



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 29

(31 March 2008 to 27 April 2008)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD

£70.00

© Copyright 2009

ISBN 978-0-339-80027-4

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

Adams, Gerry (West Belfast)	McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)	McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
Armstrong, Billy (Mid Ulster)	McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)	McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)	McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)	McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)	McCrea, Dr William (South Antrim)
Bradley, Mrs Mary (Foyle)	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair (South Belfast)
Bradley, P J (South Down)	McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)	McFarland, Alan (North Down)
Bresland, Allan (West Tyrone)	McGill, Mrs Claire (West Tyrone)
Brolly, Francie (East Londonderry)	McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
Browne, The Lord (East Belfast)	McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)	McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
Burns, Thomas (South Antrim)	McHugh, Gerry (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Burnside, David (South Antrim)	McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
Butler, Paul (Lagan Valley)	McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)	McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)	McNarry, David (Strangford)
Clarke, Willie (South Down)	McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Cobain, Fred (North Belfast)	Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Coulter, Rev Dr Robert (North Antrim)	Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)	Maskey, Paul (West Belfast)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)	Molloy, Francie (Mid Ulster)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)	Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Deeny, Dr Kieran (West Tyrone)	Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Dodds, Nigel (North Belfast)	Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)	Neeson, Sean (East Antrim)
Donaldson, Jeffrey (Lagan Valley)	Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)	Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Easton, Alex (North Down)	O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	O'Loan, Declan (North Antrim)
Empey, Sir Reg (East Belfast)	O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)	Paisley, Rev Dr Ian (North Antrim)
Ford, David (South Antrim)	Paisley Jnr, Ian (North Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Gallagher, Tommy (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Purvis, Ms Dawn (East Belfast)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)	Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)	Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Hanna, Mrs Carmel (South Belfast)	Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Hay, William (Speaker)	Robinson, Mrs Iris (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)	Robinson, Ken (East Antrim)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)	Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)	Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)	Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)	Savage, George (Upper Bann)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)	Shannon, Jim (Strangford)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)	Simpson, David (Upper Bann)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)	Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
McCallister, John (South Down)	Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)	Weir, Peter (North Down)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)	Wells, Jim (South Down)
	Wilson, Brian (North Down)
	Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

PRINCIPAL OFFICERS AND OFFICIALS OF THE ASSEMBLY

<i>Speaker</i>	Mr William Hay MLA
<i>Deputy Speakers</i>	Mr John Dallat MLA Mr David McClarty MLA Mr Francie Molloy MLA
<i>Office of the Speaker</i>	
<i>Adviser to the Speaker</i>	Mr Richard Good
<i>Private Secretary</i>	Vacant
<i>Clerk to the Assembly (Acting)</i>	Mrs Carol Devon
<i>Director of Legal Services (Acting)</i>	Mr Hugh Widdis
<i>Examiner of Statutory Rules</i>	Mr Gordon Nabney
<i>Editor of Debates</i>	Mr Simon Burrowes
<i>Clerk Assistant</i>	Ms Nuala Dunwoody
<i>Director of Research and Information (Acting)</i>	Mr Michael Rickard
<i>Keeper of the House (Acting)</i>	Mrs Sheila McClelland
<i>Principal Clerks</i>	Mrs Debbie Pritchard Mr John Torney Mr Martin Wilson
<i>Clerk to the Assembly Commission</i>	Mr Tony Logue

MINISTERIAL OFFICES

The Executive Committee

<i>First Minister</i>	Rev Dr Ian Paisley
<i>deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister for Employment and Learning</i>	Sir Reg Empey
<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Mr Conor Murphy
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Ms Margaret Ritchie
<i>Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development</i>	Ms Michelle Gildernew
<i>Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure</i>	Mr Edwin Poots
<i>Minister of Education</i>	Ms Caitríona Ruane
<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Mr Nigel Dodds
<i>Minister of the Environment</i>	Mrs Arlene Foster
<i>Minister of Finance and Personnel</i>	Mr Peter Robinson
<i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i>	Mr Michael McGimpsey

Junior Ministers

<i>Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Jeffrey Donaldson
	Mr Gerry Kelly

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 31 March 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 12 March 2008.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Review of Public Administration

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement regarding the review of public administration.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I welcome the opportunity to announce decisions on the future shape of local government. It has been a long, and sometimes difficult, journey since I launched the review of local government aspects of the review of public administration (RPA); however, the reform package agreed by the Executive on 13 March represents a solid foundation for the development of strong, effective local government that will deliver a broader range of services for all our citizens.

The review of public administration was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to deliver wide-ranging and comprehensive modernisation and reform to the public sector. The full range of RPA decisions was included in two announcements in November 2005 and March 2006. Following the restoration of devolved Government on 8 May 2007, the Executive reviewed the progress that had been made in implementing the RPA. An integral element of the process was the consideration of the strategic direction of the implementation programme. In that

context, it was agreed that I would implement a review of the previous Administration's decisions on local government. That review, to consider what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully functioning, devolved Assembly and Executive, and in the context of the strategic direction of the review of public administration, was launched on 6 July 2007.

The work of the review was supported by desk research undertaken by consultants last summer to establish the characteristics of local government in Northern Ireland, the other United Kingdom jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. The consultants facilitated several stakeholder interviews and events to test the findings of that research. In parallel, the Executive Committee's subgroup comprising me and my ministerial colleagues from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) met on three occasions to consider the structural reform of the sector. In addition, I held several bilateral meetings with Executive colleagues.

That work culminated in the emerging findings report published on 19 October 2007. The publication of the report was followed by a valuable process of stakeholder engagement, which provided the opportunity for representatives from councils and other organisations to engage in facilitated discussions on the initial proposals at one regional and four subregional events. Stakeholders also had the option of submitting written opinions, and the Department received 59 responses.

The views expressed in the written responses, those collated from the focused process of engagement, those expressed in the House during the take-note debate on 13 November 2007 and those of the Committee for the Environment were shared with relevant Executive colleagues and the Executive subcommittee. The consideration of those views facilitated further discussion of what the final recommendations of the subcommittee should be. The recommendations were agreed by the Executive at our meeting on 13 March 2008.

We recognise that it is important that local government should be closer to citizens and that a balance of responsibility between the Assembly and local government is necessary. Local government plays a clear role in providing strategic civic leadership and acting as a consistent advocate to ensure that local needs are met through more extensive engagement with the community in the planning of services; improvements in economic, environmental and social well-being, choice and customer service; and in the achievement of more sustainable development.

Therefore, our vision is of a strong, dynamic local government that creates vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at their core. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality, efficient services that respond to people's needs and continuously improve over time. That vision resonates with the Executive's Programme for Government and its strategic priorities. It also reflects the strong desire that central and local government should work in partnership to deliver the Programme for Government and the vision for local government.

Successful local councils must be effective local champions that respond to the aspirations and concerns of their communities and guide — in partnership with others — the future development of their area. Strong civic leadership must be at the heart of the new council arrangements. Effective, inclusive local democracy is an essential foundation for strong community leadership and improved service delivery. Elected councillors play a unique role in linking the delivery of services with local people's needs and ambitions.

An effective, statute-based community planning process, led and facilitated by the new councils, will be critical to that delivery. Local government must be at the heart of the process and must operate as a junction box for public services in the locality. Community leadership exercised by elected representatives, acting in partnership with statutory bodies and a range of private-, voluntary- and community-sector agencies can breathe new life into local democracy and respond to the needs and aspirations of local communities. Councils will be required to consult all their constituents about issues that affect their lives and allow people to have a say on development in their area.

The local government task force has already produced a report on community planning, which has been agreed by the five main parties. During the implementation of the agreed reform package, I will introduce legislative proposals to embody that report's recommendations. The legislative proposals will ensure that a clear statutory requirement is placed on other public bodies — including policing, health and education bodies — to participate in and support the community planning process. A clear duty will be placed on councils to engage with local communities to produce a community plan.

Councils will also have a new statutory power of well-being to assist them in the delivery of community planning. That new power will allow councils to take any action that is not already the responsibility of another agency, linked with the community plan, to improve the well-being of the local community or local area.

Such a power allows greater flexibility and, coupled with the additional functions that will transfer from other parts of the public services, will enable councils to respond creatively to local needs to ensure accessibility and people-focused services that will make a real difference to people's lives. Our aim is to put community leadership at the heart of every council and in the hands of every councillor in order to bring together public agencies and key stakeholders to act in partnership to secure excellent and efficient services and to address local problems.

The overarching aim of the Executive's Programme for Government is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland that has respect for the rule of law. We expect local government to help to deliver on that aim. A report on governance arrangements, agreed across the parties, has already been provided by the local government task force. That provides a starting point to develop new governance models. An integral and urgent part of the work of that task force will be to develop a range of models with appropriate checks and balances that can be piloted and evaluated. Those models will be designed to be mindful of the need to ensure effective and inclusive local democracy, to protect the rights of minorities, to prevent any direct or indirect discrimination and to promote the need of equality of opportunity. Those will include arrangements to allocate council chairs, deputy chairs and positions on council committees and to facilitate cross-community decision-making.

As I have indicated previously in the House, I intend to embody the new council governance arrangements in statute after their agreement by the Executive. That will ensure the protection of all rights of the people of Northern Ireland and also provide for fair, transparent and efficient decision-making.

In order to deliver the agreed vision for local government, the current configuration of 26 council areas will be rationalised to create 11 new council areas. In considering the three 11-council models on which views were canvassed in a further consultation on the review of public administration in March 2005, the Executive agreed that model 11b provides the optimal grouping of existing councils into an 11-council model. The ability of councils to connect with, and deliver for, their communities is central to our vision for local government. That number of councils strikes a balance between reducing some of the diversity among existing areas in terms of population characteristics and rating wealth, and promoting the ability of councils and their communities to identify and interact with one another.

In examining the structural reform of local government, we also considered the number of councillors that will be required under the new arrangements. We examined the need for appropriate representation against the

background of a fully functioning Assembly and Executive, and the need to ensure efficient working and decision-making. We weighed those factors and came to the view that Belfast should retain an upper limit of around 60 councillors and that the remaining councils would have an upper limit of around 40 councillors. The determination of the precise number of councillors for each new local government district will be informed by the report from the independent local government boundaries commissioner on the number of wards in each new district.

Linked to the rationalisation of the number of councils and councillors, I will introduce a severance scheme in order to recognise the contribution of long-standing councillors who opt not to stand for re-election and to facilitate the modernisation and renewal of local government. The development of the detail of the scheme will be informed by the report and recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group, which reported in June 2006.

In addition, I intend to work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office in order to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of those councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament. In order to facilitate a smooth transition over a period of time, and in keeping with the desire that the review of public administration should result in savings, I will also work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office to introduce transitional legislative provisions to provide for any vacancies in local government that result from the ending of the dual mandate to be filled on the basis of co-option rather than by-election.

We acknowledge that the 11-council model presents challenges for the promotion of efficient and effective delivery of services and will not provide for 1:1 coterminosity with other major service providers such as health or education. It will require the development of innovative and creative models of service delivery that will promote modern and efficient practice in a way and on a scale hitherto unseen by grouping councils together for the delivery of significant services such as planning, regeneration, building control and environmental health. We propose that those groups should provide the basis for the development of coterminosity with other service providers. That will enable local government to play its part in achieving the Programme for Government strategic priority of delivering modern, high-quality and efficient public services.

While there is some evidence that local government has been willing to promote the efficient delivery of services, there is scope to do much more.

12.15 pm

Central Government will support the sector in driving towards that through the development, in partnership,

of appropriate performance management systems, and by developing proposals for a modernisation challenge fund that will support innovative and efficient practice. The Budget announced by my colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, on 22 January 2008, allocated all of the funds available to the Executive. Clearly, therefore, we will need to take into account the implications for the amounts currently allocated to other public services when developing a modernisation challenge fund model.

Regarding each function that will transfer to local government, options for models of service delivery will be explored and developed, including the delivery by and to groups of councils, ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of such services. In addition, regional shared service arrangements will be developed to deliver common back-office services, such as ICT, accounting, payroll and procurement, across all of the 11 new councils.

It is recognised and accepted that, if local government is to begin to realise the potential of our shared vision and take on the role of leader and shaper of communities, it requires direct responsibility for a family of services.

The Executive have carefully considered the functions that should transfer from central to local government. On the one hand, emphasis has been placed on the key objectives of strengthening local government and developing the principle of subsidiarity that seeks to ensure that powers are delegated to the most local level possible. On the other hand, the need to ensure effective and efficient service delivery has also been an important consideration. However, it must be acknowledged that the strengthening of local government will be a process and not an event, the speed and extent of which can only be dictated by whatever secures excellence in service delivery. A balance has had to be struck.

In order for the new councils to fulfil their roles in place shaping, they will have responsibility for local development plan functions, development control and enforcement. Responsibility for regional spatial planning will remain with central Government. However, I will want to discuss with the Minister for Regional Development the roles of DOE and DRD in discharging that function at the centre, not only in the context of RPA implementation but also regarding planning reform.

Responsibility for the public-realm aspects of local roads functions will also transfer to local government. The local road public-realm responsibilities include Roads Service work in relation to: streetscaping; town and city centre environmental improvements; grass cutting and weed spraying; gully emptying; street lighting; off-street parking; pedestrian permits; maintenance of amenity areas; alley-gating, which involves making traffic regulation orders facilitating alley-gating to

avoid antisocial behaviour; permitting local events to be held on roads; and the salting of footways.

Responsibility for mainstream local road functions will be retained by the Department for Regional Development. However, there will be a formal and direct input by new councils to decision-making on local roads, and an enhanced accountability framework, within which the Roads Service relationship with local government will operate. That could take the form of an appropriate statutory framework setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of Roads Service and the new councils. It is also proposed that Roads Service will implement structural arrangements to facilitate coterminosity with the new council boundaries.

Proposals about public transport responsibilities are being considered by the Regional Development Minister, in the light of the decision to retain responsibility for mainstream roads functions within DRD, and taking into account the undesirability of separating those responsibilities. As with the local roads functions, mechanisms for ensuring local government input to decision-making on public transport will be developed.

Linking back to our vision for local government, the urban regeneration and community development delivery functions due to transfer include: those associated with physical development, such as environmental improvement schemes, comprehensive development and urban development grants; area-based regeneration, such as neighbourhood renewal; some community development programmes; and support for the voluntary and community sector. Some of the Department for Social Development's funding programmes for those functions are already delivered through councils. Possible methods of further strengthening partnership-working will be explored through pilot projects during the transitional phase in the run-up to the full transfer of those functions. That will provide a valuable learning experience, and inform and support the wider transfer. Those partnering arrangements can be used to test the feasibility of transferring some of those functions in advance of the establishment of the new councils.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive will remain as the strategic housing authority. The Housing Council, which was to be abolished under the RPA proposals of the previous Administration, is to be retained. That will ensure that local government will have a continuing involvement in strategic housing issues.

Some housing functions will, however, transfer. These are the registration of houses in multiple occupation and housing unfitness responsibilities, including repair and demolition notices. Although the Housing Executive will maintain its statutory role as the home-energy conservation authority, the new councils will take the lead on energy conservation at a local level. They will also have responsibility for Travellers' transit sites

with the Housing Executive retaining responsibility for permanent housing, group housing and serviced sites for Travellers.

In order to facilitate local government in driving forward local economic development a number of functions will transfer from Invest NI. Those include Start a Business programme and enterprise shows, which are focused on supporting businesses that operate primarily in the local market; youth entrepreneurship such as the Prince's Trust and Shell Livewire, activities that involve the promotion of entrepreneurship within the younger community; the social entrepreneurship programme; Investing in Women — a programme specifically targeting female entrepreneurship; and neighbourhood renewal funding relating to enterprise initiatives.

Also for transfer are the local tourism functions covering small-scale tourism accommodation development; local tourism marketing; local tourism product development; visitor servicing; providing business support including business start up advice along with training and delivery of customer-care schemes; and providing advice to developers on tourism policies and related issues.

Other new or enhanced functions for and responsibilities of local government are: the delivery of the EU rural development programme; the authority to spot list — that is, to issue a temporary building preservation notice — to enable councils to add a building to the statutory list on a temporary basis, subject to ratification by my Department; the authority to draw up local lists of buildings that are of architectural and/or historic interest; Armagh County Museum; local water recreational facilities; local sports; functions of the Northern Ireland Museum Council; local arts; local festivals, which was announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in this House on 4 December 2007; and Donaghadee harbour.

In addition, consideration is being given to proposals for the extension of local government responsibilities for civil contingency arrangements and to proposals to place an additional duty on councils to produce good relations plans and strategies.

In addition to the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of services, a number of my ministerial colleagues are also proposing to strengthen the relationship between their Departments and local government in delivering services. They are considering, or proposing to enhance, the involvement of local government elected members in the governance arrangements for bodies within their areas of responsibility.

Indeed, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already announced in this House, on 4 February 2008, that his proposals for health and social care reform would ensure greater potential for

democratisation with public representatives as members of local commissioning groups and on the board of a new regional public health agency, as well as having an active role within the future proposals for patient, client and carer representation. Those proposals are now the subject of public consultation, which will conclude on 12 May 2008.

Legislation is currently going through this House to establish a single library service for Northern Ireland under a new body, the library authority, which as a regional body will be accountable to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and to the Assembly. A proposed amendment to the legislation provides for reserved places on the board of the authority for elected members of district councils. Subject to the passage of the legislation, the library authority will come into effect in April 2009. To ensure that the library service reflects local needs, management responsibilities will be established on an area basis, and consultative arrangements will be established, involving chiefly councils but also other statutory and voluntary bodies. The consultative arrangements will apply until the community planning responsibilities of the new councils are in operation. The effectiveness of these liaison and consultative arrangements will be reviewed after a year of operation.

In education, legislation is currently being drafted to establish a single education and skills authority that, as a regional body, will be accountable to the Minister of Education and this House. The Minister of Education is currently considering whether to provide for reserved places on the board of the authority for elected members of district councils.

In addition, the Minister of Education is considering the arguments about the transfer of youth services to district councils. The informal education and development services that are provided by the Youth Service are an important and integral part of the education system as a whole. However, the Minister of Education proposes to establish in the education and skills authority regional structures that will be coterminous with the new council delivery groups. Mirroring the approach that has been suggested for library services, the Minister proposes to develop consultative arrangements that involve councils, as well as other statutory and voluntary bodies, to ensure that the services that are provided by the education and skills authority reflect local needs. Those arrangements will apply until district councils' community planning responsibilities are in operation, and their effectiveness will be reviewed after one year.

It has been acknowledged that there is a need to make the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority more accountable to local government. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will, therefore, explore the options that are available in order to create

a greater role for local government in fishery harbour management within existing structures.

The family of functions that will transfer to local government currently accounts for annual expenditure of some £116 million and involves about 1,070 staff. That constitutes a 25% increase in the budget of local government and an increase of almost 12% in its staff complement.

However, as I indicated, strengthening local government will be a process, not an event. Ongoing developments, such as the review of non-departmental public bodies and quangos, the outcome of the deliberations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and any implications that arise from the restructuring of Departments, will, clearly, have an impact on that process. Against that background, the Executive will review the functions that are to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new councils become operational and periodically thereafter.

Considerable challenges lie ahead in implementing the structural and functional changes to local government. As I said in the take-note debate on 13 November 2007, my aim is to implement the agreed structural reform package by 2011. That timescale is extremely challenging, and significant risks are attached to it. The full and active co-operation of our colleagues in the Assembly, local government, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Commission is needed if that aim is to be achieved.

The immediate priority is the appointment of an independent local government boundaries commissioner to draw up the proposed boundaries for the 11 new local government districts. Therefore, as a matter of urgency, I will introduce a local government (boundaries) Bill to provide for that appointment. Given the tight timescale, if elections to the new councils are to be held in 2011, that Bill will need to be progressed by accelerated passage. When I meet the Environment Committee this week, I will outline in detail the reasoning for such an approach. I will also move quickly to establish detailed implementation structures, building on the work of the local government reform task force and the agreement that the previous Administration had with local government and the political parties on those structures. I do not propose to reinvent the wheel. The work of the subgroups of the previous Administration's local government reform task force will be taken as our starting point. Where there was agreement between the parties and the previous Administration on how particular policy issues would be effected, such agreement will be the firm basis for implementing the reform package in question.

I also need to integrate our continuing work on modernising local government into the implementation arrangements to ensure that we drive forward that

modernisation as an integral part of the process of reforming the sector structurally. Our focus will be on driving out inefficiencies and delivering to the public high-quality services that improve over time. Central to the implementation strategy will be the development of service-delivery structures that are efficient and appropriate. One priority will be a detailed analysis of the delivery options in order to ensure efficiency and best value. That analysis will be carried out in close co-operation with the sector, colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel and transferring function Departments.

The reform package is fundamentally different to that announced by the previous Administration, and the cost-and-benefit analysis that was prepared at that time is no longer relevant. My officials will, therefore, work closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel, the transferring function Departments and the sector to deliver a robust cost-benefit model for the programme.

Building the capacity of local government elected members and officers and preparing those in transferring functions for the transition to local government through the delivery of a comprehensive and effective capacity-building programme will be a critical part of the implementation programme.

We need to equip local government elected members, in particular, and officers with the skills that they will need to manage the change process and to deliver effectively the functions for which they will be responsible. The local government task force has been developing detailed proposals for a capacity-building programme for elected members and officers. It will require substantial investment, both by central Government, subject to funding, and local government, and is integral to our work in developing a modernisation challenge fund.

12.30 pm

The Local Government Staff Commission will be a key part of the change process. I will shortly be initiating a review of the commission to ensure that it is resourced appropriately to provide much-needed support during the implementation of the decisions on the future shape of local government.

Whatever challenges lie ahead, central and local government are committed to working in partnership to deliver the change. That relationship has already been critical to delivering the outcomes of this review, with decisions being informed by an exchange of experience and information. Like all effective relationships, our partnership must be based on mutual trust, respect and confidence. We are committed to reinforcing and renewing the relationship in the years ahead, in pursuit of our shared goal of serving all the people of Northern Ireland and placing their needs at the heart of all that we do.

I recognise that our decisions on the future shape of local government may cause concern for people working in the sector and those working in the Northern Ireland Departments on functions that will be transferred. As we take forward the implementation of the reform and modernisation programme, every effort will be made to address these concerns. We will consult as appropriate with the relevant trade unions and staff associations and have due regard to the Public Service Commission's guiding principles to ensure the smooth transfer of staff to new organisations. I will also wish to engage fully with the Environment Committee throughout the programme.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, it has been a long and sometimes difficult journey since I launched the review last July. I would not have been able to complete it without the support and co-operation of my ministerial colleagues on the subcommittee.

In closing, I want to quote Sir Winston Churchill:

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

[Interruption.]

It is not the quote about fighting on the beaches.

To some, the review of local government aspect of the RPA has been a long time in gestation. At long last, we have truly begun, and I look forward to the functions that I have set out today creating strong, effective local government at the heart of vibrant, safe and sustainable communities delivering co-ordinated services for all our citizens.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat.

We recently met officials from the Department to discuss the review of public administration. I thank the Minister for presenting us with that detailed statement on the shape and form of local government to come; it has addressed some of the issues that were raised at that meeting. However, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it would be useful if there were an indicative timetable for the implementation of the changes that are likely to come before us.

The Minister touched on another issue that has come before the Committee, which is the concern about potential job losses in local government. There will have to be some movement on the issue soon to address that concern, as there is a lot of misinformation out there about what may or may not happen as a consequence of these changes.

Other issues that were mentioned in the Minister's statement, and have also come before the Committee, include the need for legislative protection of the rights of minorities and individuals against discrimination. The Minister referred to the need for checks and balances to provide equality, particularly — but not exclusively,

obviously — in regard to the issue of planning, which is likely to be transferred. It is vital that the excesses of the past are not visited on future generations.

The other issue that has come before the Committee is the need for some detail about a statutory code of conduct for councillors. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Committee Chairman for his comments. He and I had an opportunity to discuss the statement, briefly, before I released it today. It is appropriate that he began his remarks with a comment about staff, because people are listening to and watching what is going on today. It is important that we address those issues.

All staffing issues will be considered within the framework of the Public Service Commission's guiding principles and consultation with staff representatives and staff commissions. A lack of certainty about the progression of the review of public administration is one of the issues that staff have been communicating to me for some time. However, we have now begun on a road, and the staff will thank us for that, but they will be concerned about their positions. We will work closely not only with the trade unions, but with the staff commissions, on that issue.

Mr McGlone also mentioned the need for equality. Equality issues have been an integral part of the review of public administration. We need to demonstrate equality in every decision, and the new council structure must reflect the needs of everyone in society. There will be a system of statutory safeguards to ensure fair and transparent decision-making and to protect the rights of minority groups.

Proportionality will be the touchstone of all that we are doing on equality, and we look forward to presenting that. Between now and 2011, we intend to run some pilot schemes on the different ways in which that can happen, with a view to introducing statutory safeguards for all councils in 2011.

The Chairman also mentioned that planning will become the responsibility of local councils. That will be welcomed by many of the councillors who complain about some of the decisions of the Planning Service; it is now over to them. However, we will ensure that the appropriate codes of conduct and best practice arrangements are in place. It is important to protect councillors and planning officers from unfounded allegations, but it is also important that the public be assured that the system is open, fair and transparent. The Department will work to ensure that those assurances will be made. I am working with officials to establish what planning safeguards will be put in place. The Department will retain a call-in power for cases that become particularly difficult.

The strategic leadership board has carried out some work on a statutory code of conduct for councillors. As I

said in my statement, I do not propose to reinvent the wheel; where there is five-party support for an issue, I will take it forward in legislation.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, and in light of these proposals, I should, perhaps, say that, for the moment, I am a member of North Down Borough Council.

I thank the Minister for her lengthy and detailed statement. When I saw her 10-page, closely typed text, I thought that I had wandered into the wrong announcement. I thought that it was a statement from the Finance Minister, because such lengthy statements are more his forte — restricting himself to 10 pages is a difficulty for him.

I thank the Minister for what, I think, is one of the most important announcements to be brought before the Chamber. She mentioned governance arrangements and the protections that have been put in place. Can the Minister assure the House that the interests of nationalists in the east and north of the Province and of unionists in the west and south of the Province will be protected? In both cases, they are likely to find themselves in the minority.

Although there is, rightly, protection in place by way of proportionality and the requirement for cross-community decision-making and appropriate checks and balances, can the Minister confirm whether there is a commitment to any particular governance model, particularly d'Hondt or any form of mandatory coalition?

Mr Kennedy: Jim Allister wants to know that.

Mrs Foster: I should have thought that Danny would probably provide Mr Allister with an answer; he is good at that.

The statutory safeguards are for everybody in Northern Ireland. I am clear about that, and everybody in the House should be clear about that. Regardless of where one lives, it is right that everyone should have equality of opportunity and access.

There is no reference anywhere in the statement to d'Hondt: this is about proportionality being the touchstone. It is right that different models of proportionality be tried out through pilot schemes, which will be rolled out in the implementation plan in order to ascertain the best way forward to ensure statutory safeguards for everybody in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, which demonstrates clearly the complexity of the issues that must be dealt with. For too often and on too many occasions in the past, the number of councils seemed to be the most taxing issue for some people, including Members of this House. However, I thank the Minister for the commitments that she gave in the

discussions leading up to this decision's being made and for those that she made in the Chamber this morning.

Given her commitments on the need to have inclusive local democracy, will the Minister reaffirm that the governance arrangements, in particular, will be placed on a statutory basis? That is essential to support her commitment that the proposals for new local government arrangements will be based on principles of absolute fairness. Above all else, there must be fairness in this process, because whatever may be said about the number and functions of local councils, the manner of the governance arrangements of local government and the way in which they are delivered are central to the debate. I, therefore, ask the Minister to reaffirm that commitment, and I also declare an interest as a councillor.

Mrs Foster: I am happy to affirm that, because a statutory system of safeguards will be implemented when the new councils are elected in 2011. Between now and then, we will be rolling out different models and pilot schemes. The Member will be aware that proportionality arrangements already operate in various councils, and those will be examined to see how they are working and whether they have any gaps. There will most certainly be statutory safeguards to ensure fair and transparent decision-making, which I think the public will welcome.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the Minister's aspirations for her 11-council local government model; it will perhaps work in some way or other.

The review of public administration has been ongoing for nearly 10 years, and although I welcome the progress that has been made towards finding a solution, I am disappointed that the 15-council model has not been adopted. Outside Belfast, that model would have enabled councillors to be elected to councils in the same constituencies to which both MLAs at Stormont and MPs at Westminster are elected — 14 councils representing 14 parliamentary constituencies and one council representing the four Belfast parliamentary constituencies.

Will the Minister tell the House why the 15-council model was rejected in favour of the 11-council model? Had the 15-council model been adopted, the potential for voter confusion could have been minimised and boundaries that are already universally accepted and regarded as free from any hint of gerrymandering could have been used.

Mrs Foster: I thought that the Member was going to damn me by faint praise, but he did not.

The map of Northern Ireland meant that the issues that were discussed in reaching a decision on the option 11b model were complicated. Given that, the decision to select the option 11b model was made on the basis of the necessity to have an appropriate structure that met the need to reduce the range of variants that exist between

councils, while maintaining the local and community connections that make councils so effective in providing services to meet local needs.

Although there has been a great deal of talk about coterminosity where parliamentary boundaries are concerned, we need to look further than just at those boundaries. If we consider services such as the Health Service, education, policing, housing and roads services, none is provided on the basis of parliamentary boundaries. People must realise that and look at the map of the provision of all those services to decide whether we want to be coterminous with parliamentary constituencies in order that we can have a more effective delivery system. That is what citizens would want us to do and what local government wants to do. That is why I am happy to endorse the option 11b model that was decided on and that the Executive took on board when they made their decision.

12.45 pm

Mr Ford: Like Mr Weir, I declare that I have, for the present, an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council.

I thank the Minister for her statement, and also her officials, who attended the Committee during recess in order to give us some detail on the issue. These proposals transform the overall share of public expenditure administered by local councils by 1% upwards, and raise the question as to whether they genuinely produce strong, effective local government, or whether we could not have kept the existing model and given councils community planning as the only change.

The Minister has referred to coterminosity. However, she has not only ruled out one-to-one coterminosity with bodies such as health providers, but 1:2 and even 1:3 provision. All five health and social care trusts will have to deal with cross-boundary issues. That shows no attempt at producing joined-up government.

The Minister talked about governance; she referred to testing out potentially different models. Does she agree that the best form of governance is one in which, by local arrangement and negotiation, power and responsibility are shared equitably? Will she assure Members that legislation will be used as a backstop to ensure that that is the case, not as the first proviso in providing a rigid form, whatever that may be?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his questions; I will answer the last question first.

Local arrangements are best, where they can be worked out. However, I do not believe that they can be. The best way to move forward is to run out a couple of these pilot schemes between now and 2011, see what difficulties arise and move forward.

This has been a successful engagement. The members of the strategic leadership board who sit in the House

know that that body has engaged meaningfully on governance issues. We have moved ahead significantly in those matters.

With respect to functions, the budget for local government has been increased by 25%. I am disappointed that the Member made the comments that he did. Local government was last reformed in 1973. Some 35 years on, we are discussing giving local government a 25% budget increase and completely new powers for community planning and well-being. In return, we ask that the number of local government units be rationalised from 26 to 11. By anyone's standards, that is a major change from the way that local government has been run in this country for 35 years.

Some Members see the glass not just half-empty but completely empty. We are moving forward into a partnership arrangement between this House and local government. I said repeatedly that this is the start of the process. I look forward to its development, as a Member of this House, and I will keep a close eye on it on that no matter where I am.

Mr T Clarke: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council and I congratulate the Minister on her statement. She referred to a severance package for long-serving councillors. A colleague of mine will, by the end of this term, have served 28 years as a councillor. Will the Minister expand her remarks on that scheme?

Mrs Foster: It is appropriate that we acknowledge the contribution of long-standing councillors, who, during the past 35 years, were the only people — apart from MPs — to represent people at local level. I pay tribute to the work that has been done by local government over that period.

A severance scheme for long-standing councillors, who have served their communities well through difficult years but who do not want to stand at the next local government elections, is fully justified, both by the service given, and by the fact that the number of council seats available in the future has been reduced by the decisions that the Executive took on 13 March.

Provision of the severance scheme creates an opportunity to refresh the pool of councillors and to increase the current low levels of representation on councils of women and young people. Precise details of the scheme will be developed using, as a starting point, the report and recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group, which reported in June 2006. It will be a part of the implementation plan. In the near future, I hope to speak to NILGA and the National Association of Councillors to make progress on that issue.

Mr McKay: I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive statement. I echo what my party

colleague said in welcoming the announcement as regards equality checks and balances, which will be a radical departure from how councils here have been run in the past.

Given the negative social and economic impact of the border, especially on those communities living close to it, and given that the new councils will be similar in size and composition to the county councils in the Twenty-six Counties and that they will be given additional powers, will the Minister outline how she intends to deliver on the opportunities for cross-border co-operation through the new community-planning process?

Mrs Foster: The community-planning process is what it says on the tin — it is for the community and elected councillors in an area, and it will be up to them to determine how they will interact with councils in the Republic of Ireland and with their colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her statement this afternoon. During her speech, she made reference to the urgent need to appoint a boundaries commissioner. Will she advise the House as to when she anticipates that that will happen, what his remit will be, and when he will report back?

Mrs Foster: I will be speaking to the Environment Committee this Thursday about the local government boundaries Bill. Due to the tight timescale that I indicated to the House, I am hoping that the Committee will understand the need for accelerated passage. If that happens, I hope to bring the Bill to the House soon. Thereafter, I hope that the local government boundaries commissioner will be able to take up his post and report back to me within a year.

As I said in my statement, the timescale is tight, and I will need the co-operation of the Environment Committee and the Northern Ireland Office and Electoral Commission to take matters forward in the time available.

Mr B McCrea: I declare an interest as a member of Lisburn City Council. Earlier, the Minister said that she was worried that she might be damned by faint praise from one of my colleagues — I assure Members that she will have no such concerns about me.

The particular issue that I would like clarification on is that this appears to be a political fudge that is designed to maintain the status quo. Unless the Minister can provide coherent answers to questions about the 11-council model, I am afraid that other people will be forced to agree with me.

She said:

“The ability of councils to connect with, and deliver for, their communities is central to our vision for local government.”

Will she explain why she thinks that the citizens of Castlereagh are more in tune with the citizens of

Lisburn than they are with those of Belfast? Does that not show that this is a complete misunderstanding of the premise that local government should be about local people giving local services? Will the Minister please give me an answer to that question?

Mrs Foster: I, apparently, have a complete misunderstanding of local government. The Member will need to look at the local government boundaries Bill when it is published. I have shared its contents with the two Ministers in his party, and the Bill states that the local government boundaries commissioner could take in the whole of, or a major part of, that council area, which means that he will not be constrained when he is considering Belfast, Castlereagh or Lisburn. He will be able to go into other areas and decide whether they should be in Castlereagh, Belfast or wherever. Yet again, the Member is jumping the gun; and one wonders why he would do that apart from the fact that he is trying to create mischief in the House.

This is a good news story for local government, the Executive and the House. However, yet again, the Ulster Unionist Party cannot cope with good news for the House because that means that its Members are being left behind again.

Mr Gallagher: I commend the Minister for her statement and for her approach in taking the matter forward quickly. I also commend the Executive subcommittee's work to which she referred.

I have two questions. First, will the Minister confirm whether, before making her announcement, she presented the contents of her statement to a meeting of the Executive subcommittee?

Secondly, the SDLP considers the protections and safeguards for minorities to be a key test of the proposals, and, in the future, it does not want any councils to be in the situation in which there are permanently trapped minorities. The Minister ended her statement with a reference to Churchill. As a nationalist, I ask the Minister to ensure that dreary drones in unionist-dominated regimes, such as Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council, do not emerge in the future.

Mrs Foster: For a moment, I thought the Member was going to mention the dreary steeples of Fermanagh; but no, he spoke of the dreary drones of Lisburn and Castlereagh. The protections and safeguards are for everybody in the community, and it is rather tiresome to hear nationalists speak about this matter as if they were the only people to suffer as a result of past equality issues.

Edmund Burke said:

"You can never plan the future by the past."

I have no intention of looking to the past, and I want the House to look to the future for the way forward in local government.

Concerning the Member's technical point about meeting with the subcommittee before making my statement, it was impossible to get all the members together in one room. Therefore, I met each member individually in order that they would know what would be in my announcement.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. As a member of Dungannon District Council, I must declare an interest. The Minister's statement is an important step in dealing with matters relating to the number of councils and the required legislation and in getting on with the job in hand.

Will the Minister confirm that the power to deal with issues that are not the preserve of Departments will not limit councils to addressing problematic situations that, in the past, those Departments perhaps neglected?

In order to ensure strong local government, will the Minister encourage her party colleagues to transfer the maximum amount of functions, which must be followed by responsibility sharing? The carrying out of such functions must be tied to resources. The danger is that local government will have responsibilities, but will not have the resources to fulfil them.

I wish to re-emphasise the issues concerning checks and balances, which are there not just to protect minorities but to ensure that every councillor has the opportunity to come forward and play an important role. With that in mind, uniform standing orders might be one way to ensure that we do not end up with local arrangements similar to those in the past, which David Ford suggested consisted of nods and winks between people and which produced wrong solutions. We require legislation that is enforceable at local government level, and the Dungannon pilot scheme might be used in the future.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments about this being an important step forward. In the course of discussions about reforms to local government, many people have missed the power of well-being, which is an important new statutory power that councils will have. Indeed, some chief executives are looking forward to exercising the power of well-being in order to progress matters that are not the preserve of any other agency.

Concerning the encouragement of other Ministers to transfer the maximum amount of functions to local government, I know that the Member will encourage his party colleagues, as I will continue to encourage mine —

Mr P Robinson: And yourself.

Mrs Foster: Myself? What does the Member mean? I have given everything away. I will continue to

encourage my colleagues to transfer the maximum amount of resources and powers to local government.

I share the Member's opinion that checks and balances do not just protect minorities, but also individual councillors — particularly in relation to the planning function that will be transferred — and I know that councillors will welcome that.

I hear what the Member is saying about uniform standing orders; as I said, I will listen to the opinion of the strategic leadership board on all those issues, and I know that the Member will want to make his points to that body.

1.00 pm

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, and I declare an interest as a councillor on Cookstown District Council and as a member of NILGA. The Minister mentioned the functions that will be transferred from the Housing Executive to local government. Will she tell the House what functions that were originally to be transferred to local councils will not now be considered for transfer, and why?

Mrs Foster: The Minister for Social Development has been very helpful with the work that has been carried out since our debate on the emerging findings report and since I received the 59 written responses on the way forward. The Department for Social Development will retain certain elements for strategic reasons, and anything that can be delivered locally will be transferred to local councils. The responsibility for issues such as Travellers' sites and local transit sites will fall to local councils, but the Department will retain strategic and statutory responsibility for permanent sites under the aegis of the Housing Executive. There has been a good relationship between our Departments, and, like other ministerial colleagues, the Minister for Social Development has said that she will revisit those issues after a period of time to see how they are progressing.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon District Council, and my question to the Minister concerns the dual mandate. Most Members have had to declare an interest because of their dual mandate. I welcome the end of the dual mandate, on which the Minister concentrated in her statement. When will the legislation be in place that will allow MLAs such as me to stand down and co-options to take place in the councils?

Mrs Foster: Some of my colleagues are keen for me to encourage the Member to stand down as soon as he can. *[Laughter.]*

The dual mandate creates a conflict of interest with strong local government. The removal of the ability of individuals to be councillors and Members of the Assembly or the Westminster Parliament will address

the issue. We should see that development as a positive way forward. It will allow us to bring new blood into the council system, help to build capacity, and allow us to increase the number of female and young councillors. That will be part of the implementation plan, and I know that NILGA will want to work with me closely on that; however, it will not happen overnight. The dual mandate creates capacity issues, and I am sure that the Member will acknowledge that. Many Assembly Members also serve as leaders of their council groupings throughout Northern Ireland. We must examine the capacity issue in order that we can deal sensibly with the dual mandate.

Mr McCausland: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. I thank the Minister for her statement and for indicating the timescale for the boundaries review, and I ask her as a matter of urgency to pass that information to Fred Cobain in order to settle his shattered nerves. *[Laughter.]*

I wish to make couple of specific points. The first concerns spot-listing powers. Will the Minister assure the House that the arrangements for spot-listing will enable councils to make a swift response to situations as they arise? Urgency is a key element of the power to spot-list. Secondly, will she clarify the relationship between the salting of footways and the salting of roads?

Mrs Foster: If needs be, we can get clarification from the Minister for Regional Development, but as I understand it, the salting of footpaths will become the responsibility of the councils, and the responsibility for the salting of roads will remain with the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

I hear what the Member has said. However, part of the new structure between councils and DRD, the health and education bodies, among others, is that there will be a more focused local input. Indeed, DRD has indicated that it will reconfigure its local offices so that they will cover each of the 11 new council areas. One Member said that the new council areas do not directly map the boundaries of the health and education bodies. The police are also considering reconfiguring to fit in with the new council areas. We are also considering innovative ways of having shared services, and people will be quite excited about that.

I will finish by talking about the Belfast boundary. The Belfast council area could be expanded, and it probably should be expanded to recognise the natural growth of the city and its community boundaries in recent years. However, it will be a matter for the local boundaries commissioner to make recommendations on the council boundaries, and there will also be public consultation on the issue. The boundaries commissioner will be appointed in the near future, and we will be able to take the matter forward then.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her statement. I declare an interest as a member of Newry and Mourne District Council. One of the major concerns in local government is whether the money will follow the new functions. The Minister said that local government budgets will rise by 25%. Will that be a permanent state of affairs? What are the projected savings and staffing implications from her proposals? Will the Minister be responsible for appointing an appropriate person to act as the local government boundaries commissioner? When does she hope to perform that task? What powers and responsibilities will that person have?

During the Minister's discussions with NILGA and the National Association of Councillors in respect of packages for councillors who may not wish to stand in forthcoming elections, did she form any view about whether those with broken service will be entitled to a compensatory package?

Finally, I beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker — it was a Churchillian speech, so I must attempt to ask meaningful questions. The Minister said that she would work with the Northern Ireland Office to fill local government vacancies on the basis of co-option rather than by-election. Surely that decision would depend on the opinion of the political parties and the individuals who comprise the existing councils, rather than on the opinion of those in the Northern Ireland Office?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his many and varied points. The local government budget will increase by 25%. That will not be a permanent state of affairs, as I hope to increase it. As the Executive and the Assembly bed in, I hope that more funds will be released to local government, especially in connection with the ongoing institutional Assembly and Executive review.

The projected savings will be at least £15 million a year, at a rough estimate. The figure will increase greatly, because that is a minimum estimate.

In relation to the cost of the proposals, officials are working closely with my ministerial colleagues and with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the transfer of functions from Departments. They must develop a fully costed implementation plan, and that exercise is already under way.

Like any public appointment, the post of local government boundaries commissioner will be filled in accordance with the public appointments procedures for Northern Ireland. As Minister of the sponsoring Department, I will have the final say on who will be appointed to the post.

The eligibility of councillors who have broken service for the severance scheme will be considered by the National Association of Councillors and NILGA, and their recommendations will be brought to me in relation to the councillors' remuneration package.

Finally, with regard to the question about elections, by-elections and co-option, my comments were made in the context of the fact that the Northern Ireland Office retains the power over electoral law. That is why reference was made to the Northern Ireland Office. I must ask the Secretary of State to hold elections not in 2009, but in 2011, when we will hold new elections for the new councils. Having elections for the 26 councils would not be worthwhile at present. We should concentrate instead on building the capacity of councillors and officers to move forward into the new situation.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that although we have heard, rightly, about the interests of councillors and staff, we must ensure that we focus strongly on ratepayers' interests as we progress these issues? We must consider the implications for ratepayers of the services that are to be provided and what they will be asked to pay for those services.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I wish to inform the Minister that that Committee will probably want to examine the implications of her proposals relating to social enterprise, business start-ups and youth enterprise, so that we do not end up with a rag-bag of approaches. We want to ensure that there is still a strong regional framework and that there is, at least, a coherent regional policy baseline for those matters and for tourism matters.

Will the Minister deal with one issue again? She said that:

"The consideration of those views facilitated further discussion of what the final recommendations of the subcommittee should be. The recommendations were agreed by the Executive at our meeting on 13 March 2008."

That, and other comments in the Minister's statement, might have given people the impression that the recommendations were endorsed by the Executive subcommittee. I understand that the subcommittee has not met since Christmas and that, even when members of that subcommittee had discussions with the Minister, no decisions were made on the number of councils — certainly in the case of at least one Minister. Will the Minister clarify those points so that there is no suggestion that she has misled the House?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to deal with the Member's points. His first point was about the citizen being at the heart of the RPA: that is precisely why the RPA was first initiated. The RPA is not about cost; it is about making more efficient services available to citizens. People ought to remember that when examining the RPA and not always concentrate on the cost, although that must certainly be taken into account.

The Member's comments on Invest NI and the programmes that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has agreed to transfer to local

government demonstrate very clearly the balance that must be struck between retaining the strategy in this place and allowing service delivery at local government level. I am glad that the Member raised that issue, because sometimes people have — very unkindly — suggested that Ministers are trying to grab all the powers and keep them at Stormont. That is not what the proposals are about; they are about having the sort of high-level strategy to which the Member referred.

1.15 pm

With respect to the subcommittee; to be frank, I had some difficulty in getting all the Ministers into a room at the one time. Therefore, I took the view that the best way to proceed was to have separate meetings with each of the Ministers who was on the subcommittee — none of them can deny that I had those meetings with them individually. Indeed, the Minister for Social Development was kind enough to give me a letter indicating her views on the range of functions and on the proposed number of councils before 13 March so that I could go to the Executive meeting with a clear understanding of her position on the proposed number of councils.

Mr G Robinson: I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council. I thank the Minister and I congratulate her for bringing this statement on the RPA to the Chamber. How will the proposed new councils have a greater say in decision-making on local roads? I know that the Minister made some reference to the issue but will she perhaps provide some elaboration?

Mrs Foster: That matter will be developed between the Department for Regional Development and the implementation group that has been established. It is hoped that local councils, in their new configuration, will be able to determine the priorities regarding the local roads in their areas, and it will then be up to Roads Service to deliver on those local priorities. That is a very significant move, because in the past — and I have been sitting in council when it has actually happened — Roads Service officials “consulted” with local councils when, in effect, all they were doing was setting out their programme for the year ahead. That is going to change, and local councils are going to be involved more at the front end and take a proactive role in determining priorities regarding the roads in their particular areas.

Mr Neeson: I declare an interest as an elected member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. First, I congratulate the Minister in having the courage to reach a decision on the number of councils; that issue has dragged on for far too long. In her statement, the Minister said that it is:

“a process and not an event”.

I know that the local government task force, when it was looking at the issue, was considering the possibility

that after the elections to the new councils, those councils would meet on an interim basis. Is the Minister considering that possibility? Secondly, will the Minister agree that having reduced the number of local councils, there is a need to reduce the number of Departments as well?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. As I am reducing the number of councillors, obviously we will have to look at the number of Assembly Members as well. As regards what is normally called the shadow period or shadow council, there are advantages and disadvantages with that approach. One disadvantage, which was very clearly enunciated to me, was about the time that the Belfast Corporation became Belfast City Council. People said that they did not actually know who to go to during that period — whether they should go to the corporation or the new city council. People were uncertain as to who actually had the power at that particular time. I do not want that sort of situation arising with the new local council structures; that is something that is in the back of my mind.

However, we have not taken a definitive view in relation to shadow councils yet, and I am quite happy to listen to council colleagues in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the National Association of Councillors (NAC), and indeed to the Environment Committee and Members of this House, to hear what they have to say on the issue. I am concerned about the possibility of having a shadow period, but I think the Member is right: we need to prepare for that 2011 go-live date, and perhaps the way to do that is to have different pilot projects running throughout the country on different issues.

Mr Storey: I declare an interest as a member of the local government task force strategic leadership board, and Ballymoney Borough Council. I thank the Minister for her statement. The previous Member to speak asked the question that I wanted to pose to the Minister in relation to the shadow council and the period between 2009 and when the 11 councils will be established in 2011. I am glad that the honourable Member for Mid Ulster Mr Molloy is in the House today; no doubt he will be glad that it will be 11 councils and not seven, and he will obviously not be receiving a severance package from his own party in regard to that particular matter.

Will the Minister comment on the names of the new councils and on who will be responsible for naming them? That issue has been a bone of contention for some time. Some of the suggestions for the names for the new councils, which were envisaged under the RPA, were unacceptable.

Mrs Foster: I was going to suggest that the new council in the south-west would be known as greater Fermanagh, but that would be very mischievous of me. *[Laughter.]*

The names of the new councils will be a matter for the boundary commissioner, who will make recommendations, and I will take the final decision in consultation with the Committee for the Environment. The Member is absolutely right — some of the names mentioned in the last RPA were quite Orwellian and did not inspire any sort of local identity or a civic sense of ownership. That is precisely what we are trying to inspire, so perhaps it would be a good idea to call that council greater Fermanagh.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for bringing this information to the House. Has she considered the current debts of some councils, and the high rates in some council areas compared to others? How will the merging of a council with high rates and a council with low rates actually operate? Will the councils' funds all go into the one pot, with the citizens of one area having to pay for the debt and poor management of the other?

Secondly, the Minister mentioned a letter from the Minister for Social Development. Did that Minister indicate her preferred number of local council areas?

Mrs Foster: I recognise the Member's point about poor management in some councils — something that is obviously reflected in the different levels of rates throughout Northern Ireland. I assure the Member that we will consider that issue proactively. Although many councils may have significant debt, I presume that they also have a significant asset base, and that issue will be considered by the implementation group.

It will be a matter for the Minister for Social Development as to whether she wishes to release to Members the letter that she sent to me. However, I believe I am correct in saying that — and the Minister will forgive me if I miss out a few words — although 15 was the SDLP's preferred number of councils, she could understand why we had reached 11 as the number. She was happy with that, and felt that it was an improvement on seven. Furthermore, the Minister's team were clear with me in previous meetings that they could work with either 11 or 15 councils, and could work very well with 11 councils.

Therefore, as Minister of the Environment, I find the Ulster Unionist Party line in relation to the number of councils unclear. Some people are happy enough with 11, others are — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: The truth hurts.

Some people are happy with 15, and a councillor in Fermanagh wanted 26. Therefore, I do not know what the Ulster Unionist party line is, but, then, neither do its Members.

Mr Speaker: Declan O'Loan is not in the House; therefore Roy Beggs will ask the next question.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

Will the Minister explain why she seeks to pursue the enactment of this important Bill by accelerated passage? This afternoon, it is proposed that the commission for victims and survivors Bill will proceed by accelerated passage. The Bill to change local government boundaries proposes some of the most extensive changes to local government for over 35 years, and it is important to get the detail right. Will the Minister, therefore, explain why the Bill will be advanced in a time frame that will not meet the indicated 2011 deadline? Why was the Bill not introduced earlier? Why did delays prevent proper scrutiny of this important issue?

Secondly, the Minister indicated that there would be a reduction in the number of councillors, and that she would support a reduction in the number of MLAs. Given that it is impossible to be in two, or even three, places at once, and a future reduction in the number of councillors and MLAs, does the Minister believe that there should, moreover, be a ban on a dual mandate, preventing councillors or MLAs from serving as MPs?

Mrs Foster: I thought that I had made it clear that I was referring to membership of both the Assembly and Parliament. Perhaps the Member was not in the Chamber when I made that point.

I do not understand how I could introduce a piece of legislation in respect of the Boundary Commission if the Executive had not first agreed on the number of councils that would be —

Mr B McCrea: Why did it take so long?

Mrs Foster: Perhaps the Member should ask his own party why it took so long, bearing in mind that it was his party that started the process in 2002 with a statement at the Ulster Unionist Party conference. The Bill is being introduced under the accelerated passage procedure to ensure that we can go to the electorate in 2011, and that we will be able to provide the electorate with the new councils at that time. I will be attending a meeting of the Environment Committee this week, and the Ulster Unionist Party's Committee members can ask me any questions that they wish about the detail of this short Bill.

Mr Cree: I remind the House that I am a member of North Down Borough Council. I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill and for getting the ball back in play. That has taken a long time, but not all the fault for that lies with the Ulster Unionist Party.

The Minister said that a process is under way. However, I have serious concerns about the 11b model. Will the Minister confirm that the Executive made a unanimous decision to go for that model? Were her partners on the Benches opposite of the same mind?

I had a question about the transfer of funds, but the Minister has already dealt with that matter. I assume that there is an assurance that those arrangements will be updated as time moves on.

What is the future of the Local Government Staff Commission, and what staff efficiency losses will there be? Has any decision been made on that significant point? Is there any likely date for the implementation of the MLA severance deal?

Mrs Foster: If some MLAs are looking for severance, I could suggest a few names. *[Laughter.]*

When the Executive considered the available range of council models and settled on 11 councils, we believed that that struck a good balance between reducing some of the diversity of population and rating income, and promoting and strengthening the links between councils and their communities. I was always told at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies not to ask a question to which I did not know the answer. The Member clearly knows the answer to the question about whether the Executive's decision was unanimous because the information, including the fact that his two party colleagues felt that they could not support the Executive's 11b model, has been in the public domain. However, everyone else was happy to go along with that.

As I said in my statement, I am initiating a review of the Local Government Staff Commission, and I hope to make progress on that soon. We will work with the Local Government Remuneration Committee, NIC and NILGA to introduce the most fair and appropriate severance package available.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

First Stage

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I beg to introduce the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill [NIA 12/07], which is a Bill to replace the post of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland, which was established by the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, with a commission for victims and survivors for Northern Ireland.

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.

1.30 pm

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

Accelerated Passage

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I beg to move

That the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

I am grateful for the opportunity to address Members on this motion. I reiterate my commitment and that of the First Minister to meeting the needs and addressing the concerns of victims and survivors. Since the re-establishment of devolution on 8 May 2007, we have made it clear that we are determined to address that key issue, and we have expended much effort on considering how best to meet the needs of victims and survivors. We are finalising a comprehensive strategy and have secured £36 million over the next three years to meet their varied needs. We are putting together a structure to ensure that the voices and needs of victims and survivors will be able to shape future policy and practice.

The new commission will be a vital foundation for that work, and its speedy establishment will be a significant step towards meeting the urgent needs of victims and survivors. The decision to appoint four commissioners was taken after careful consideration. In reaching that decision, the First Minister and I have taken a step that enables us to draw on a wide range of experience, expertise and commitment. Our decision was also based on our recognition of the substantial body of work that must be undertaken, and I am pleased to report that the new commissioners designate are already in the early stages of developing a work plan and establishing an office for the commission.

We are keen that the work should continue as quickly as possible. One implication of our decision is that the Assembly must amend the existing legislation, namely the Victims and Survivors Order 2006, to allow for the replacement of a sole commissioner by a commission. The functions of the commission will be the same as those envisaged for the victims' commissioner in the 2006 Order. The Bill makes provision for amendments to the 2006 Order to allow for the appointment of such number of individuals as may be considered appropriate.

The First Minister and I seek the Assembly's support for accelerated passage for the Bill to establish the commission, because early legislative provision is necessary to expedite meeting the needs of victims and survivors. We realise that general concerns may arise about the use of accelerated passage for legislation. However, in this case it is of the utmost importance that the commission be underpinned without delay by a legislative framework.

I thank the Committee for recognising the need to expedite the process and for its support for accelerated passage. To engage in the normal legislative timescale would unduly delay addressing the needs of victims and survivors. Their needs have been unaddressed for far too long. The First Minister and I have put much effort and consideration into ensuring that appropriate structures are established to address the needs of victims and survivors. We recognise the difficult issues that surround the definition of "victim". Victims and survivors should consider that issue. We will, therefore, request that the proposed victims' forum makes it a priority to examine the definition of "victim" and brings forward its proposals.

We must start the required work, and the Bill makes the minimum changes required to the 2006 Order to enable a number of people to be appointed to a commission. To facilitate the technical changes that will underpin the commission's work, the First Minister and I seek the support of the Assembly for the accelerated passage of the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I thank the Minister for his statement. Standing Order 40(3) provides:

"Where, exceptionally, a Bill ... is thought to require accelerated passage ... the Member in charge of the Bill shall, before introduction of the Bill in the Assembly, explain to the appropriate Committee –

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure."

Therefore, I intend to place before the House the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's strictly factual position about the information that is relevant to the requirements of Standing Orders.

My Committee became aware of the fact that the legislation that is before the House would be required when the First Minister made a statement to the House on 28 January 2008, in which he announced that four of the candidates on the list of those who were considered appropriate for the post of commissioner for victims and survivors had indicated their willingness to act in a joint capacity as commissioners designate in a new commission for victims and survivors. In the First Minister's statement, he advised that it would be necessary to introduce legislation to create the commission for victims and survivors. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was not consulted in advance of the announcement that four commissioners would be appointed.

I became formally aware of the need to introduce legislation to establish a commission for victims and

survivors on the morning of 28 January 2008, when the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and I received a briefing from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the planned ministerial statement. During that briefing, the Deputy Chairperson and I asked several questions on the decision to appoint four commissioners, the process leading up to that appointment and the implications of that decision. At the end of the briefing, the First Minister offered to attend the Committee to discuss the issues that were raised.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister attended the meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 5 March 2008 in order to discuss victims' and survivors' issues, which included the draft Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. On 4 March, Committee members received a letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, dated 3 March 2008, which advised that they intended to introduce a draft Bill to amend the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and that they would seek the Committee's support for the Bill's accelerated passage.

On 22 February, the First Minister and deputy First Minister indicated in a press release that they would seek the Committee's agreement for accelerated passage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. The letter that the Committee received on 4 March formally notified the Committee that accelerated passage was being sought. A copy of the draft Bill was also provided to Committee members on that date.

During the Committee meeting on 5 March, the First Minister and deputy First Minister provided information on future policy for victims and survivors, explained the reasons for seeking accelerated passage and sought the Committee's support for accelerated passage. Ministers also responded to questions from Committee members on provisions in the draft Bill and agreed to respond in writing to questions that they were unable to deal with during the meeting. After discussions with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers, the Committee debated the Ministers' request that the Committee support accelerated passage for the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. The Committee agreed on a majority vote to support accelerated passage for the Bill.

At its meeting on 12 March, the Committee noted correspondence from OFMDFM that provided written explanations on the matters that are contained in Standing Order 40. The letter also provided clarification that was requested by the Committee on the Bill's scope and on the purpose of several provisions that are contained in schedule 1 to the Bill.

I trust that my explanation of the Committee's consideration of the draft Commission for Victims and

Survivors Bill will assist the House in its consideration of the motion for accelerated passage.

I now leave aside my responsibilities as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in order to speak as a representative of the Ulster Unionist Party. Although the deputy First Minister indicated in his statement that the victims' commission will be charged with redefining, as a matter of urgency, what constitutes a victim, it is gravely disappointing that those in the House who have so loudly protested their unhappiness with the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 have failed to take the opportunity presented by the Bill to change the flawed definition of what constitutes a victim in the 2006 Order.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not the Bill's sponsor. However, although mindful of the technical and procedural difficulties that the Bill presents, we will seek to amend the flawed definition of what constitutes a victim. It is not only reasonable but morally right that a legislative definition of what constitutes a victim does not include those injured while undertaking criminal acts and/or those who were convicted of terrorist offences.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I draw your attention to Standing Order 40, especially to 40(4), which states:

"In moving the motion the Member shall explain to the Assembly-

"(a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;"

Mr McGuinness certainly referred to the need to meet the needs of victims by instituting accelerated passage, although the timetable that we have just heard Mr Kennedy outline suggests that, so far, there has been a lack of urgency on the part of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Standing Order 40(4) also states that the Member shall explain to the Assembly:

"(b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted;"

The deputy First Minister has told us that the interim commissioners are already engaging in work. That suggests that there is little by way of consequence should accelerated passage not be granted.

Standing Order 40(4) also requires the deputy First Minister to explain to the Assembly:

"(c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure."

The deputy First Minister — to whom I listened carefully — made no reference whatsoever to steps taken to minimise the use of such procedure in future. Therefore, I submit that he has failed to comply with Standing Order 40(4).

Mr Speaker: I understand what the Member has said. It is up to the deputy First Minister to decide how he explains himself. I am sure that he will deal with those points during his winding-up speech.

Mr Ford: With respect, Mr Speaker, Standing Order 40(4) states specifically:

“In moving the motion the Member shall explain to the Assembly”.

At this end of the Chamber, we did not hear Standing Order 40(4)(c) covered at all, nor did we hear Standing Order 40(4)(a) and (b) covered adequately.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the deputy First Minister will correct himself during his winding-up speech.

Mr Ford: Therefore, he did not cover Standing Order 40(4)(c) when speaking to the motion?

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Stephen Moutray.

Mr Moutray: I support the motion. My colleagues and I believe that the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill should be granted accelerated passage under Standing Order 40(4).

The appointment of the four-person victims’ commission in January 2008 to deal with the issues that affect victims was an important, positive and proactive development. It demonstrated to the people of the Province that the House is committed to providing support and help for the innocent victims who have gone unheard and unsupported for so long.

Unfortunately, the previous Administration neglected innocent victims’ needs. Although the failed Belfast Agreement delivered for terrorist prisoners, it did not address the needs of victims of violence. Rather, it pandered to the perpetrators and ignored the victims. Those unionists who advocated that deal should hang their heads in shame.

The motion for accelerated passage will set the wheels in motion to eradicate the current legal difficulties that prohibit the four-strong victims’ commission’s getting down to business. The commissioners will be protected, because the body will be given the proper legal status that it requires.

The Democratic Unionist Party has championed, and always will, the cause of innocent victims, who were, for many years, sidelined and ignored under the Belfast Agreement.

1.45 pm

Since 2003, this party has made progress on that front by calling for the introduction of a victims’ commissioner. In 2005, that call was met with the appointment of the Interim Victims’ Commissioner, Mrs Bertha McDougall, who carried out sterling work and created a good base upon which to build.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Moutray: In the early part of this year, we spearheaded the appointment of the four-person team. The Minister of Finance, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, has ensured that victims will have the largest-ever budget of £36 million. That is real progress.

The needs of innocent victims can never, ever be forgotten. As Northern Ireland seeks to move beyond the decades of terrorism and violence, providing for the needs of victims is vital. Such a motion will assist us in ensuring that that is the case. The ultimate aim of the DUP is to ensure that the voices and views of innocent victims are adhered to.

Along with my colleagues, I pledge that we will not let the case of victims be forgotten. Our duty is to ensure that they are provided for and safeguarded. I refer to true victims — not those who went out with the intent to murder and were apprehended in the act of doing so. I am clear in my mind what the definition of a victim is.

It goes without saying that innocent victims have suffered great personal loss over the years. The motion tabled today ensures that the four-person body can get down to work and deliver on the real issues that affect the victims in this Province. It will ensure that the commissioners can deal with the prevalent issues surrounding the victims and give factual, consolidated answers. Such a commission will allow victims and survivors to receive that to which they are entitled.

Throughout my constituency of Upper Bann, many have suffered at the hands of terrorist violence. Many innocent victims have struggled to make ends meet and to raise families in the most difficult of circumstances. Such an acceleration procedure will enable the four newly appointed commissioners to get down to business quickly and to deliver on the real issues affecting those who suffered over the decades of conflict, terror and strife.

Many of the victims who are getting on in years need assistance with simple matters, such as running a home. Those people are not looking for handouts — they need assistance to lead as normal a life as possible. They want the same quality of life as those who were less affected by the Troubles.

We fail to realise the impact that the Troubles have had on the social life of many of the victims. There are victims groups throughout this Province, and they do sterling work. I look forward to the commission working with those groups to deliver on matters of importance. It will enable greater flexibility in accessing and meeting the needs of individual victims and their families. It will enable them to provide support and help for all victims and survivors, bearing in mind that those are some of the most vulnerable people in the Province, who have suffered great personal loss.

Recently, in my Lurgan office, I met a number of victims. Their cry is that there is no support or assistance

for those who have suffered at the hands of terrorists. That will no longer be the case.

I support the motion, knowing that such a procedure will put the wheels in motion for supporting and assisting the individuals who for so long have suffered alone.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The legislation is being introduced to establish a commission for victims and survivors. A panel of commissioners will bring a mix of experience, expertise and skills. It will be more representative and reflective of the experiences of all victims and survivors in the important stages of shaping and delivering the services that they need.

It must be realised that the issue of victims and survivors of the conflict is a very sensitive and emotional one. We must always remember that we are talking about people who lost their lives, and, in particular, about their families and those who were injured. The survivors must live with the trauma of bereavement and injury every day of the week, and we must be very sensitive to that. Our priority should be to ensure that all relatives are treated with respect and dignity and that every effort is made to support them. The needs of all victims and survivors must be met as a matter of urgency.

The decades of political conflict have marked the lives of everyone in the North of Ireland. That legacy is evidenced today in the various experiences that were, and are, endured by victims and survivors: the bereaved, the injured, ex-political prisoners, former combatants — both state and non-state — and their wider family circles and communities. Irrespective of religious or political affiliation, any legislation that is introduced must recognise, acknowledge and support the ongoing efforts to ensure that an inclusive and meaningful process is established to deal with the legacy of the conflict. That process must be anchored around truth and justice for all and must address the varying needs and demands of all victims and survivors. Support for such a process — particularly through the delivery of programmes at local and community level — represents an important building block in developing a society that sustainably embodies due regard for the need to promote equality and good relations among everybody.

The ongoing grief and trauma experienced by survivors and victims of the conflict must be recognised and resourced on an equal and equitable basis. That is particularly important when addressing the legacy of the conflict through community initiatives, the provision of counselling and emotional support, and the delivery of training and development opportunities.

Therefore, when we undertake any initiatives to support victims and survivors, we should take our lead from victims and their families and endeavour to make a positive contribution to help them to come to terms

with their circumstances. Any approach must be victim-centred. By building a society that is based on the foundations of equality and human rights, and by keeping the victims and survivors of the conflict at the centre of our initiatives, the long-term development of good relations and reconciliation can be achieved in the interests of all. If we are to move towards such a society, all victims and survivors and their families must be treated with dignity and respect, and there must never be a hierarchy of victims. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: Several Members have mentioned the background to the proposals for a victims' commission, and the motion, which proposes to grant the legislation accelerated passage, would give standing to that commission.

The issue of victims and survivors is crucial. Promises were made to victims and survivors in the Good Friday Agreement back in 1998, but those promises have not been fulfilled. We should, as a matter of urgency, strive to reach a position whereby we can look victims in the eye and honestly tell them that we are meeting those promises, and we must ensure that we do so credibly and sensitively. For too long, those of us in the party-political system have engaged in the practice of patronising victims on the one hand while ghettoising them on the other. Perhaps there was a collective failure on the part of the political class to meet the promises in the agreement — perhaps the Governments were neglectful in their handling of some issues, or perhaps those involved in the political process failed to make good on the commitments that were made to victims and survivors. It is because of that failure that many victims and survivors simply do not have confidence that the Government, or the political process in general, will address their concerns and affirm their rights.

It was because the SDLP was conscious of that lack of confidence that, quite a number of years ago, in the assorted talks that took place during the various political breakdowns and attempts to resume the institutions, it strongly advocated the creation of a forum for victims and survivors.

I recall that the Alliance Party also strongly championed that proposal. During the all-party discussions at Hillsborough in early 2003, we made a strong case for the establishment of a forum for victims and survivors, and indicated the remit that it might have to advance issues that had been delayed. However, when a joint declaration was published by the British and Irish Governments in spring 2003, the only reference to such a forum was that it would be considered. We questioned why the commitment was not stronger and why the possible role and remit of a forum was not mentioned in that joint declaration. The two Governments told the SDLP that there was only a glancing reference to a forum for victims and survivors because the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin did not agree with it. That

was the reason that we were given for the issue not progressing.

We are still only working towards a forum for victims and survivors to complement the important work that that the commission for victims and survivors will undertake. However, as other Members have already stated, in seeking accelerated passage, Ministers and the Executive must provide assurances and explanations to the House. I am worried that there is an emerging pattern whereby issues that have been long delayed, either in a Department or in the Executive, are subject to a scrambled outcome by Ministers and a scrambled legislative process in the House. Scrambling such important issues in the House is not the stuff of accountable devolution.

Given that it took such a long time to make decisions, and for Ministers and Departments to present proposals, Members have the right to ask for more time to consider them. The SDLP member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister felt that the Committee was being bounced, not just on the question of accelerated passage, but by having to take a decision on the day on which the Committee was told about the proposals. The Committee was not allowed to return to that issue at later meetings.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that the DUP and Sinn Féin have the voting power to force anything through by accelerated passage, but that that will not solve the problems that we face as a society? Does he further agree that it is right and proper to discuss such delicate and sensitive issues openly and with transparency, and that invoking accelerated passage takes away that inalienable right?

Mr Durkan: I do not go as far as advocating outright opposition to accelerated passage in this case because there is urgency in respect of this issue. Although I want Members to be afforded the right to properly consider all the issues involved, including those issues that they feel should be involved that may not be covered by the Bill, I am careful not to immediately adhere to partisan divisions on how to move forward.

As well as taking up some of the points that were made by other Members, and further to what he has said about a victims' and survivors' forum and the definition of a victim, I ask the deputy First Minister to reflect on whether the proposal is well thought out. After the long delay in addressing the concept of a victims' and survivors' forum because of uncertainty over its functions and the difficulties surrounding it, devolving to it the most divisive issue of all — the definition of a victim — is an abdication of responsibility by those who should be prepared to address those issues. It is a bit much to have party point-scoring in the Chamber on the definition of a victim and for the parties to serve notice that they will maintain the luxury of sniping at the various definitions

— and then for the decision to be made that that difficult and divisive issue be the one thing that is devolved.

One would almost think that the proposal is calculated to abort the potential success and work of the victims' and survivors' forum.

2.00 pm

We are being told that the proposed legislation for the victims' and survivors' commission is primarily to ensure that there can be a commission rather than a single commissioner, as is provided for in the current legislation. The deputy First Minister told the House that there will be few other changes. If this legislation were not being dealt with by way of accelerated passage, Members would have wanted to take the opportunity to improve the legislation. Members would possibly have wanted to give more weight to the commission's remit.

Exchanges have already taken place today about the funding package for victims, to which Ministers have referred. However, the Bill gives no indication of there being any statutory role for the commission in relation to that funding package. Ministers have referred to the victims' strategy, but the Executive have presented no clear-cut statutory role, remit of oversight or intervention for the commission in relation to that strategy. That raises fundamental issues. If we are in the business of legislating for a coherent and competent victims' commission, some of us would have wanted those issues to have been addressed. If the Bill receives accelerated passage, it will be difficult to get a handle on those issues.

Given that the deputy First Minister has told the House that a number of other issues will be under consideration, I hope that he will be able to reassure Members that those will be considered without prejudice to the necessity to ensure that the commission can get up and running and be free from some of the legal question marks that are ricocheting around about its status.

Although the SDLP questions how the proposal for four victims' commissioners came about, now that that is the outcome, we believe we must enable the commission to do the best possible job. We also want the Assembly, as a legislative body, to do the best possible job. If it cannot do so because this Bill proceeds under accelerated passage, then I hope that the Minister can assure us that he and his colleagues will take steps to ensure that the Assembly will have other opportunities and means to do so on behalf of victims and survivors.

Mrs Long: I oppose the motion seeking accelerated passage for the legislation. I recognise that the subject is emotive and sensitive, particularly given that four individuals have been put in an impossible situation because the House was not given the opportunity to discuss the concept of a commission before their names were made known publicly. That has hampered much

of the discussion about the pros and cons of the creation of a commission rather than a commissioner.

The responsibility and fault for that lies with OFMDFM, which put the cart before the horse. Although Members have referred to a commission, there is currently no commission. There are four commissioners designate, because that is the only legal vehicle by which they can take their posts. Therefore, we must be careful when discussing this issue.

We are also in danger of straying into a much wider debate about victims' issues, which is not the meat of the subject today. We are being asked to discuss specifically whether accelerated passage should proceed. There may well be other opportunities for a wider debate on victims' issues. Perhaps on those occasions Mr Moutray will explain why, although he said that he is unhappy with the current definition of "victim", his own party, through OFMDFM, brought forward the long title for the Bill that did not allow any amendment to it to deal with that specific issue. Clearly, the First Minister is a member of Mr Moutray's party. Mr Moutray will have the opportunity to answer that question at another point.

Jennifer McCann referred to the need for a full range of experience, skills and expertise — and she will have to answer why, when this process was originally put in train, it was designed for an individual who would cover all of those bases. At no point have the First Minister and deputy First Minister suggested that the process was in any way flawed. Serious questions are, therefore, being raised about what people have said.

I shall stick to the specific issue of accelerated passage. No one in the House wants unnecessary delay in the creation of arrangements to address the needs of victims and survivors. Both in and out of Committee, I and others in the Chamber have repeatedly called for OFMDFM to expedite the appointment of commissioners. We are all acutely aware of the political failure of the entire process thus far to prioritise sufficiently the needs of victims, and we want that matter to be addressed urgently. In contrast to the urgency that has been expressed in the Chamber today, after devolution, and despite having been told repeatedly that the appointment was imminent, there have been protracted and unjustifiable delays at the hands of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The re-advertisement of the post was followed by further inactivity by OFMDFM. Four commissioners designate were then appointed with a view to creating a commission. The need for further legislation to provide for that commission created further delay.

That was clearly the case and, when concerns about delay were raised, the Committee was told by OFMDFM that, although a resolution was urgent, it was more

important that the decision be got right. Despite that, OFMDFM is now unwilling to allow the Committee and the House any time to go through the due process to reassure themselves — and the public — that the decision has indeed been got right. That is the point of the process in which Committee members engage — to scrutinise and to ensure that things are got right. However, accelerated passage denies Committees that process.

Accelerated passage was requested at the Committee's meeting on 5 March 2008. That meeting was held in closed session, so that discussion is not formally on record. That was a mistake; it would have been better had it been on record so that the issues that were aired would have been fully open to scrutiny before this debate. However, on making the appointments in the aftermath of Christmas, the Ministers said that they were aware of the need for legislative change. Therefore, they knowingly built that additional delay into their actions, and the pressure has been turned on this House to abandon its responsibilities and duties with regard to scrutiny, and to facilitate a process that has come about simply because OFMDFM has not, for more than nine months, fulfilled its obligations to expedite this matter.

It is possible for the Committee and the House to allow the passage of a Bill to proceed without undue delay. Accelerated passage is not, therefore, just an arrangement whereby agreement can be reached; it is more than that. It obliterates the Committee Stage of a Bill, and removes from the Committee proper scrutiny and the ability to take evidence from others who may wish to scrutinise a piece of legislation.

Standing Order 40 makes it clear that certain requirements should be met before accelerated passage is agreed. First, it is made clear that it should be exceptional for a Bill, other than a Budget Bill, to be in that position. Standing Order 40 requires:

"the Member in charge of the Bill shall, before introduction of the Bill in the Assembly, explain to the appropriate Committee –

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure."

With regard to exceptionality —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. However, as she articulates her case, she is in danger of giving the impression that a precedent has been set, and I would like her to address that. Does she say that never, ever, is there an occasion on which to go for accelerated passage? Will she confirm that this is not a precedent, but that accelerated passage has, in fact, been used on many occasions, not only in this House but in other elected Houses?

Will she plainly tell the House what her true problems with the use of accelerated passage are?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his timely intervention, because I was about to outline the other occasions when the House has used accelerated passage and the particular circumstances pertaining to them.

The Member asked whether a precedent has been set. I believe that it has, because the deputy First Minister's opening statement did not outline all of the requirements — as requested by Standing Order 40 — as to why accelerated passage should proceed. He is being permitted to do that in his concluding remarks if he so chooses. Therefore, a precedent has been created today.

Since devolution in 2000, 11 Bills have been granted accelerated passage by the House. Five of those were Budget Bills, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel expressed the view that there had been sufficient consultation on the Budget and that failure to agree the Budget would have resulted in the Assembly not being able to draw down money from Westminster. That would qualify as a significant consequence of not accepting accelerated passage.

Five of the Bills were parity legislation, specific to issues of social security and welfare reform. If accelerated passage had not been granted, specific deadlines would not have been met. That would have resulted in loss of benefits to individuals in Northern Ireland. Again, that could be considered a significant consequence of failing to grant accelerated passage.

The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill was also granted accelerated passage. The Committee for Social Development expressed reluctance on that occasion, but accepted that it was unavoidable because there was a need for parity not to be broken. Therefore, even though it was unavoidable, the Committee did not simply roll over and play dead on the granting of accelerated passage.

The only other piece of legislation given accelerated passage was a two-clause Bill, the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill, which was introduced to comply with a High Court ruling in order that we would not be in breach of the law. Again, that is a significant reason and an exceptional circumstance to justify the use of accelerated passage.

I am not opposed to the use of accelerated passage per se. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs Long: However, as is outlined in Standing Order 40 — and if Members are unhappy that Standing Orders make requirements clearly in black and white before our eyes, that is their problem and not mine — certain requirements must be met. That is not the case with this Bill.

When the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister raised those issues with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the two junior Ministers, no reason was given during our meeting or in a subsequent letter to suggest that the circumstances were exceptional. The letter states:

“We fully appreciate that concerns may arise regarding the general use of accelerated passage for legislation but regard this as an exceptional case.”

I eagerly turned to the second page, only to find that it had moved to a different theme. The letter provided no reason why the case was exceptional. If delay and heel-dragging in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is being cited as exceptional, that is a weak argument. It causes me particular concern that yet another Minister intends to use accelerated passage and, therefore, again preclude a Committee from filling its proper role.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I have given way already. The other issues —

Mr Donaldson: Does the Member not want a Minister to respond?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs Long: The Minister will have an opportunity to respond at the end of the debate, and I am happy for him to do so. OFMDFM has had adequate opportunity to answer the questions put to it by the Committee, but has failed to do so.

2.15 pm

Mr Donaldson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It was I as a junior Minister who attended that Committee meeting and gave exceptional reasons for accelerated passage being required. Is it in order for the Member to make an accusation that is untrue, impugn Ministers' integrity and then not give them the opportunity to respond?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. As Speaker, I am not involved in the business of Committees or how Ministers address Committees.

We now move on to Mr Jim Shannon. *[Laughter.]*

I am sorry; Mrs Long, please continue your speech.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My speech almost became accelerated, which would please some Members and not others.

I do not believe that substantive reasons were given for accelerated passage. After a commissioner designate made some comments on television, I pressed the junior Minister — he may wish to respond to my points when I finish — on whether there were difficulties in

commissioners engaging with the public, drawing up action plans, undertaking the required range of duties, and so forth. Initially, OFMDFM refuted that and stated publicly that there was no impediment to the commissioners meeting victims and undertaking other functions; at the Committee meeting, the Ministers agreed with this. I pressed further and asked what the commissioners would be unable to do in the context of the legislation not being expedited. The only example I was given verbally was that, in the absence of a legislative framework, they might not be able to issue grant funding.

Mr Donaldson: I recall that point being made, and it is a pity that the Committee meeting was not recorded. However, we gave exceptional reasons for the need for accelerated passage. In my opinion, the victims are an exceptional enough reason. However, there is a problem in that, legally, under the Data Protection Act 1998, the commissioners cannot collect information about victims in order to help them with individual issues. That was explained to the Committee, and it is a reason that accelerated passage is required, so that the commissioners can get on with the job that the people of Northern Ireland — and especially the victims — want them to do.

Mrs Long: It is a shame that the junior Minister did not include that impediment in the three-page letter that was sent to the Committee in response to its specific question. That point was not included in the press statement about impediments not existing. I also think that it is a pity that the Committee meeting was not recorded. However, the meeting took place behind closed doors at the request of the Department and the Ministers, not the Committee.

The Committee was told that there could be an issue.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way; I want to finish my speech.

The Committee was told that there could be an issue. The only impediment that was brought to its attention, either verbally or in writing, was that of the distribution of funding. Given that, at present, no framework is in place for the commissioners to issue grant funding — after all, they have only been appointed — and there is no formal application process, I cannot see that the normal passage of the Bill would impede the commissioners, because a framework would be in place in time for them to undertake that role. The ability to fund was the only impediment mentioned, and the letter that was sent to the Committee by OFMDFM did not refer to it. The Committee asked serious questions, which were reiterated in writing, and I fail to see why this issue did not form part of OFMDFM's written response.

My colleague Stephen Farry wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister asking what impact the decision to appoint multiple commissioners on 28 January 2008 would have on the delivery of the new strategy for victims and survivors and on the creation of a victims and survivors' forum.

They said that, in their assessment, it would have no impact. In the evidence presented in writing — if there is dispute about the verbal communication — there is no indication of any impediment to the commissioners undertaking their role. If there were an impediment, I would not oppose accelerated passage for the Bill.

I also ask the Department to outline what steps will be taken to minimise the use of accelerated passage in the future. During this debate, some Members have suggested that to resist accelerated passage is merely a whimsy of the Alliance Party, the SDLP or the Ulster Unionist Party; that it is simply frustration. It is not; opposition to accelerated passage exists for a reason. Committees play an important role in the drafting of legislation, and they should be fully consulted in doing so. Despite the fact that it is stated in Standing Orders, I cannot understand why measures to avoid future use of accelerated passage were not outlined to the Committee or the House. That substantive point has not been addressed by the Ministers — neither in their letters nor in the deputy First Minister's statement this morning.

It has been asserted on a number of occasions that the Bill is a technical piece of legislation in which one word will simply be replaced with another. I dispute that; it is a piece of enabling legislation that creates a commission of four equal commissioners on four equal full-time salaries. As those who have read the Bill will know, it also creates the legislative framework for any number of commissioners to be appointed; there is no cap on that. At a time when many small organisations that provide direct services to victims and survivors are going to the wall because of lack of funds, that should be of concern to the House.

This is a significant departure from what was originally envisaged — the post of one commissioner to act as a strong, unified, advocate voice for the entire sector. No doubt, those issues will be addressed at Second Stage.

It is important to assess whether we have addressed the requirements of Standing Order 40. The Committee received the Bill 24 hours before it was requested to agree to accelerated passage, and, given the answers that members had received, it was not reasonable for us to do so on that day.

I asked that a decision be deferred for one week to allow OFMDFM to respond fully to the Committee's questions, to address fully the issues in Standing Order 40 and to report back to the Assembly. I had not originally ruled out the option of accelerated passage, as I have put on record during that Committee discussion. However,

it was clear to those of us who are not members of the DUP or Sinn Féin that other Committee members came simply to do the will of OFMDFM, regardless of the issues raised. The Committee simply rolled over, and we had no opportunity to explore the issues further before making a decision.

This is a rather shameful saga for the Assembly, from beginning to end. I do not wish to interfere with the actions undertaken in good faith by the commissioners designate, and I do not wish to delay the process further. However, the House has a role, and the Executive must acknowledge that fact, once and for all. They must also accept that that role exists not only to enable Members to express their opinions but for the Committee to allow others to be canvassed, so that we have some idea of the views of the general public. The single point of agreement is that this is an important issue that has been badly handled by the Department.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. As Question Time for the First Minister and deputy First Minister commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the Assembly takes its ease until that time. This debate will continue at 4.00 pm with Mr Shannon.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide details on its recent meeting with the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health. (AQO 2588/08)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): The Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health is one of the largest regional mental-health voluntary organisations in the North of Ireland. It was founded in 1959 and provides residential and day care services, and other support, for people with mental-health problems in the community. It has 13 beacon centres offering a range of rehabilitative activities and providing comprehensive advice and information on mental-health issues.

Junior Minister Kelly met with the Association for Mental Health on Thursday, 13 December 2007, to discuss important cross-cutting issues of health promotion in relation to mental health. The Executive, as part of their Programme for Government, acknowledged the need to promote physical and mental health. The junior Minister was able to assure the organisation of OFMDFM and the Executive's commitment to tackling mental-health issues.

The association is also represented on the cross-sectoral steering group that was set up by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which oversees the implementation of the 'Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008'. Cross-cutting issues, such as early-years intervention and the work of the suicide task force, were discussed, and in that context the organisation asked OFMDFM to continue to press for a co-ordinated approach across all relevant Departments. The junior Ministers and representatives of OFMDFM sit on the ministerial subgroup that deals with suicide prevention and have given that important issue their fullest attention.

The Association for Mental Health met with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

and had an agreed date to meet the Minister of Education to discuss the issues that fell under the responsibility of those Departments. An official from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was also present at the meeting with the junior Minister.

Mr McElduff: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comprehensive answer, and I welcome the fact that junior Minister Kelly met with the Association for Mental Health in mid December. I ask OFMDFM to focus its attention on the mental and physical situation of carers in society. Does the deputy First Minister agree that caring for someone can be physically, emotionally and financially draining? I hope that the implementation of a co-ordinated approach — that the deputy First Minister mentioned — will mean that senior citizens, for instance, who have to take on inappropriate levels of care for others will be supported in the future. I am asking for an Executive and an individual departmental commitment to support carers — not least those who are senior citizens.

The deputy First Minister: There is no doubt that people who care for those with mental-health problems are entitled to as much support as we can muster for them. I have no doubt that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — under the aegis of Michael McGimpsey — recognises the importance of having a comprehensive approach to ensuring that those with mental-health problems receive the greatest care possible under the circumstances.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for his initial answer. Given the overarching responsibilities of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, will the deputy First Minister give special attention to the stress management aspects of mental health — particularly at this time of uncertainty in the housing market, which is producing high levels of stress, worry and concern among homeowners, prospective homeowners and pensioners and people approaching pension age. Will he ensure that appropriate steps are taken to ensure that support services are widely known about and used?

The deputy First Minister: I accept that there are many pressures on people, not least financial ones. We need to address all the issues that have been highlighted by Members by putting together the comprehensive interdepartmental approach that I described earlier. We must ensure that we support all those who are afflicted by mental-health problems.

Mr G Robinson: Will the deputy First Minister indicate whether services for epilepsy were discussed at the meeting? Such services are funded from the mental-health budget.

The deputy First Minister: I am not aware whether epilepsy was discussed. However, I will find that out and send the Member a written reply.

Children's Play: Support

2. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how support for children's play is co-ordinated by the Executive.

(AQO 2581/08)

The deputy First Minister: The benefits of play are manifold. Good play and leisure opportunities can help to improve children's quality of life and safety in neighbourhoods, tackle obesity, promote children's health and well-being, support their development and build community cohesion.

There have been several key developments relating to play, including the establishment of an interdepartmental group and collaborative work with the Commissioner for Children and Young People and key stakeholders to map existing play provision and to develop a play and leisure policy for the North.

Ministerial colleagues will shortly be asked to approve the policy statement for publication. Prior to that approval, the draft policy statement will be sent to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister so that Committee members may express their views. Members will note the revised title 'Play and Leisure Policy'. Use of the term "play policy" in the consultation seemed to confuse the public and promote the false idea that the policy was for younger children only. The revised title reflects the fact that the policy is for all children and young people up to the age of 18.

It is important that the Executive be seen to be in the lead on current issues and, therefore, the policy highlights the fact that, although OFMDFM takes the lead on the issue of play, all Departments are signed up to the development and implementation of a policy. We also look forward to working closely with our many partners in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors on the development of the implementation plans that will follow the policy statement.

In recognition of the different needs of age groups, we will draw up two implementation plans: one for children up to the age of 11, and another for those aged between 12 and 18. Work on those will begin this year, with a view to having implementation plans agreed by spring 2009. Membership of those groups will be drawn from a wide range of stakeholders.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. How does he see the play policy interacting with the 10-year children's strategy? What oversight mechanisms will be employed?

The deputy First Minister: The document has considerable links with the six high-level outcomes in the 10-year strategy for children and young people and

will show how play and leisure will contribute to achievement of those outcomes.

The benefits that play brings to the development of children are well documented, and we are committed to promoting them.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister provide a report on the first meeting of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which was held this month?

The deputy First Minister: There is tremendous focus on this important work. The issues of children in society, their protection and ensuring that proper services are available to them are matters of great importance for the Executive and the various departmental authorities. It is clear to us all that we must adopt a joined-up approach. Meetings, at which reports are presented, are held on a regular basis. Those who are responsible for the stewardship of those meetings must make accurate assessments and plans for making progress on an issue that is of tremendous importance to all our constituents.

Mr Cree: What is OFMDFM's strategy for expanding children's play facilities and opportunities throughout the Province? Given the demands of the testing culture in schools and the Internet's pervasiveness in children's lives, does OFMDFM agree that play is important in developing their mental health?

The deputy First Minister: We are all conscious of the pressures on children and young people. In the Assembly, there have been several important debates about matters related to testing and about how that impacts on the mental health and well-being of many children. Many parts of the North have experienced tragedies, and it is difficult to assess precisely why such situations arise. However, as we move forward, we are conscious that approaches and strategies must be put in place in order to make life better for young people. Efforts to expand services will always be dictated by budgetary pressures, and we have had huge debates in relation to the Programme for Government, the Budget and the 10-year investment strategy. Nevertheless, we all recognise the importance of adequate facilities.

When young people — particularly those in socially deprived communities — are interviewed about the activities in which they engage, we hear the age-old expression, "There is nothing for us; there are no facilities." Close to where I live in the Bogside area of Derry, there was, until recently, a poor play park called Bull Park. It has now been refurbished by the council, and I have never seen a play park used as much. People come to it from many parts of the city. However, to me, that highlights the inadequacy of play facilities in other areas of Derry city, and I am sure that that applies to counties Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Antrim and Down.

There is a big challenge for us all, and we ignore at our peril the pressures that young people are under. In line with budgetary considerations — and we are

committing big funds to this area — we must ensure that we progress in a way that meets the needs of children and parents.

Executive Subcommittees

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its role in relation to establishing Executive subcommittees.

(AQO 2558/08)

The deputy First Minister: From time to time, the Executive may decide to set up subcommittees, as we already have in relation to water and sewerage services; local government modernisation and reform; children and young people; and rural planning. Normally, it is for the relevant Minister to propose the establishment of a subcommittee; however, the Executive must collectively agree on its establishment, composition and remit.

Mr Storey: The Education Minister has said that her discussions with stakeholders are confidential. Will the deputy First Minister confirm whether the Executive's deliberations about establishing an education subgroup in order to examine post-primary transfer are also confidential? Furthermore, will he give the House details of his row in the Executive with the Education Minister concerning that matter? What steps do the Executive plan to take to ensure that the Education Minister sets up a subgroup to deal with the important issue of post-primary transfer?

The deputy First Minister: When the Member suggests that there was a row between me and the Minister of Education, he is 100% wrong. There was no such row, or anything that remotely resembled one. The Minister of Education has clearly indicated that, in due course, she will bring proposals to the Assembly, the Education Committee and the Executive.

2.45 pm

We are all conscious that this is a difficult issue. This is a time of change in education. There is common ground, even among people who disagree about what that change should consist of, or about the need for change. People recognise, for example, that the 11-plus is an outdated exam. We must move forward sensibly. Yes, confidentiality is applied to the running of the Executive in certain matters, but we are all conscious of our responsibility to try to make progress on issues in a way in which our young people's needs are met. The central focus of our efforts must be on the children and on how we can improve our education system. The First Minister and I, and other members of the Executive, await with as much interest as the Member the proposals that the Minister of Education will introduce — hopefully sooner rather than later.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is always good to know that there are no rows.

Mr Gallagher: Whether matters are debated at subcommittee level or at full Executive level, the deputy First Minister will recognise the importance of openness and transparency and the need to adhere to proper procedures. Although I do not wish to single out any particular Ministers, Members have become aware that, despite the fact that some subcommittees are already in place, Ministers will make statements without first providing them to the relevant subcommittee. Does the deputy First Minister agree that that situation should be examined? When such statements are made, the Minister concerned should either indicate that the matter has been brought to the subcommittee for consideration or that it has not.

The deputy First Minister: I have already outlined a number of areas in which subcommittees exist to deal with different aspects of government. All those who participate in those subcommittees have a responsibility to ensure that government is working properly. That leads to far better working relationships and to situations in which we can provide the proper governmental institutions that our people want. Although Members can point to instances in which they felt that things were not handled as well as they should have been, all Ministers have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that, as we progress, we treat each other with proper respect. Government decisions are huge matters, which affect the lives of the people whom we represent, and it is important that we represent them in a way in which their needs are delivered consistently.

Mr Cobain: Will the deputy First Minister tell the House whether a permanent Executive subcommittee on the eradication of child poverty has been created? After all, that is a major, publicly declared Executive target. The situation is a public disgrace and an indictment of the Executive's lack of adequate focus on poverty issues.

The deputy First Minister: It is absolutely clear from the Budget and the Programme for Government, which the Assembly agreed, that the Executive regard the eradication of poverty as a priority. A great deal of funding has been invested to ensure that progress will be made over the next few years. The only way in which we can deliver in a manner that builds confidence is to do so over time. The institutions have been in place for only 10 months, and we are moving forward in a way that focuses on the need to ensure that we deliver properly for the people whom we represent.

Poverty has existed on this island for a very long time. The responsibility of politicians in the Assembly, and on the Executive that represents it, is to ensure that we face up to the huge challenges that exist. The remit of the subcommittee on children and young people,

jointly chaired by junior Ministers Kelly and Donaldson, is to improve the lives of our children and young people.

Through the workings of the subcommittee, the six objectives contained in the 10-year strategy for children and young people will be placed at the heart of the Government's agenda.

Tackling Racism

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps it is taking to tackle racism. (AQO 2597/08)

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I, along with the rest of the Executive, are determined to stamp out racism, sectarianism and intolerance. They mar our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society. In the Budget announced by the Executive on 28 January, we allocated significant new resources to tackle those scourges. Expenditure on good race relations in the past three years has been approximately £21 million. The Budget will increase that investment by almost £7.5 million over the next three years to ensure continued improvement in relationships and to address the challenges facing new and host communities. Total investment between 2008-09 and 2010-11 will therefore be approximately £29 million, taking account of efficiencies over the period, to meet the public service agreement target of building a shared and better future for all.

The Programme for Government reflects our determination to address the divisions in our society and to achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime through a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration for a shared and better future. Work on developing the programme of cohesion, sharing and integration is at an advanced stage, and we intend to introduce it for discussion with the Committee and the Assembly in two to three months.

We have already launched a call for applications for funding under the funding scheme for minority ethnic communities. A key element of that scheme is tackling racism in its many manifestations. The many strong applications that we have received and that will be awarded funding will build on examples of best practice previously funded by OFMDFM. In the longer term, the funding will form an important part of our proposals for a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his full answer. There was a sectarian incident in Belfast at the weekend which has left a young man fighting for his life. Does the deputy First Minister agree that it is everyone's responsibility — individually and collectively — to stand up to racism and sectarianism and to stamp it out wherever it occurs?

The deputy First Minister: I agree that there is a responsibility on all of us. I think that I can say without fear of contradiction that everyone in the Assembly supports the efforts of the First Minister and me to stamp out sectarianism and racism in our society. I wish to take this opportunity to condemn totally and absolutely whoever was responsible for the horrendous injuries suffered by that young man in the centre of Belfast.

I also heard on the local north-west news this morning that a car belonging to an eastern European family was burnt out. Although there are now low levels of attacks and tension in our society, now and again there will be incidents that will bring shame on the perpetrators. I believe that I speak for everyone in the Assembly when I say that we wish all those who have been attacked and injured recently — be it physically or psychologically — well in the future.

The best example that we can set is to continue with the work that we are engaged in here, because if we are seen to be working together and to be facing up to the issues, that will bear down on the Neanderthals in our society who think that attacking other people is the right way to go. It is the wrong way to go; it is unacceptable, and I think that every Member of the House will join with me in condemning those responsible for such attacks.

Mr Durkan: I join with the deputy First Minister in condemning the weekend attack on a Romanian family in my constituency of Foyle. It is the second attack that that family has suffered. I welcome the deputy First Minister's efforts to ensure that all Departments work to arrest some of the misapprehensions about the new diversity in our society and the role of people of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Will he ensure that the Executive affirm that immigration makes a positive contribution to the competitiveness and growth of this region, and that the new ethnic communities add to the diversity of our society? Will he make it clear that people of different ethnic backgrounds offer no offence or threat to our society, and that those who attack them offer that threat and offence?

The deputy First Minister: I agree with every word that the Member has just uttered. The first joint engagement that the First Minister and I were involved in was to welcome a huge turnout of people from all over the world to an event in the Great Hall on 9 May 2007. We made it clear, on behalf of the whole Executive, that we very much value the contribution that those people — some of whom have been here for some four or five decades — have made to our society.

I agree absolutely that those who attempt to destabilise our society by attacking defenceless, innocent people who make a worthwhile contribution are entitled only to our total and utter condemnation. However, condemnation alone will not be enough to ensure that we deal with those situations. There is a responsibility

to ensure that the Police Service has the will and desire to bear down on those who are responsible for such attacks. The Police Service is led by people who are determined to do that, and we must give them as much support as possible. However, where there are deficiencies, we must face up to the challenges that clearly exist.

There is also a mighty responsibility on everyone in society, no matter who they are, to give information to the police so that the thugs and scoundrels who are involved in such activity can be arrested and brought before the courts.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response concerning the strategy and moneys. He will be well aware of the issue of language. Given the strategy and the moneys available, what steps is he taking to address language difficulties, not only in the community but for people who have contact with Government bodies, the PSNI and elected representatives? It is important that people are integrated into our society, and I welcome that, but we must do more to ensure that it happens.

The deputy First Minister: The Member has made a very important point. We all understand that if there are difficulties as a result of people coming from another part of the world, a language barrier can further alienate those people. All of us have a duty and responsibility to do everything in our power to address the communication deficit that clearly exists.

I saw a very interesting programme on RTÉ about a woman from County Meath who went out of her way to embrace new immigrants who arrived in her community. She established a school, and, together with other elderly people in the community, she set up language classes for immigrants. Language is crucial.

Another crucial factor is children's education. Our schools are becoming more diverse than ever, and that represents a challenge for our education system and for the Department of Education, but they consistently rise to that challenge.

Equality Impact Assessments: Training

5. **Mr Brady** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the training that all levels of the Civil Service must go through to familiarise themselves with, and enable them to carry out, equality impact assessments effectively. (AQO 2579/08)

The deputy First Minister: With the introduction of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, an extensive programme of training for all grades of staff was provided across the Civil Service, including familiarisation training for all staff, and in-depth training for policy-makers on how to complete an equality impact

assessment. Since then, new members of staff joining the Civil Service undertake an induction programme, which includes an overview of section 75 and equality impact assessments.

3.00 pm

For staff who are directly involved in policy development or in undertaking equality impact assessments, specific OFMDFM-approved training is provided through the Centre for Applied Learning. That training covers how to conduct an equality impact assessment, and it complies fully with section 75 of the 1998 Act and with the Equality Commission's guidance on good practice. In addition, each Department has an equality unit that provides advice and guidance to staff on the correct process to follow in undertaking an equality impact assessment.

ENVIRONMENT

Climate Change

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the performance of Northern Ireland in contributing to United Kingdom targets to counter climate change. (AQO 2605/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

The current UK target for emission reductions emanates from the Kyoto protocol and is for a 12.5% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2008-12. That is an overall UK target, with no specific targets for regions or sectors. The latest information that is available on Northern Ireland emissions relates to 2005 and shows a decrease of 6% from 1990 levels. The Programme for Government has committed to a 25% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2025.

There has been considerable variation in the trends identified for Northern Ireland in the greenhouse gas inventories. That is because the methodologies and data sources that are used at a UK level to calculate emissions do not translate easily when applied to Northern Ireland, which accounts for only 3.2% of overall UK emissions.

Two pieces of research are being undertaken by my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That research will be published soon and should help to inform the position. The Member will understand that there will always be differences between the UK regions and between different sectors of the economy. Given that, it is never easy to be definitive when assessing relative performance in emission reductions; for example, our relatively dispersed rural population and associated economy will necessitate

more car use for economic and social reasons than will be the case in an urban setting that is more the norm in England. Hence, it will be understood generally that transport emissions will be higher here than elsewhere.

As the Member knows, the future assessment of performance will be informed by the independent Committee on Climate Change, which is to be established through the UK Climate Change Bill. The Committee is already up and running in shadow form, and Members will know that Lord Adair Turner and his team have visited Northern Ireland to outline their role and to get feedback on the Northern Ireland position.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her response. On the broader environmental remit, what intention does she have to advance the report from the review of environmental governance (REGNI)?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that I hope to be able to speak to the House about environmental governance before the end of May. He knows that I received a report — last June, I think — which is commonly known as the REGNI report, from a review group that was set up under direct rule. I have been considering the issues that were raised by that report, and next week, my Department will launch its first 'State of the Environment' report, of which the Member will be aware. Indeed, the production of such a document was one of the recommendations of the REGNI report. We are also looking at the October 2007 Criminal Justice Inspectorate report and at the impact of environmental crime. We are assessing the views of all the NGOs, and all the other interested stakeholders, such as the Ulster Farmers' Union. As I have indicated previously, I will come to the Member's Committee in the near future, and to the House, to discuss environmental governance.

Mr Gardiner: What action has the Minister taken to address the situation that was revealed on 23 November 2007 when the Energy Saving Trust (EST) placed 18 council areas in the Province in the top 20 of the worst carbon wasters in the United Kingdom?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I support efforts to improve energy efficiency; however, it is unfortunate that the Energy Saving Trust identified several council areas, not least my own, as being the least receptive to the energy-efficiency agenda. I have already said in my answer to the substantive question that there are huge differences between areas in Northern Ireland and areas in England, for example, as to how we use our energy.

I understand that the survey was conducted online. I do not believe that that is the best way to measure the responsiveness of a rural population — far from it. The survey also identifies some actions in relation to car use, which, as I have already said, will be much higher in rural areas of Northern Ireland than it will be in, for

example, cities in mainland UK. However, as the Minister of the Environment, I encourage all Northern Ireland's population to save energy and to commit to some of the pledges identified by the EST. Saving energy is a matter that Members must take on board, and be aware of always — as I am sure the members of the Committee for the Environment are — of the need to send out positive messages about it. I know that that view is shared by my ministerial colleague in DETI.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister update the House on what consideration she has given to Northern Ireland's signing up to a tougher target for carbon reductions, in line with our counterparts in Scotland and Wales, who are both opting for an 80% target, as opposed to the UK-wide target of 60%? Both Scotland and Wales have rural-based populations, similar to our own.

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that I have said that I remain open-minded in relation to the higher target. Indeed, I indicated to his colleague the Member for South Antrim that we will be watching keenly what happens in Wales in relation to the Climate Change Commission that has been set up there, and I recently received a report from an official who attended its last meeting.

The idea behind setting up the Committee on Climate Change, which is chaired by Lord Adair Turner, is for it to assess whether we need to move to that higher target. The committee members will, through their academic and industrial experience, be able to bring that information to us. I am very impressed by the way in which they have tackled their work to date. They have been over in Northern Ireland — unfortunately, I was unable to meet them as I was ill that day, as many Members will know — but I will be meeting them in the near future and emphasising that they need to be responsive to Northern Ireland's agenda for climate change, as well as for that of the whole of the UK.

Supporting Rural Development

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the changes to be made to the planning system to support economic development in rural areas. (AQO 2572/08)

Mrs Foster: In the context of the review of draft PPS 14, we are considering some relaxation of farm diversification planning policy to more effectively complement the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's policy. In addition, work is well advanced on a final version of PPS 4, which is entitled 'Planning and Economic Development'. I expect to publish that in the summer. Work on a new planning policy statement on tourism will be progressed later in the year.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for her answer and for locating these policies in two particular planning policy statements. I want to emphasise the importance

of the Planning Service becoming more flexible in order to enable businesses, contractors and engineering firms located in rural communities to expand their on-site operations, when those businesses are established and growing.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister whether, if it were followed up in writing, she might accept an invitation to meet with a number of local businesses in the Omagh and west Tyrone area to discuss how the Planning Service may have been obstructive to their growth.

Mrs Foster: It is nice to receive invitations on the Floor of the House. Certainly, if the Member contacts my private office, we will consider the invitation. I look forward to that as I have not been to Omagh District Council yet. I have been to other councils but have not had the opportunity to visit Omagh so I am quite happy to go there — it is a short route home from Omagh to Fermanagh.

The policies include the potential for the adaptation of redundant agricultural and non-agricultural buildings in the countryside to be reused for economic development purposes. There is also scope for the expansion and redevelopment of existing rural enterprises, subject to environmental and other criteria being met.

However, as I understand the Member's question, he is actually talking about a culture in the Planning Service as opposed to a policy. That very culture is going to be addressed in the planning reform that, I know, he and others are looking forward to being started before the summer.

Mr Simpson: What steps has the Minister's Department taken, and what progress has been made, to reduce the backlog in planning applications across the Province, particularly in my area of Craigavon?

Mrs Foster: All politics is local. The Member knows that when I came into office there was a bad backlog in the Craigavon office. I am pleased to say that the divisional support team, which I put in place, went into the Craigavon office last summer and has made good progress. I visited that office a couple of months ago to see how matters were progressing. The divisional support team has helped to reduce the number of planning applications in that office. Since June 2007, it has dealt with 1,800 applications, and approximately 1,100 decisions have been issued: approximately 600 in Newry and Mourne, 400 in Armagh and, more recently, up to 100 in Banbridge.

I am pleased to say that the Craigavon divisional office issued 5,200 decisions between 1 April 2007 and 29 February this year. That is approximately 1,200 more decisions issued than the number of applications received. We are now on the right side of the issue.

Although the number of applications received by the Planning Service up to the end of February has increased by 4.5% to more than 25,000 compared to the same period last year, the number of live applications in the system is just under 19,000, compared to more than 22,000 at 31 March 2007.

Mr Burnside: The Minister has proposals for the development of small rural communities known as clachans, which, at present, are restricted to 14 houses. There is a strong argument that that number is not enough to develop local self-contained businesses, and certainly not enough to maintain the presence of small, local primary schools. Will she look again at that number? Fourteen houses are not enough for those small local communities.

Mrs Foster: The Member is referring to dispersed rural communities and to setting up social and affordable housing in the countryside. That currently stands at eight houses. During discussions at the Executive subcommittee, it was felt that that number could be increased from eight to 14. That would take into account issues such as the infrastructure for sewerage. From an environmental point of view, it would be difficult to increase the number of houses from eight to 14. Indeed, some people have expressed concern about the move from eight to 14. However, as with everything else, a balance must be struck.

The Member referred to sustaining local primary schools — that was never the idea behind clachans. The idea was to provide homes for people who needed to live in the countryside, and if that helped to support local services such as schools, post offices, etc, it would be an additional benefit that we would support. However, that must be put in the context of the reason for clachans, which was to provide more social housing in the countryside. The Social Development Minister had the Semple Review in mind when, in the Executive subcommittee, she spoke in favour of increasing the number of houses from eight to 14.

Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on her Department's plans to address the issue of light pollution in the vicinity of the Armagh Observatory. (AQO 2577/08)

Mrs Foster: The use of lighting has increased over the past decade. Complaints have been made about light pollution, whether it is the glare from security lights — and many people are familiar with the problems caused by neighbours' security lights shining on to their properties — or the obliteration of the night sky by urban lights. From my Department's perspective, light pollution is one of several local environmental quality issues. My officials have considered the issue

under the cleaner neighbourhoods agenda, which aims to introduce stronger and more effective legislation and guidance to improve the environmental quality of our towns, cities and public spaces throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Does the Minister agree that the Armagh Observatory is an important research and educational facility, and will she take this opportunity to put on record her commitment to its continuing work?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. My officials have been in contact recently with Professor Mark Bailey, the director of Armagh Observatory, who is of the view that light pollution is making it increasingly difficult to carry out new observational programmes from the observatory's site. I have responded recently to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in respect of a study that it is undertaking on the impact of artificial light on the environment. I will continue to work with the Royal Commission, Armagh City and District Council and the observatory in dealing with the problems that persist in the city of Armagh.

3.15 pm

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response to Mr Brady. She referred to towns, cities and public spaces — is she not also concerned about the effects of light pollution in rural areas, on Armagh Observatory, astronomers and wildlife? Does the Department propose to address that problem?

Mrs Foster: The Member is absolutely right. I mentioned security lighting, which is becoming more of a phenomenon — and problem — in the countryside than in well-lit towns. The Department views security lighting as a nuisance and wants to address it and other issues, such as fly-posting, as part of its clean neighbourhoods agenda. However, resources would have to be found to introduce an Act similar to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 in England and Wales. My officials and I are considering carefully whether specific measures from that Act should be introduced individually and those that the Department considers to be priorities should be expedited.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response to Mr Brady. I put the same question to Professor Bailey at a recent meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in Armagh. To what extent does the Minister's Department benefit from information and research provided by the Armagh Observatory? Is she aware that the observatory is underfunded, and will she raise that issue with her Executive colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure?

Mrs Foster: If the Member writes to me, I am prepared to consider both issues. I will raise the issue of funding with my colleague. I am unaware of how my Department benefits from Armagh Observatory's

work, but I will follow that up with the Member at a later date.

School Bus Safety

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of the Environment, further to the recent tragic accident on the Ballygawley Road, what action she is taking to review the safety of school buses, and in particular, the provision of a high bumper to reinforce the rear of buses. (AQO 2574/08)

Mrs Foster: My Department is working in partnership with DRD and the Department of Education to implement a series of measures that were announced in 2006 aimed at improving the safety of school bus transport. We have ended the practice of allowing three children to share a double seat, reduced the number of children standing on school buses, designed a new warning signs and lights system, and increased the number of buses with seat belts on designated school services.

Over the next two years, we intend to end all standing on school buses and to introduce regulations to allow, and eventually require, the use of new signs and lights. Although I have no specific plans to introduce a requirement for high bumpers on school buses, my Department will continue to investigate any new initiatives or technologies that may increase the safety of children travelling to and from school.

Following the accident on the Ballygawley Road, I met the Minister for Regional Development and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to discuss how safety on the A4 might be improved before the construction of the new dual carriageway. Several interim measures that could be taken immediately have been identified, including additional signage and increased patrolling. My Department is also considering the use of radio advertising to encourage drivers to behave more responsibly in the kind of situations that occur on that and similar stretches of road.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I am glad to hear that some issues are being addressed. However, I am surprised to see that the rear panels of most school buses and Ulsterbus and Translink buses are made of fibreglass and give no protection to the rear-seat passengers. That is why I asked about the high bumpers. Another possible provision would be the introduction of crumple zones, or airbags such as are found in cars.

I am surprised that the rear and side impact zones of buses offer no protection, which leads to danger if one bus runs into another, or the recurrence of that accident in which a child was killed when a lorry crashed into a school bus. Perhaps the Minister will undertake to examine the existing conditions and how the specifications for the rear of school buses compare with European

standards and, particularly, with Canada and the United States.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for making those points, and I am happy to take them on board. The Member will know that the Department recently carried out an enforcement exercise at the King's Hall to check the condition of buses carrying children of school age.

The Department was alarmed to find that it must deal with a huge number of defects on those buses. It is a good-news story, however, because the Department must, therefore, continually examine and enforce improvements to buses that carry schoolchildren.

A terrible tragedy occurred on the Ballygawley Road. The House must bear in mind that during the 2007-08 academic year, 91,651 pupils are eligible for home-to-school transport assistance. Of those pupils, 85,224 travel by bus, and the remainder by taxis, for example. Buses remain the safest way to get to school. I must pay tribute to Mr Mallon for his words after his child was involved in such a tragic accident. Indeed, his family has been the model of how people should react in such a situation.

Mr Gallagher: I agree that all the measures that have been mentioned deserve most serious consideration, including that of Mr Molloy, who suggested that the rear of buses be reinforced and, therefore, better protected.

With regard to the particular case on the Ballygawley Road, the Minister has mentioned measures and policy implications that the Department is considering. I am sure that the Minister is aware that at that accident point — which Mr Molloy and I pass regularly, as do others in the Chamber — the primary school is located on a minor road that is close to a main road. A warning sign is situated only on the minor road. The school, which has more than 200 pupils, is located at a busy junction where buses pull in to allow pupils to disembark and other children to board for St Ciaran's High School in Ballygawley. Despite that, there is no warning sign on the main road to alert drivers to the schoolchildren. Can the Minister tell the House whether the Department will consider the matter of that school and any others where similar situations pertain?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I believe that that matter will be dealt with soon by the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development. Additional signage will be erected on that road. I am sorry that Nicola Murray's tragic death occurred in the way that it did, and that she will no longer be present on the bus. The Department must now deal with the situation and take proactive measures on that stretch of the road. Although a new dual carriageway will be built, my Department is determined to put in place as many road-safety measures as possible in the area during the interim period.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's response to the question. To what extent has her Department considered the recommendations that resulted from an in-depth inquiry by the previous Assembly to provide extra safety on school buses, particularly when they are stopped to let children disembark? It was recommended that traffic coming behind and towards a bus should stop until the bus had dropped off its passengers and had moved on. Is the Minister considering such an approach?

Mrs Foster: The previous Environment Committee carried out that important piece of research. My Department will revise 'The Highway Code' in the near future. The Department will certainly examine how motorists react to a bus that has stopped in front of them. It will also deal with the requirement that all children wear their seat belts. The Member will recognise the difficulty in ensuring that children keep their seat belts on for the duration of their journey. The thorny issue is the question of who is responsible for ensuring that children wear their seat belts: is it the bus driver or the school? Who will be in charge? At present, the Department is working its way through that issue.

Waste Management Targets

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of the Environment what action her Department is taking to ensure that all local councils reach their waste-management targets. (AQO 2587/08)

Mrs Foster: My officials have been working closely with the three waste management groups and the Strategic Investment Board in order to ensure that all district councils can meet their targets. I have secured £196.7 million for capital works in the 2008 Budget to assist the district councils with the cost of delivering the strategic-waste infrastructure that is required to meet the targets that are set out in The Landfill Allowances Scheme (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004, which are known as the NILAS regulations.

That fund will be administered through the governance structures that have been agreed with the waste management groups, which include a waste infrastructure programme board.

My Department has established a programme delivery support unit in partnership with the Strategic Investment Board to provide professional and technical support to local government and to help with the procurement of that infrastructure. Guidance and advice to district councils is provided through the NILAS implementation steering group, which is chaired by the Department. That group also monitors and reviews NILAS.

My Department also provides funding to the waste and resources action programme, which supports and provides guidance to district councils on a number of issues, including landfill diversion.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am aware of the support that the Department offers to district councils on this matter. The process is a logistical nightmare, as much as anything else.

Is the Minister in a position to confirm that councils will achieve their targets, or is the process still being planned?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, different waste management groups are at different stages of their planning processes, and some are more advanced than others. The Member is right to say that the Department is working closely with those groups. We are keeping a close eye on them for two reasons: we know that we have to push them to meet those targets, but we want to support them in doing so and help them with technical issues such as procurement, which will have to be open and transparent.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. Many district councils are concerned about the penalties that they could incur if they do not meet the targets. Will the Minister confirm whether councils will incur fines if they fail to meet the Northern Ireland landfill allowance scheme targets? Furthermore, what help will be given to councils to help them to try to achieve those targets?

Mrs Foster: The allocation of allowances as set out under NILAS is an essential element of my Department's strategy to meet our obligations under the EU landfill directive to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill. The regulations provide for fines to be imposed should the individual district councils exceed their allowances in any given year. Councils may be fined £150 per ton of waste over their allowances. However, my Department has indicated that only in exceptional circumstances would a penalty be imposed on a council before 2009. As I indicated in my answer to the substantive question, we want to work in partnership with the councils, and that is the way in which the issue has been progressing. Similar to the RPA, we are working to a challenging time frame, but I believe that we can achieve it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Indigenous Species and Habitats

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her plans for working with landowners to halt the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015, as laid out in the Programme for Government. (AQO 2520/08)

Mrs Foster: Biodiversity delivery groups have been established, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group, to help to deliver the conservation measures that are required to halt and reverse the loss

of priority habitats and species by 2016. Key groups of landowners, including Government, farming, forestry, fisheries, industry and conservation organisations, are working in partnership to develop and deliver the work programmes agreed by those groups.

With regard to the Government estate, various Departments with responsibility for development and land management have established biodiversity implementation plans, many of which include actions not only for halting the loss but conserving and, where appropriate, enhancing our local biodiversity.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is responsible for working directly with landowners to ensure that native species and habitats are maintained in favourable condition on designated nature conservation sites such as areas of special scientific interest. That involves the establishment of conservation objectives and views about management as a basis for continuing close liaisons with landowners. In addition, EHS provides a grant-aid programme, which is available for landowners to manage land for biodiversity.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister accept that in the past — and even currently — her Department has a poor record when dealing and working with some owners of environmentally sensitive sites in the Province? What, if any, progress has been made between her Department and those landowners to improve relationships?

Mrs Foster: I do not accept that. Working with landowners to halt the loss of biodiversity is not confined to my Department; we work closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which has an important role in working directly with farmers to halt the loss of native biodiversity, particularly through the delivery of agrienvironment schemes such as the new countryside management scheme.

There is a range of other Government incentives and regulations affecting land owners, who will also benefit from biodiversity during the period up to 2016. Those incentives include grant aid for conservation from the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), for the creation and management of woodland from the Forest Service, for the management of water courses from the Rivers Agency, for water quality from the EHS, and for development from the Planning Service.

3.30 pm

Most land in Northern Ireland is farmed, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has a critical role to play. My Department works very closely with DARD on that issue. As the Member knows, we are trying to cut down on regulation through the better regulation and simplification review. My Department is very much looking forward to that review, and we hope to bring it to a conclusion very soon.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Land and Property Services

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the capital provided for Land and Property Services is sufficient to ensure its efficient running and modernisation. (AQO 2643/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The £5 million capital provided for Land and Property Services for the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period 2008-2011 is sufficient to ensure its efficient running and modernisation. Land and Property Services will prioritise business improvements in line with the capital allocation to ensure the full realisation of the efficiencies arising from the merger at the earliest opportunity.

Land and Property Services has recognised the need to operate within its CSR capital allocation while ensuring that it continues to deliver and modernise its services. The agency has therefore established a business improvement and modernisation committee, chaired at director level, to prioritise and monitor ongoing and new capital projects in its capital allocation. However, the CSR capital allocation does not cover any additional capital expenditure that may be required to further develop its rating IT systems and processes to support the effective and efficient delivery of new rating reforms.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his reply, and I note his last comment about new rating reforms. Given that rates arrears are increasing year on year — up 65% last year, to around £140 million — is the Minister not concerned that, in the event of the introduction of a new rating regime, the profile of debt will increase, especially for those who are vulnerable? In those circumstances, what is the risk to the future operations of Land and Property Services, including its rates division?

In all of those circumstances, is the Minister satisfied that there is sufficient capital and recurrent expenditure to meet the potential new developments?

Mr P Robinson: The Member's question specifically referred to capital allocations, and it was to that that I initially responded. If there are requirements for further capital allocations, the Department would make a bid as part of the in-year processes at a monitoring round. The same would go for any revenue costs that would arise.

I am acutely aware of the inherited position in relation to backlogs, and I have asked for a thorough review in the Department, to be satisfied that all the necessary steps are being taken. In some areas of Land and Property Services' activity, the backlog has been reduced significantly. In one case, a backlog of 70,000 was reduced to 17,000 — at the beginning of this month it was down to 17,000. I am promised that — by the end of today — that will be down to 12,000.

Progress is being made, but it requires a particular focus and the right systems to be in place. In many cases, that will not require an additional capital cost — some of it will be achieved by simply altering programmes.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for the information that he has given to the House on this issue. How is the problem of the backlog in in-year billing adjustments being addressed?

Mr P Robinson: If there are changes to the valuation list, ratepayers' addresses, or the closure of rates accounts, an adjustment can be made to the rates bill as a result.

There has been considerable system development in the agency, and it has dealt with the functionality to process change in valuation. That was what led to the significant backlog. The agency redeployed 30 staff to concentrate solely on the backlog, and, by doing so, it has reduced the figures to those that I set out earlier for the Member for West Belfast, Mr Attwood.

Mr Beggs: First, when does the Minister think that the backlogs will be cleared? When will there be sufficient staff and resources to deal with the ratings adjustments that regularly occur? Those delays affect finances, leaving individuals and companies with large bills that they did not expect.

Secondly, is the Minister confident that Land and Property Services will be capable of administering effectively the new rates reliefs for qualifying pensioners over the age of 70?

Mr P Robinson: In response to the second question, we would need to be satisfied that the agency will be capable of administering the new rates reliefs in time before we move in that direction, and I am satisfied of the agency's ability to do that. A significant backlog developed because of the considerable additional work that the agency was asked to do and the difficulty that it had with some of the computer programmes. However, the agency has reduced the backlog significantly. I was trying to work out the mathematics in my head as the Member asked his question: if the figure has been reduced from 17,000 to 12,000 in one month, I presume that the backlog should be reduced almost entirely in another two months. However, because of the nature of the work, there will always be some backlog. Nevertheless, the agency's efforts will reduce the backlog to manageable proportions so that there will be no significant delays, and it will deal with the issue of the significant amount of money that could be outstanding.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

Pleural Plaques Legislation

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in light of the House of Lords decision in the case of *Rothwell v Chemical and Insulating Company Ltd* and conjoined cases, whether or not he intends to introduce legislation to assist those in Northern Ireland who suffer from pleural plaques.

(AQO 2628/08)

Mr P Robinson: In October 2007, the House of Lords ruled in the case of *Rothwell v Chemical and Insulating Company Ltd* and three related cases that damages are no longer available for symptomless pleural plaques caused by negligent exposure to asbestos. However, the House of Lords left 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 are accompanied by physical symptoms, although that is rare.

The ruling has generated significant debate throughout the United Kingdom, and there have been calls for amending legislation to overturn the decision. The Scottish Government have agreed to do just that, and they are aiming, subject to parliamentary timetabling, to introduce the required Bill before their summer recess, which commences on 28 June. The United Kingdom Government have not committed to legislative change; however, the Prime Minister recently said that he wishes to examine the issues and that a consultation paper will be published shortly.

I have carefully considered the implications of the ruling for those in Northern Ireland who have been exposed to asbestos and who have subsequently developed or been diagnosed with pleural plaques. Before making any decision on the preferred way forward, I wish to ensure that I have thoroughly explored all the options and have accessed as much information as possible. With those twin aims in mind, I have concluded that a consultation exercise should also be initiated in this jurisdiction, and I have asked my officials to make the necessary arrangements.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. Would it be possible for Northern Ireland to be included in any Westminster legislation on the issue?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, it is possible for Northern Ireland to be included in such legislation — several elements of legislation going through the House of Commons could include Northern Ireland.

Under the Sewell Convention, the permission of the Assembly is required if the UK Government want to do that. Before that, we would consider the matter at an Executive level and discuss it with the Committee.

Social Segregation: Savings

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of the potential to realise revenue savings from a reduction in social segregation. (AQO 2641/08)

Mr P Robinson: Social segregation imposes significant costs on the people of Northern Ireland, not only in the general quality of life, but through the additional cost of providing public services. That is particularly the case in the provision of social housing and educational services.

The 2007 report on the cost of division by Deloitte for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister suggested an upper limit of £1.5 billion as the cost of social segregation or division in Northern Ireland, which is excessive. In addition, although the Executive are taking steps to reduce the cost of division, for example through greater collaboration between schools, eradicating such costs may not be possible in the short term.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that the economic cost of division is ridiculous, and that the economy that maintains that division is not sustainable in the long term?

Mr P Robinson: First, we must be able to assess and quantify the cost of division. In my initial response, I said that the suggested £1.5 billion figure was excessive — slightly more than £500 million of that figure is what Deloitte views as additional money spent on policing. Anyone who looks at our policing budget knows that that represents 50% of that budget, 75% of which is spent on manpower costs. Therefore, to suggest that the policing budget in Northern Ireland could be reduced by 50% takes no account of the realities in Northern Ireland. The figures on the economic cost of division are almost outlandish and are based on what happens in an area of comparable size in Great Britain, and do not take into account a number of factors, not least need and demographics.

Any money that is wasted on division could be used for more beneficial purposes, and it is up to each Department to investigate where money can be saved. Departments are encouraged to do that through the 3% efficiency savings because, if Ministers are faced with the proposition of cutting costs, they should do so where they see the greatest waste.

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

Does the Minister agree that there is value and profit in reducín social segregation, and that any assessment of the worth of a project should include that as a criterion? Furthermore, does he agree that social segregation will be much reduced if the proposed national stadium is built at the Maze/Long Kesh site,

because it will realise our shared and equal future? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: Each Department must take decisions that reflect the need to encourage moving away from the type of division that there has been in our society.

I will not go into detail on the Maze stadium issue. The business case for the stadium is before my Department and will be analysed in accordance with the financial issues that are involved. It will then be up to the Executive to state the value that they put on any other factors, including that of shared space. The shared-space factor is a little overrated in relation to the Maze prison: shared space is people sharing the same space at the same time, not sharing the same space at different times.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit

6. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the areas that will form the initial focus of the performance and efficiency delivery unit. (AQO 2656/08)

3.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: The Programme for Government and the Budget set out a twin agenda for the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) — to examine the scope for Departments to deliver higher levels of cash-releasing efficiencies, and to work with Departments over the coming years in specific areas to ensure that the funds that are allocated by the Executive deliver significant improvements in outcomes.

The unit will take a close interest in the efficiency-delivery plans of Departments, which are aimed at ensuring delivery against efficiency targets, as published in the final Budget. Quality of future performance against those plans will also provide important sources of data for new initiatives to drive even higher levels of efficiency in the system. I also envisage that, in its early stages, the new unit will take a close interest in the systems that are being put in place to monitor departmental delivery against the priorities and commitments specified by the Executive in the Programme for Government.

With that in mind, I intend to bring proposals to the Executive on PEDU during early April. After I have taken my proposals to the Executive, I will make a statement to the Assembly.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he indicate whether the performance and efficiency delivery unit might consider areas of Government that are inhibiting economic growth in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: No areas of departmental activity should be ruled out of the scope of PEDU. The Executive's priority is to grow a dynamic and innovative economy and they will look to PEDU to give assistance to each Minister and each Department in order to achieve the objectives and targets that they have set out. No Department or Minister would want to do anything other than co-operate with PEDU in its desire to improve efficiency and delivery in the public sector.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his answer. Has he identified any areas of departmental responsibility that would be particularly suited to action by PEDU and has he had discussion with Ministers about those areas? Can he give the House any indication of his thinking on the composition and membership of the body?

Mr P Robinson: The answer to the first question is yes, but the Member was looking for a bit more than that. I have some ideas, but it would be wrong for me to introduce those to the House before I have had the opportunity to bring them to the Executive.

The Member for North Belfast Mr McCausland asked whether any areas should be excluded, with particular reference to economic growth. An obvious candidate in that area is the Planning Service. Having listened to Department of the Environment Question Time, it is clear that DOE's Planning Service can be a significant aid to economic growth. The Minister of the Environment has challenging targets under the Programme for Government and, if she were to seek support in reaching those targets, PEDU would be capable of providing that.

I have identified several people who would be perfect as panel members, who would give advice and direction to the unit. I have also identified key members of DFP staff who would be the right people to have in post. We have already set up the early part of that structure in the Department of Finance and Personnel. That team is housed at my offices at Craigantlet Buildings and is starting its work while it waits for other colleagues to join, for the panel to be put in place and for the Executive and the Assembly to be given the final details of its composition and purpose.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that the unit is being modelled on the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU)? Will it follow similar protocols to assist Departments on request? Will he advise when the operational protocols will be published?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is only half right. Aspects of the unit's work will be similar to that carried out by the PMDU. Essentially, the PMDU ensured that Departments met manifesto commitments made by the Labour Party during the election campaign and commitments made by Ministers thereafter.

Although delivery is an important element, the unit that the Department of Finance and Personnel will establish will go beyond that and attempt to increase efficiency and performance standards across the public sector by making savings and getting the same job done for less, or alternatively, a better job done for the same amount.

I hope to be able to establish protocols within the next fortnight.

Absenteeism

7. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to identify the Department with the lowest rate of absenteeism. (AQO 2521/08)

Mr P Robinson: In the 2006-07 financial year, the Department for Regional Development had the lowest rate of absence with an average of 9.2 days lost per staff year. The latest published figures, based on current financial year-to-date trends, estimate that in the 2007-08 financial year, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have the lowest absence rate, currently estimated at 7.4 days lost per staff year.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response; progress is afoot. Will the Minister indicate whether departmental absence rates are due to grade profile or other factors? How do the absentee rates for similar groups differ among Departments?

Mr P Robinson: There are several factors that affect the level of absenteeism in the civil service. Gender and grade levels are factors, but I suspect that the most important factor is management control. The permanent secretary who is in charge of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment this year was in charge of the Department for Regional Development during the 2006-07 financial year. Perhaps that provides a reason for the figures. That is a lesson for us all.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister stated that gender is a factor in absenteeism. Given the high percentage of women who are absent due to sickness unrelated to pregnancy, has there been any further consultation with Departments to discover why more women than men in Departments are on the sick?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure the figures are unrelated to pregnancy because they do not take into account maternity leave. A significant number of women tend to extend their period of absence when their maternity leave ends. Therefore, it is not unconnected. At a recent event I attended, the trade unions considered it dreadful that I should attempt to reduce sickness levels. There seems to be a view among some people that work is toxic. It is not. Work is good for you.

Mr Spratt: It certainly is.

Mr P Robinson: Yes, you should try it some time.
[Laughter.]

I agree with the general principle of well notes rather than sick notes so that doctors can tell us what an individual patient can do rather than what they cannot do. I see that I am getting something approaching a nod of the head from a doctor across the Chamber.

Surplus Land for Disposal

8. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail which Departments have identified surplus land that could be considered for disposal over the course of the next financial year. (AQO 2525/08)

Mr P Robinson: The 2008 Budget sets out plans for Departments to realise £486 million in capital receipts in 2008-09, which will allow capital investment to rise to over £1.8 billion over the next financial year. An important source of capital receipts will be the disposal of surplus land, and the DHSSPS, the Department of Education, DSD, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and DFP all plan to sell surplus land in 2008-09. In addition, the capital realisation task force has identified the potential for further disposals over the next three years, but more work needs to be done before we can be precise as to the specific assets and the amounts concerned in the next financial year.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his reply; it seems that some progress is being made in the disposal of surplus land. When will the capital realisation task force report?

Mr P Robinson: The capital realisation task force has reported to the Executive. Some of my colleagues have said that it is taking the Executive longer to agree the report than it took the task force to write it. I am impatient to get the report through the Executive processes. However, the Executive have considered the main findings of the report, and further work is ongoing to clarify some of the details of the structures and protocols that will be used in the future.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions so far. Considering the weakness of the property market, would it not be better, or possible, for some of the land to be released for affordable housing development, where appropriate? Furthermore, what incentives exist for Departments to release land or admit to having land?

Mr P Robinson: It is difficult to know who might have put the Member up to asking that question. He will know that the distinction between the draft Budget allocation to housing and that in the final Budget came about directly as a result of the work of the capital realisation task force. As I think I mentioned in a previous debate in the Assembly, the capital realisation

task force identified a further £290 million of assets that would be available, and £200 million has been allocated from that. We did not allocate it all, for the very reason that the Member mentioned: there is a lack of certainty in the land and property market, and that requires us to be cautious.

Mr Deputy Speaker: One never knows who is plotting.

Mr Burnside: I preface my remarks by congratulating the Finance Minister on the speed and detail with which he answers questions here; he deserves praise. If and when he becomes First Minister, he might get the deputy First Minister into a training session to cut out some of the platitudinous waffle that we heard from him earlier this afternoon.

As someone who believes in the sale of as many public assets as possible — transfers from the public sector to the private sector — may I add my voice to the note of caution about the property market? The commercial property markets in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States are more depressed than they have been for almost 20 years. The credit markets have almost closed in the City of London; one cannot do big commercial deals. If the Assembly and the Executive were to sell commercial property from the public sector in the foreseeable future — the next one or two years — they would be giving away state assets at the wrong price.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Question please.

Mr Burnside: It would be as big a mistake as the Chancellor made when he sold gold at the wrong price, so I urge the Finance Minister to be cautious.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Was that a question?

4.00 pm

Mr P Robinson: I think that there was, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am aware of the real difficulties in the property market at present. Indeed, putting a lot of land and property on the market could have a very detrimental effect on the market. However, in schemes such as Workplace 2010, for example, which is the biggest single element of the portfolio at which we are looking, the two main bidders will not be looking solely at how things stand today but on a much more long-term basis over the 20 years of the contract. Therefore, there are certain matters with which we can proceed without any downside to the Assembly and the Executive. However, he is right to urge caution about putting anything out to the market in its present depressed state.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Question Time is over, and we now resume the debate on accelerated passage for the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

Accelerated Passage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Mr Shannon: I am glad to return to the issue of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and as a member of the DUP, I can say that this issue is close to the heart of my party. That being the case, I am in wholehearted support of ensuring that the issue of victims is no longer shunted to one side — and, more importantly, that the victims receive the recognition and assistance that have for too long been denied them.

There are few in this Chamber — indeed, there are few in this Province — who can say that they have no idea of the pain caused by terrorist violence. The sad reality is that almost everyone over the age of 21 can point to some stage in their lives when the reality of the Troubles hit them in a personal way. Many of us have lost loved ones and friends, who will never be forgotten.

There are those, however, who are suffering the effects of the Troubles as much today as they were some 20 years ago: wives taking care of husbands who were injured physically and who are still struggling to make ends meet as they try to bring up a family along with the pressure of being carers. Too many families have been torn apart by not only the death of a parent as a result of the Troubles but by the associated problems of raising a family single-handedly. Women are bringing up children on a small wage, trying to put them through school and even university with their income halved. I know of young people who lost a parent due to the Troubles some years ago and who are still paying off their student loans because their single parent could not afford to put them through university. I welcome the £36 million that has been set aside for the victims and which will go some way to addressing their financial needs.

The awful fact is that very little was done at the time to help those families. For too long we have sorrowed with them without helping practically, which is so often what is needed and which is needed today. My cousin, who had been married for just three months, and his friend were murdered on the Tyrone border some 30 years ago. He and his friend, a Roman Catholic, served in the Ulster Defence Regiment. They were murdered side by side. The Northern Ireland Office at the time made a paltry sum available to my cousin's friend, who had three

children, one of whom was disabled — £3,500. That was all that was left to her to raise that family.

Living on a shoestring does not come close to what so many similar families had to do to survive. That scenario, in varying degrees, was multiplied thousands of times across the Province. As well as having to deal with the pain of having loved ones ripped away, there was also the financial worry. As well as having to care for a now-disabled spouse or child or mother or father, there was now the worry of having to survive without that wage coming in. There are those who might cynically say that giving money now will not make any difference to the pain and struggles of 20 and 30 years ago. That is simply not true. There are many families still paying off mortgages; many people who, were their partners still with them, would have been able to retire at the proper age; many children who would not still be paying off a student loan had their dad been working and able to help them financially. I know of young people who have just finished university courses — indeed, some of them are in work — and they are still paying off student loans.

Those people still feel the effects of the Troubles. The moneys that were set aside for victims must be allocated retrospectively, enabling those people to rise above their experiences and gain at least a little financial freedom, if not emotional freedom.

I know who the victims are. The people whom I represent and who speak to me know who the victims are. We also know who perpetrated the terrorist violence over the years. I am aware of many families who are still affected by the mental scars of events witnessed during the Troubles: partners and children who are coping with mood swings, afraid of banging the door, or making other sudden noises, lest they bring back difficult memories for their partners, fathers or mothers. Many men and women worked hard, and yet they are now unable to work at all due to psychological problems caused by the atrocities of the Troubles.

Those people paid the ultimate sacrifice, and that cost is still being met. It is past time that that was recognised and addressed. My party, and OFMDFM, are pushing for accelerated passage in an attempt to take those first steps that should have been taken so many years ago. The longer that proper recognition and support is held back, the longer those men and women will continue to struggle emotionally, physically and financially, without the support that they should be receiving from their community.

“We will remember them” is an oft-used phrase. However, that is not merely a phrase — it means more than that: it is a promise. When uttered, it is a promise to do more than just think of the victims once a year. It is a promise to remember and care for their families and to acknowledge the mental scars and psychological

battles that some of them still fight today, some 30 years later. It is a promise that I have uttered and will do all in my power to fulfil. I hope that other Members of a like mind will do the same.

I support the Bill to show my support for the victims of the Troubles: physical victims, emotional victims, the bereaved, and those who live every day in the knowledge that something is missing from their lives — something stolen. That sense of loss can never be replaced by money, but it can be lessened if they receive the support that they should have had for many years. I support accelerated passage and I urge the rest of the Assembly to do so. In doing so, they will show their support for the real victims of the Troubles.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I support accelerated passage, as I did in the meeting of the OFMDFM Committee. We have reached an important stage in respect of the particular role of the commissioners. At the time of the announcement of the appointments, everybody spoke of that role, of the importance of moving on, and said that at least the victims' commissioners designate had been appointed. It was stated at that time that legislation would be required to bring the commission into effect.

It was also accepted by most as important that the four commissioners would represent different strands; that they could each reflect the views of their respective communities. The commissioners each operate in different ways, and victims would perhaps feel more comfortable dealing with someone that they knew, or who represented their own point of view — that would be the variation.

Mrs Long: What the Member has said causes me some concern. Throughout this process, we have been assured that there would be no attempt to Balkanise or pigeonhole the individual appointees in any way. We were assured that they would represent the needs of all the victims and survivors in a united and collective manner. I am concerned, therefore, by what the Member seems to be suggesting now. It is not necessarily in the best interests of those individuals who have been appointed to the designate roles to be expected to serve particular groupings. I urge the Member to clarify his comments.

Mr Molloy: If the Member had listened, she would have heard me say that the system will allow the victims to talk to someone who understands their personal situation, but that each of the victims' commissioners designate would deal with the issue as a whole. I was trying to highlight how victims would view and approach the commissioners.

Each brings his or her skills to the job so that four different experiences will be applied. It is important that that role has been given to the victims' commissioners designate and that they can get on with the job as

quickly as possible. This has become urgent because of the delays that have occurred and because, under direct rule, there was insufficient progress. However, now that the Assembly is operating, we can respond more quickly.

During the meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 5 March 2008, there was lengthy discussion of the issues raised — indeed, the Ministers and junior Ministers who attended took quite a while to get through it all. The Committee met in closed session so that members could ask questions and deal with issues that they considered relevant without having to worry about how the media reported them. One of the problems that has dogged us all along is how the media has presented the issue. Therefore it was important that Committee members could ask questions and that the Ministers could respond in as much detail as possible. Most Committee members supported accelerated passage for the Bill because they were keen for the commissioners to get down to work.

As a Member said earlier, one of the victims' commissioners designate had complained on a television programme a few nights earlier that he could not get on with the job because the legislation was not in place. At least one Minister said on that programme said that she would move heaven and earth to ensure that the necessary legislation was enacted for the commissioners. She said that she would get to work the next day to ensure that there would be no further delay and that she was surprised that the legislation was not in place. That was said in a very public domain, and we expected that all parties would support the legislation and enact it as soon as possible.

It is dangerous to play party politics with the issue in order to cause delay. I realise that the Alliance Party considers itself as the opposition, even though it was vocal in trying to get the Assembly up and running. However, it should not see its role solely as one of opposition. When a beneficial measure — such as accelerated passage for this Bill — will deliver what the Alliance Party asked for in the first place, that party should facilitate that measure and assist in progressing it. An opposition does not have to oppose everything merely on principle.

Let us move forward. Accelerated passage will put the commissioners in place: they will report to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister; and the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will respond to the Committee. This is not a single event: it is an ongoing process. When the commissioners are up and running, they will want to make changes and variations.

Victims, too, will want to raise issues and it is important that we respond to them. The process should be victim-led. In the past, one of the difficulties was

that such structures were set up without victim capacity. It is important that victims can work with the commissioners and deal with the issues. Families should have a forum in which they can become involved; they should have a voice that they feel is listened to and responded to.

We should have no further delay. Accelerated passage is the correct way to deal with this issue. As was said before, accelerated passage has often been used in less urgent situations. When I was Chairperson of the Finance Committee, we dealt with five Budget Bills — I had not realised that it was so many — that had been a year in the planning but which still needed accelerated passage to ensure their progress through the Assembly, despite the Committee's reservations.

Accelerated passage should be used only in urgent cases. The Victims and Survivors Bill is urgent, as we need to give the commissioners the legislation to enable them to get on with their work. We should all get behind the process to ensure that victims have their cases heard and to get the necessary response.

4.15 pm

Mr Elliott: I find myself in an unexpected position, because I did not envisage, almost a year after the restoration of the Assembly, discussing whether we should have a victims' commission rather than a commissioner. I had envisaged discussing victims' issues, many of which we should be debating and on which are missing out due to the process that we are now undertaking. We could have been discussing the funding's administration and who should draw down on it; for example, how much of it should go to statutory agencies and how much should go to the real victims in the Province. Furthermore, we could have been discussing the appointments' process, which, because it is the subject of a possible legal case, we are therefore bound not to discuss in great detail. Nevertheless, related questions must be answered.

On several occasions in the past year, members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were told that the appointment of a commissioner was imminent. Then, all of a sudden, we found out through media channels that commissioners were to be appointed. As far as I am aware, unless the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson know something different, that proposal was never brought before the Committee. Since restoration, the point has been reached at which the public — and the victims — have become totally frustrated with the process, and that is why, in one sense, I am glad that the matter is coming to a head and that some degree of progress is being made. It is not the progress that I had anticipated, but at least we are moving forward.

Bertha McDougall's work has been recognised here, among the wider public and among many of the victims. The difficulty is that no progress has been made on

Bertha McDougall's recommendations, and the new commission has no responsibility to advance any of the proposals contained in her report.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): That is categorically not the case. OFMDFM is currently engaged in preparing a comprehensive strategy that will incorporate many, if not all, of the recommendations. That strategy will then be put out to consultation. There have been discussions with victims' groups about that strategy, and those discussions will continue. OFMDFM is committed to proceeding with Mrs McDougall's recommendations and will do so.

Mr Elliott: I thank the junior Minister for that clarification. Obviously, the situation has changed since the First Minister and the deputy First Minister gave evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, where its members were told that any new commissioner would have no responsibility whatsoever to progress any proposals from Bertha McDougall's report. I hope, therefore, that we shall now make some progress. Those evidence sessions were recorded by Hansard.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it right for a Member, deliberately and persistently, to make statements that do not stand up to scrutiny? The Member should get the minutes of his Committee's meetings, read them, and show me where what he claims was said happened. It did not happen, as he knows well.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but the First Minister has made his point.

Mr Elliott: I thank the First Minister for his intervention. Although I do not have the minutes of evidence with me, I will be happy to provide the requested clarification.

Some victims are also concerned about the appointment of the commissioners. Let us be clear: one of those commissioners has been described as being the sister of an IRA volunteer. I recall one Member saying earlier that a commissioner should not deal with one group or another. However, it is clear that that will be the way of it. Some victims and victims' groups will not have any dealings with one of those commissioners. That is the reality as we proceed, and it is an issue that concerns me greatly.

The appointment of that person raises several questions about the definition of a victim and of how that will be dealt with. Mr Moutray raised that issue earlier, saying that in his mind he was well aware of how a victim should be defined. I am also quite clear about that definition. I know in my own mind what a victim is, or what I believe a victim to be. The difficulty is that it is not defined in the proposed legislation. The definition

that is accepted by Mr Moutray and others may be different to that which is contained in the legislation, and I have huge concerns about that.

I, and many others in the constituency that I represent, are concerned that the innocent victims and the real victims in the Province will be considered to be on the same level as the perpetrators of violence and those who created many victims in Northern Ireland. I therefore have a huge concern about that aspect of the Bill. When we were presenting the legislation, and the amendments to it, why did we not go the full way and define a victim properly?

Mr B McCrea: I have several concerns about this matter. First and foremost is that we are in danger of treating victims as though they are some kind of political football, and we must avoid that if possible.

We must also be careful not to use accelerated passage at the drop of a hat. If it were used repeatedly, it would show complete disrespect for the Assembly, its Committees and its structures. There are reasons why we have First and Second Stages and why we ask Committees to examine the details of any Bill. It is also anti-democratic to rush matters through the House in such a fashion. The debate has raised a number of issues, and several Members have informed the discussion. We have not yet addressed some issues that we should have, such as grants and how and by whom funds are drawn down.

I was unaware previously of issues to do with the number of commissioners. Apparently, the proposed legislation imposes no limit on the number of commissioners that can be appointed. We have not had a proper discussion about whether there should be four or five, or one or two — the commitment is open-ended.

The problem that is fundamental to the debate is the definition of a victim. Even those who wish to broaden the discussion accept that there are genuine victims — people who had absolutely nothing to do with anything, or who were the victims of mistaken identity. Surely they are in a different category to people who were involved in some way. We ought to look after those victims differently.

If this were the only time that we used accelerated passage, the situation might have been different. However, we are getting to the stage where it is being used repeatedly. Naomi Long raised that issue, and she said that accelerated passage had been used before and would undoubtedly be used again. I stress that I would be most unhappy with setting such a principle.

The final point that was made was that it is not necessary for us to proceed at this speed. It is not that we are against accelerated passage; rather, it concerns whether we need to use such a procedure on our first day back. We have taken a long time to make up our minds about certain issues, so we could have discussed

it for another week or so, and involved everyone in the process.

I come back to the point about the issue being used as a political football. Some Members seem to be ambivalent about the issue of victims. Some have said that victims must simply get used to the idea of living alongside those who perpetrated the crimes. Other people around here have said that the families of the Omagh bomb victims do not represent real people, as they have a vested interest. The whole of society expects us — this Assembly and these politicians — to deal with those issues. An attempt is being made to sanitise the past and to put a whitewash over it, so that we can — ostensibly — move forward. Everyone is using their own brand of political disinfectant, and that is a fudge.

Mr Donaldson: Early release? Open the gates?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr B McCrea: I am happy to take a formal intervention from Mr Donaldson if he wishes to make a comment. He does not have to do so from a sedentary position — he is quite capable of getting up on his hind legs and speaking for himself. I will take him on about Glenties or any other issues. What is being said now is fudge and hypocrisy. The issue is that people are trying to move things forward.

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Of course I will give way, but you will have to ask the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Donaldson: I thank the Member for giving way. When it comes to hypocrisy, no one can match that of the Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches. When they had the opportunity through the Belfast Agreement, they failed the victims miserably. When they were in Government, they failed to do anything about a victims' commission, and they failed to introduce any proposals to help the victims of terrorist violence. Therefore, they should not point the finger at this party and at others who are doing something to help the victims. Some of us were actually involved in politics during the conflict — we are not johnnies-come-lately.

Mr B McCrea: I recognise that that intervention was made by someone who is something of an expert in hypocrisy, so I am grateful to him for his advice. The Member also talked about relative newcomers to this process. On reflection, what did the people who were involved for a long time actually achieve? Nothing. When the matter comes up now, and we talk about nothing — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: While we are on the subject, nothing shows the failure of this Assembly more than the fact

that we cannot agree on whether we need one commissioner or four. We spent ages trying to work out what we were going to do, and we could not agree on a candidate. Agreement cannot happen with just one party — it happens when we all discuss the matter. It is about inclusivity, and not about some sordid backroom deal that is agreed in Portugal or wherever. Agreement can be reached when all parties can participate in the discussion.

By the way, that deal was done in Lisbon, Portugal and not Lisburn, Lambeg. We cannot even agree on the definition of a victim, and we should not pass it on to others to think about. I accept that it is a delicate and sensitive issue, as Members across the way said; however, it is something that we should confront and discuss. We should not leave it to others, no matter how well intentioned. We should not deal with the issue in a back room, or put it on the long finger and hope that it will go away.

It is the proper business of the Assembly to talk about such matters, to confront the issue and to provide the leadership that our society so badly needs. It is up to all politicians to deal with the issue. That is why accelerated passage is not the best way to deal with the legislation. We should have discussed the matter before now. We should have discussed it in Committee, and we should certainly be allowed to put our views forward in this forum.

4.30 pm

We must have openness and transparency. Mr Durkan kindly took an intervention in which I said that I accept that the DUP/Sinn Féin axis can push through anything that it wants because of its voting power. However, it will not fix our problems and address the issues of the past. If we are to move forward, we must talk the problem through and ask: who is a victim and who is not; what are we going to do about it; how are we going to look after those people; and how are we going to move forward?

We failed to grasp the opportunity that was presented by the Maze site, in its totality, to put the past behind us and to sit and ask why we cannot have a conflict transformation centre. If we are going to keep the H-blocks, why can we not display them in all their detail with the stench and all such issues? That is an important issue to confront. Why can we not have a garden of reflection or remembrance that represents all the people who were murdered and others who were targeted? Why can we not get such issues out in the open and let the people of Northern Ireland see that we are prepared to confront the past because we never want to go through such events again?

Why can we not do what the Germans do at Auschwitz, where children are shown around interpretative centres and told, “Look what man was allowed to do to man — let us not do it again”? Only if we are honest and start to confront the issues can society really move forward.

That is why I am so disappointed that the two major parties are doing some sort of back-room deal on the matter. We should all be involved, because we must all take responsibility for moving forward.

In conclusion, it is not enough for us to hide behind weasel words when we talk about a victim. As far as I am concerned, victimhood is passive; it is something that others impose on a person, and that person is not involved. I have heard the argument — although I do not agree with it — that the war was a war and that the war is over. If it was a war, people were combatants — not victims; they were involved. People cannot have it both ways. There are people who genuinely, through no fault of their own, were caught up, and their lives were ruined. The whole country was ruined. We owe it to those people to find a way to move forward, and we should confront the issue, not whitewash it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move on, for Members’ information on the question of hypocrites, it may be acceptable, in parliamentary terms, to refer to the hypocrisy of various parties’ positions, but it is unacceptable, in parliamentary terms, to refer to other Members as hypocrites.

Mr Spratt: I had not intended to speak in this debate, but, as someone who served for 30 years throughout what is now known as “the Troubles”, and having seen many victims from different areas across the entire Province, I feel sad that victims are being politicised in the House. Victims have also been politicised over time in the Committee, because it is obvious that tactics were employed to delay further the appointment of the commissioners.

I have had close involvement with several victims’ groups throughout the Troubles and during my previous employment. I still have close contact with some of those groups, the vast majority of which welcome the appointment of commissioners, because they saw that the previous Interim Victims’ Commissioner — who did a fantastic job, as folks from all sides of the House have said — was dogged by being seen as being from one side of the community.

The victims’ groups that I have spoken to have certainly welcomed the appointment of the commissioners. What I and other colleagues on the OFMDFM Committee were trying to do in proposing accelerated passage for the Bill, following the appointment of the four commissioners designate, was to get them down to work as soon as possible so that they could start their work for victims.

It is sad to hear the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea talking about a political football; it is he who is making a political football out of victims. He is being disrespectful — which is another word that he used — to many victims in the Province. For once, we should join together and agree that this Bill should be

given accelerated passage, because the issue was raised by one of the commissioners designate, and it has been pointed out by a number of Members earlier today —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: No, I will not give way, I have heard enough from that Member.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: No. I have heard enough from that Member today. I am not giving way. What I do want to say —

The First Minister: We have heard the honourable gentleman who wants to speak actually blackening every police officer and army officer: they were combatants, and combatants should not be condemned if they are fighting to give me my freedom.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Spratt: I agree fully with what the First Minister has said, and certainly, during my 30 years of service, it was not a war that I was fighting. I was fighting to preserve this Province from anarchy on many occasions.

The issue was raised by one of the commissioners designate on a television programme, as has been pointed out by a number of folk in the House today, that in fact what the commissioners want to do is get down to work as quickly as possible. That is the reason behind the proposal for accelerated passage of the Bill. Members could argue for days about definitions and about the work of the commissioners. It is the commissioners who should be making much of the proposals, and I am sure that they will be looking for changes and amendments to the legislation to allow them to progress their work — the sooner that that is allowed to happen, the better. I support the accelerated passage of the Bill through the House.

Dr Farry: The real reason that we are having the debate today is to clear up a mess that is entirely the making of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. There are issues of accountability concerning the reasons why we are in this mess, and it is right that the Assembly is given an opportunity to discuss those issues.

There are also proper accountability issues relating to how Members take forward legislation in this House and ensure that there has been proper scrutiny. Today's debate has probably been more like the equivalent of a Second Stage of a Bill — a debate that will most likely be happening tomorrow — rather than one on the merits, as the case may be, of accelerated passage.

There has been quite a lot of discussion today about delays over the issue of the appointment of a victims' commissioner, or commissioners, and the importance of moving ahead on that. The reason for the delays has been the inability of the First Minister and deputy First

Minister to take decisions. Let us not be under any illusions about that. They have been in office, wrestling over these important issues, for more than 10 months. We were promised decisions time after time, and each time we were promised, what we got instead was more and more delay.

Mr Donaldson: You are delaying it.

Dr Farry: I think there has been plenty of delay; you are the experts on it. There have been 35 years of delay in this country, through the actions of some parties in this Chamber, whenever there have been opportunities to move ahead with self-government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farry: The second reason for this mess is that, rather than agreeing to appoint one individual, the First Minister and deputy First Minister could not agree on whom to appoint. Rather than showing leadership and demonstrating to the people of Northern Ireland the ability of the two main traditions here to come together and bridge their differences in the interests of good governance, what we see is a fudge, whereby instead of appointing one individual, we appoint four. In doing so, an almighty bit of confusion was created, which we are now struggling to deal with. That confusion has spread to such an extent that we have members of the parties of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister referring to a commission, when no commission actually exists, because the Assembly has not passed the legislation creating the commission. All that we have is four commissioners designate — the commission is still to come.

Similarly, we have had an almighty row in the Chamber today over the issue of the definition of what a victim actually is. I make a prediction — with a heavy heart — that, rather than having a single definition of what a victim is, thereby allowing our society to move forward, we are going to end up with four different definitions, if not more, given the precedent that has been set so far.

My colleague Naomi Long has set out the basis under which accelerated passage is supposed to be considered. Looking at what has happened in the past, we can see examples of the appropriate use of accelerated passage, mainly for Budget Bills and parity legislation, where there are genuine consequences if the Assembly does not follow suit. Policy issues may arise with some pieces of legislation, but the Assembly's overriding policy is to try to ensure that social-security issues in Northern Ireland are kept on a par with the situation in the rest of the United Kingdom and that funding proceeds on that basis. That has been a fundamental principle for 60 years. In those instances, there is not a huge policy issue at stake.

Accelerated passage is not meant to be used for matters involving fundamental issues of public concern. People may argue that this is simply a tidying-up exercise and

we should go along with accelerated passage because there are not any fundamental issues to discuss. I beg to differ — there are fundamental issues that have to be discussed in respect of how the commission is going to be established.

First of all, the commission involves a major change from how consideration of such appointments happened previously, and we need to take that on board. We now have a situation where, unlike other commissions such as the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland or the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which have a full-time chief commissioner and other commissioners on a part-time salary, we are now going to have four co-equal commissioners on similar salaries. There is a lack of clarity in respect of how that commission is going to operate in practice. Those are major issues that need to be discussed.

There are also issues regarding the budget for the commission, and whether that money would be better spent on meeting the actual needs of victims and providing services to them, as opposed to being spent on ever more administrative costs. I thought the Assembly was trying to cut down on administrative costs.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue of all — Francie Molloy let the cat out of the bag — is the fear of the Balkanisation of the commission. The people of Northern Ireland expect a coherent response from the commission to the needs of victims, so that the commission pushes in the one direction and all victims' groups react to a single commission. If we have a situation in which different groups — whether as a result of perception or of reality — see particular commissioners as appealing to their constituency, we will have a disaster on our hands. That is the fundamental question that needs to be analysed. I maintain that having a proper Committee Stage creates the opportunity for those issues to be discussed.

The deputy First Minister today failed to comply with the terms of Standing Orders in providing the rationale for accelerated passage. Indeed, we have had confirmation that there are no real consequences of delaying the Bill — the only real consequence being in relation to the distribution of funds, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is not yet in a position to do that in any event.

It was suggested that one reason that this matter must be progressed is because of comments that were made on a television programme by one of the commissioners designate. However, that matter was addressed the following day in a statement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which stated that there was not actually a problem.

I do not know why the Back-Bench Members of those parties are still banging on about an issue that

their ministerial colleagues have already addressed. Perhaps they need to look at their internal co-ordination.

4.45 pm

Mr Donaldson: In response to Dr Farry's colleague Naomi Long, I made it absolutely clear that there are problems. The OFMDFM statement said that there was nothing to stop the commissioners from talking to victims. However, there are a lot of other things that they are unable to do, which we clarified to the Committee, and which, unfortunately, Ms Long has forgotten about. We made it clear why we are asking for accelerated passage, and one reason is the Data Protection Act 1998. However, there are other issues, and that is why we need the support of the House to move the matter forward quickly. Apart from that, do the victims not deserve it? Why is the Alliance Party prepared to delay the matter further, when it called for a decision to be made? It is delaying the issue, not us.

Dr Farry: If the victims of Northern Ireland are as deserving as Mr Donaldson says — and I accept that they are — why have we had a 10-month delay and 10 months of fudge? Why have we had 10 months of inability to make decisions?

Mr T Clarke: Why do you want longer?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party believes that the House and the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister deserve the opportunity for a proper discussion because major issues must be resolved. There has been a major shift in the goalposts. We have moved from a single commissioner to a commission made up of four individuals. There are concerns right across society as to how that will operate. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister do not grasp the cynicism with which large chunks of the population of Northern Ireland greeted their decision to appoint four individuals, rather than one individual. Many victims' groups are cynical about that. They view it as — yet again — a cause for delay and a diversion of resources, rather than addressing the fundamental issues at stake.

If we are to argue that this is an exceptional case, there is one aspect of "exceptional" that could be considered — the inability of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to agree, instead presenting us with a mess. In that office up until now, there has been a failure to do anything other than find the lowest common denominator of agreement, and this is not in any way exceptional. That office has failed to address the issue of what measures it will take to avoid such situations.

Mr Durkan was concerned that the issue may well be a precedent for the future. Departments may take so long to address policy issues that they will come running to the Assembly looking for it to rubber-stamp decisions, and that is not what the Assembly is here for. It is a

body of elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland to provide proper scrutiny and accountability for decisions that are taken. It is about time that the Executive realise and respect the role of the Assembly in important issues.

The Committee Stage for any Bill takes around six weeks, with the option for an extension — that is six weeks for proper scrutiny. If we had started the scrutiny process when the announcement was made in January, the bill would be through the Committee Stage by now. Instead, it took almost six weeks from the announcement of the commission until legislation was produced. That situation only confirms that the decision to move from a commissioner to a commission was made on the hoof, and was not a long-term strategic decision. It was a reflection of a failure to agree, and a decision to bridge the difference and move forward on that basis. That is the reality of the situation, and the Assembly should not be party to covering up the mess in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the deputy First Minister to make his winding-up speech, I will address the point of order raised by Mr Ford. The deputy First Minister may wish to address the issues required by Standing Order 40(4). Other Members also raised the same issue.

The deputy First Minister: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened with great interest to the debate. It was appropriate to end with a contribution from Stephen Farry, who talked about the ongoing consistent failure of the First Minister and me to agree on anything. He would not be sitting in his seat today if the First Minister and I, and others, had not agreed to put the institutions in place.

Lo and behold, not only did we do that but we managed to agree a Budget and a Programme for Government.

Dr Farry: Did the First Minister and deputy First Minister agree on a definition of victims?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: We have agreed an investment strategy for the next 10 years that involves up to £20 billion.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

The deputy First Minister: No, the Minister will not give way because the Assembly has heard enough from the Member today.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The deputy First Minister: The Assembly has heard enough nonsense from the Member today. The First Minister and I also agreed the review of public administration, which was one of the biggest decisions of the past 10 months. While the Member was eating

his Christmas pudding, the First Minister and I were at Stormont Castle deciding on a way forward for victims and survivors. It does not behove the Alliance Party to tell Members about the cynicism of the people of the North of Ireland. They voted for Sinn Féin and the DUP, and it grates on the Alliance Party that not enough people voted for it to put it in a position to make decisions.

It is important that early legislation underpins the work of the commission. Members who spoke today agreed that progress on work in that area is of the utmost importance. Therefore, the legislation must proceed without further delay. Important work must be done, and I urge the Assembly to support the motion for accelerated passage. The strong panel of commissioners must be supported in their work as advocates of victims and survivors. Their views are needed to shape services and to improve the delivery of support to victims and survivors.

The commissioners designate can undertake only preparatory work. The commission must be able to operate fully as a matter of priority. Go raibh maith agat.

I also wish to address Mr Ford's point of order on the requirements of Standing Order 40, to which Naomi Long also referred. As required by Standing Orders 40(4)(a) and 40(4)(b), I set out in my opening remarks the reasons for accelerated passage and the consequences of that not being granted. Standing Order 40(4)(c) requires Members "if appropriate" to explain:

"any steps ... taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure."

It was implicit in the case for accelerated passage in this instance that the First Minister and I do not wish to use that procedure as a matter of routine for legislation on victims and survivors, or more generally. The Bill is a narrow piece of legislation, with one substantive clause and one purpose: to replace a commissioner with a commission that will have the same powers and functions. It does not introduce any other policy change, and it is not part of a wider programme of legislation on victims and survivors. Therefore, I argue that it is not one of the cases envisaged in Standing Order 40(4)(c) for which it would be appropriate to explain steps:

"to minimise the future use of ... accelerated passage".

However, to dispel any doubt, I am happy to confirm that the First Minister and I will take any steps necessary to avoid coming back to the House to seek accelerated passage for legislation on victims and survivors. I reiterate that we do not request accelerated passage lightly. However, the process to make the largely technical changes to the legislation must be expedited. The exceptional nature of the issue was recognised by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which supported the use of accelerated passage for the Bill.

Basil McCrea talked about decisions being made behind closed doors. The First Minister and I expect to be able to discuss the detail of our draft strategy with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister soon. That will mark the beginning of the consultation process, and we will also discuss the strategy with the commissioners designate. Therefore, there is no question of decisions being made behind closed doors.

Tom Elliott and others raised a wide range of issues that I do not intend to address today, because the debate is on accelerated passage. Members will undoubtedly take the opportunity to decide on matters relating to the commission when the Bill is debated. I do not, therefore, propose to deal with the substance of those issues today.

The establishment of the commission will be a good start, and the needs of victims and survivors must be met as a matter of urgency.

Of course, some issues touch a raw nerve with many Members, and those issues will, undoubtedly, be discussed further during the process that brings the matter to a conclusion. We must respect one another's positions. I understand how painful the process is for many people in the unionist community and for their political representatives. However, my party also represents human beings — people who have also been hurt for a long time. We have all been hurt and we have all hurt one another. We must do precisely what Basil McCrea suggested during his contribution —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The deputy First Minister: No, I will not give way.

Basil McCrea pointed out that Members should not try to score political points as the Bill moves through its legislative stages. I agree; it is too important an issue for that. I appeal to everyone in the House not only to recognise the emotion that surrounds the issue but to recognise that the commission offers the only way in which to get to grips with it. As Mark Durkan rightly pointed out in his contribution, the inability to deal with victims and the past has been one of the peace process's great failures thus far. It has been everybody's failure. If the Assembly is prepared to recognise that collective failure, all Members have a responsibility to work together positively and constructively to find solutions to those problems. I am in favour of finding solutions. I believe that the vast majority of Members are of the same mindset. I hope that the motion will be supported.

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

Question put,

The Assembly divided: Ayes 54; Noes 28.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

UNIONIST:

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McElduff and Mr Shannon.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

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

UNIONIST:

Mr Beggs, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McNarry, Mr Savage.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Ford and Mr McCarthy.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>54 [65.9%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>21 [63.6%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>33 [78.6%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0 [0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

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

**The Pneumoconiosis, Etc.,
(Workers' Compensation)
(Payment of Claims) (Amendment)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008**

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

That the Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation)
(Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland)
2008 be affirmed.

These regulations were made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, and they increase by 3.9% the compensation that is payable under the Order to those who satisfy the conditions of entitlement on and after 1 April 2008 — namely tomorrow. The increase in the amounts that are payable under the Order maintains parity with the corresponding scheme operating in Great Britain and is in line with the annual uprating of social security benefits.

I will briefly outline the purpose of the Order. An employer can be sued by someone suffering from an industrial disease, if that disease had been contracted as a result of working for that employer. However, the diseases that are covered by the Order can take a long time to develop, and they may not be diagnosed until 20 or 40 years — or longer — after exposure to the dust. By that time, the employer or employers responsible may no longer be in business, and, consequently, sufferers and their dependants can experience great difficulty in obtaining compensation.

The scheme was introduced in 1979 to help those who have no realistic chance of success in suing through the courts, as their employers are no longer in business, and it provides for a lump-sum payment for sufferers. Payments are in addition to any award of weekly industrial injuries disablement benefit for the same disease. A claim can also be made by the dependants after the death of the sufferer.

In order to receive a payment under the scheme, a person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit. Two further conditions must be met before any payment can be made. First, there must be no relevant employer who can be sued, and, secondly, court action must not have been brought, nor any compensation received, for any of the diseases for which a person is claiming.

The scheme covers five respiratory diseases, most of which are directly related to asbestos exposure. Those diseases are: diffuse mesothelioma; diffuse pleural thickening; primary carcinoma of the lung; bisinosis; and pneumoconiosis, which includes asbestosis. The amount to be paid is based on a simple calculation that cross-references the age of the sufferer and the level of disability. The higher amounts are paid to people with higher levels of disability and to those whose disability arises at an early age. The average payment to sufferers is around

£18,000. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who claim after the sufferer has sadly passed away.

The regulations help to ensure that the compensation that is provided maintains its value in line with the rate of inflation. I am sure that Members know many people who may suffer from varying degrees of asbestosis as a result of industrial-related diseases and who will warmly welcome the regulations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): The Committee for Social Development considered the departmental proposal to make the Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 at its meeting on 14 February 2008, and it considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 13 March 2008.

As the Minister has outlined, those regulations will increase the amounts payable to sufferers of certain dust-related diseases or their dependants, who have been unable to claim damages from the relevant employers because the employers are no longer in business or there is no realistic prospect of obtaining damages from them.

5.15 pm

As we are all only too well aware, dust-related diseases can take a long time to develop and may not be diagnosed for a considerable number of years after exposure. I imagine that the scenario is quite common. Although no amount of money can compensate for the misery and suffering caused by diseases such as pneumoconiosis, the amounts payable offer some assistance to sufferers and their dependants. Therefore, it is important that there are increases and that the amounts payable keep pace with inflation. The Committee for Social Development recommends that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Having had two relatives die from asbestos-related illness, I understand the problems of the families of those who suffer from such illnesses. As Mr Campbell stated, the Committee for Social Development has accepted the regulations as outlined by the Minister. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I am pleased with the consensus of support across the Assembly for the regulations. I thank Mr Campbell and the Social Development Committee for the positive manner in which they dealt with the regulations. I also thank Mr Brady, who has had first-hand experience of the matter through relatives with asbestos-related illnesses and disabilities. All Members will want to ensure that the value of compensation under the 1979 Order is not eroded by inflation — the regulations will ensure that that does not happen. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation)
(Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland)
2008 be affirmed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Salary for the Holder of the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton): I beg to move

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary Group 5.

On 12 February 2008, the Assembly agreed an amendment to Standing Order 53, which enabled the Audit Committee to table a motion in the Assembly on the salary of the holder of the post of Comptroller and Auditor General. Prior to the amendment, the motion was brought by the Department of Finance and Personnel. In my speech on 12 February 2008, I outlined why the Audit Committee decided to take on that function.

The Audit Committee is now, for the first time, exercising the function conferred on it by the Assembly. As noted in my speech on 12 February, the governing legislation for the salary of Comptroller and Auditor General is the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, and specifically article 4(1). To comply with that article, and to avoid the issue of retrospective pay, the salary for the Comptroller and Auditor General must be agreed by the Assembly by 1 April each year. The governing legislation makes the issue of retrospective pay very difficult.

During suspension, the salary was linked, by mutual agreement between the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Department of Finance and Personnel, to that recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable to the judiciary at salary group 5. I stress that the review body is independent.

The body provides advice to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office on remuneration for a number of types of posts, including the judiciary. The review body does not specifically examine or make a recommendation for the remuneration of the post of Comptroller and Auditor General. It is an Audit Committee recommendation that the Assembly continue to apply to that post the level of pay that is awarded by the body to the judiciary at salary group 5.

In coming to that recommendation, the Audit Committee examined the agreement that was put in place during suspension of the Assembly for the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which was introduced in 2003. The Committee has considered its outworkings on a year-by-year basis and is content for the link to remain in place. The Committee is therefore satisfied both with the link between the report of the review body for

the judiciary at salary group 5 and the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is satisfied that the link has been implemented exactly each year since 2003. The Committee has consulted with all relevant parties, including the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which have stated that they are satisfied with the link and its outworkings.

I ask Members to note that, if the Committee were to decide in the future that it was not content with the link to the Review Body on Senior Salaries report, the Committee would begin discussions with all relevant stakeholders on a new linkage. However, such a theoretical discussion would take time and, until such discussions were completed, the existing arrangement would have to remain in place. That is not the case; the Audit Committee is satisfied and happy to recommend the motion to the Assembly. Members should also note that, under section 65(6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Assembly cannot reduce the salary that is payable to the person holding the post of Comptroller and Auditor General.

The review body report for 2008 is not yet available. Nevertheless, the Audit Committee recommends to the Assembly that the annual salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General for the period from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009 is, as recommended for the judiciary, at group 5 in the report of the Review Body on Senior Salaries. I have outlined the rationale that has enabled the Committee to come to the Assembly with that recommendation.

Mr Gardiner: I support the motion that has been moved by the Chairperson of the Audit Committee. I compliment him on the way that he presented it to the House. The Audit Committee examined the matter in great detail and unanimously agreed to make this recommendation to the House. I hope that the House sees fit to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary Group 5.

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on the membership of the Committee for Education. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Nelson McCausland replace Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson as a member of the Committee for Education. — [*Lord Morrow.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Carer's Allowance Bill

First Stage

Mr McNarry: I beg to introduce the Carer's Allowance Bill [NIA 13/07], which is a Bill to make provision preventing the adjustment of carer's allowance by reference to retirement pension.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Varney Review

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.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its deep concern at the conclusions of Sir David Varney's Review of Tax Policy in Northern Ireland; maintains that it is flawed in not sufficiently recognising the particular economic and geographical circumstances of this region; and calls on the Executive to bring forward a detailed Regional Economic Strategy that will address the economic and financial dependency of Northern Ireland, and facilitate a step-change in the Northern Ireland economy, in terms of closing the productivity gap with the rest of the United Kingdom.

I express my gratitude to the Assembly Research and Library Service for producing a detailed information pack on this issue that reflects the importance of today's debate.

The motion calls on the Executive to deliver a proper challenge to the Varney Review of Tax Policy and to develop a new, more ambitious regional economic strategy in time for the investment conference in May. It is unfortunate that so much time has already been lost. The Varney Review of Tax Policy — Varney I — contained some useful analysis, but it essentially confirmed the UK Government's regional economic strategy, which focuses wealth creation in the south-east of England, leaving Northern Ireland on the periphery.

Our regional economic strategy — delivered under direct rule — also follows that pattern. However, that pattern is not good enough for those of us with true ambitions for Northern Ireland. What is the point of devolution if decisions made by the Assembly are dependent on the whim of a London Government whose priorities may differ greatly from ours?

The Executive have given up on differential tax rates, but Ministers should know that Northern Ireland's businesses have not. It is not enough for the Executive to provide a tame written response to Varney I. Ministers should have been banging down doors to challenge it and demand explanations. Unionist parties cannot bring themselves to support calls for tax-varying powers in line with those in Scotland, so afraid are they of accepting real responsibility. That sends out the message that they are not serious about a different corporation tax rate or the serious fiscal reform required to deliver the investment that we need in health, education and infrastructure without hammering the ratepayer.

However, that is in the past. The objective of today's debate is to learn from those mistakes, to facilitate a proper debate on Varney II and to develop a home-made regional economic strategy for Northern Ireland on behalf of the people whom we represent.

First, we cannot continue to accept the basic UK Government policy, which leaves nine of the 12 economic regions dependent on subvention from London. Northern Ireland is the extreme case, but that arrangement is not economically or environmentally sustainable for any of the nine regions — or for the whole country.

Secondly, we cannot compare ourselves only to the worst UK regions. That will leave us ever-reliant on the Barnett formula or a replacement over which we have no control, or, in other words, reliant on the whims of a Chancellor of the Exchequer who has no direct mandate here. That would render us more peripheral than ever with no say in our future — the complete opposite of devolution's intended effect. We must be ambitious and target the best — including the south-east of England.

Thirdly, Varney has thus far omitted to consider what is now for many sectors — not solely tourism, energy and finance — an all-island economy. We must deliver the tools to our people, our workers and our businesses to enable them to remove the competitive disadvantages that they suffer and to play a full role in the development of a prosperous, all-island economy with the potential to benefit everyone.

That is why the scope of Varney II is not sufficient, and the Executive should be shouting that from the rooftops. The review must take account of the need for sustainability as a core public policy; the need to close the gap with all UK regions — including the greater south-east; and the need for analysis of the tools that we need to play our part in the all-island economy.

5.30 pm

The overall objective of our economic strategy must be to make Northern Ireland sustainable, not only environmentally, but economically. Differential taxes, particularly corporate taxes, are only a means to an end. We must also identify the key industries to prioritise,

the main inward investment markets to promote and the means to promote our companies in developing export markets. Without that, there is no point in investment conferences or the like.

It is unfortunate that the Executive's sole economic priority seems to be a one-off investment conference. The timing could not be worse: the United States is accepted to be in recession; investors will have no clarity about our economic policies; and there is no apparent targeting of specific industries or sectors. However, it is important to say that the Alliance Party is supportive of the investment conference. Collectively, we are prepared to play our part in trying to make the investment conference a success.

We did not pin our hopes on corporation tax. We made recommendations to the Government and to businesses about the costs of division and social division, and they were accepted by business organisations but ignored, apparently, by the Executive. We did not pin all our hopes on a begging-bowl approach, but preferred to identify key industrial sectors and to push the corporation-tax issue before devolution — something on which the Executive parties failed to deliver. Furthermore, we did not remove the most successful UK regions from our comparators. The Alliance Party is ambitious for Northern Ireland, and we wish to be compared with the best — not with the most mediocre.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member inform the House whether business organisations support the Alliance Party's call for a three-pence-in-the-pound increase in income tax, which would only add to the social costs that businesses here face and do nothing for our competitiveness?

Mr Neeson: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I wish that he had read the Alliance Party manifesto. That is not our policy, and I do not know where he got the idea from.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member clarify —

Mr Neeson: I have only a limited amount of time.

This motion should have been tabled long ago by the Executive parties, and it is telling that it has been left to the opposition to move it. We have been trying for months to have this debate on the Floor. It is past time that the Executive challenged a regional policy that leaves Northern Ireland on the sidelines and an economic policy that deprives us of the basic tools that we need to make devolution and democracy work. Furthermore, it is past time that the Executive challenged the views that do not reflect our economic and geographical position as part not only of the UK economy, but of a growing all-island economy.

The Executive have a unique opportunity to make some of the tough decisions that are required to deliver a step change in our economy and which would close

the productivity and wealth gap, and so move us away from being solely dependent on the goodwill of politicians who do not seek election here.

One reason for this issue's being discussed today is that, prior to the restoration of devolution, the Committee on the Programme for Government's Subgroup on Economic Issues discussed a package that was to be part of the peace process. Representatives went to Downing Street, met Gordon Brown and made a strong case for reform. However, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has, unfortunately, let down the people of Northern Ireland.

The challenge remains, and we still have to address Varney II. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee have a dual responsibility, and both have co-operated in bringing forward relevant ideas. It is important that we move soon; certainly before the investment conference in May.

Mr McQuillan: It is disappointing that the Alliance Party sees fit to continue its negative attitude in the Assembly. That attitude is not the best one to be giving to people who will potentially invest in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party's attitude is similar to terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport — designed with all sorts of fantastic ideas that in reality do not work and would cause chaos.

On 17 December 2007, the Minister of Finance and Personnel expressed his disappointment at the outcome of the Varney Review. That was doubtless an understatement of his true feelings. Since he does not have a magic purse from which he can produce money when he wants it; he must use the moneys at his disposal in the most effective and prudent manner possible.

In the Programme for Government, supported by a well-crafted Budget, the emphasis was on economic development and growth. The First Minister said on 28 January 2008:

"We will secure value-added inward-investment commitments creating a minimum of 6,500 jobs — 85% of which will be above the Northern Ireland private-sector median wage". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p11, col 1*].

Do the sponsors of the motion not realise that that is the regional development strategy that they are mentioning in this motion? Dr Farry even admitted on 21 January 2007 that the Barnett formula was:

"perpetuating the financial penalty on the rest of the UK". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p295, col 2*].

Where do the signatories to the motion think that the money that they want to spend will come from?

To facilitate a step change in the Northern Ireland economy that addresses the economic dependency of Northern Ireland, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in his Budget, concentrated on the Departments that

help to build and drive the economy — the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Education, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — during the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, and provided over and above the block grant average of 3·6%. The Department for Employment and Learning will benefit from a 3·9% increase; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive a 4·8% increase; the Department of Education will have a rise of 4·3%; and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will have a whopping 6·5% increase.

The Minister, therefore, addressed the shortfalls in those budgets for the essential economy builders and economic drivers that have been wasted in coping with a terrorist campaign over 30 years. The skills and infrastructure that Northern Ireland needs in order to attract multinational companies; create well-paid sustainable employment; benefit the entire population; give our economy a boost, and reduce reliance on the public sector have all been addressed. Is that not a regional economic strategy?

The geographical location of Northern Ireland puts us in a special-case situation. We have a neighbouring state that taxes companies at a lower level, which results in a distinct disadvantage for Northern Ireland when attracting multinationals. The Varney Review apparently failed to accurately appreciate the impact that that has on Northern Ireland. No other part of the UK has a land border with a foreign state.

We also have short-term requirements that are different to the rest of the UK due to the fact that we are coming out of long-term conflict. The current global economic slowdown only makes these problems in more need of urgent resolution. However, there is global goodwill towards Northern Ireland, and we must capitalise on that.

Varney II can help to level the playing field by immediately reducing the rate of corporation tax. That is just one of a number of measures that Varney II could recommend, but it is the one measure that will deliver by far the greatest boost to the Assembly's efforts to attract and retain the employment required for economic growth. I urge Sir David Varney to recognise those priorities and to support our cause as a matter of urgency. He has no excuse for non-delivery since Northern Ireland officials have been involved throughout Varney II. He could also examine the cost of fuel on both sides of the border.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said that he cannot control the Treasury. However, the aspects that he does control have been managed with complete professionalism: that should be congratulated. It is a

pity that he cannot control the Alliance Party and its terminal-5 approach to fiscal policy in Northern Ireland.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is a lot of common ground between the parties in relation to the commitment to growing the local economy and developing a more productive, competitive position.

There is also significant agreement about the outcome of Varney I. It is evident that that review is, in many ways, a prisoner of the Treasury's orthodoxy, with its one-size-fits-all approach, despite comprehensive and indisputable evidence that the policy of convergence has not, and cannot, work in this economic region.

The outcome of Varney I was predetermined. That review concluded that present economic policies give us a competitive edge, but it ignored the consensus among the parties and the business community on the need for flexibility on fiscal and taxation policy. It ignored the strong, positive lessons that emerged from the flexibility that exists south of the border and the clear evidence, sustained over the best part of a decade and a half, of increased revenue flows into the taxation coffers. Benefits all round were ignored, and an opportunity was missed.

The motion, which addresses that, is worthy of support, and its criticisms of Varney I are fair. I am concerned that the motion ignores the fact that we have a revision of the regional economic strategy to which we are committed and which is already underway. The actions which the motion calls for are already in the process of being delivered. The aspiration to close the productivity gap with the rest of the United Kingdom is not as positive or ambitious as it should and could be in relation to our economic prospects. If Varney I is a prisoner of Treasury orthodoxy; we should not be prisoners of the status quo here with respect to looking for the best opportunities.

Sinn Féin believes that the motion can be supported, even though it is flawed in some respects. Although Sinn Féin certainly does not share the same economic analysis as the Alliance Party, we can work together to create a different set of outcomes, given the dreary predictability of working within the straitjacket that Whitehall and the Treasury are imposing on us.

Sinn Féin takes the approach that, if we are looking for a step change, we must close the competitiveness and productivity gap with the Southern economy. We should take an all-island approach for the benefit of all the people who live on the island, and particularly for those of us who live in the north-west region, where the economy is attempting to deal, not just with the consequences of limited resource, but with the consequences of emerging from decades of conflict and division.

If we take a broad approach, we can see that, on this tiny island, to have the amount of duplication involved in two systems of government, two economies, two health systems, two education systems and so on, is a nonsense. That degree of co-operation and harmonisation, leaving the constitutional question in its proper place and for its proper time, will allow for significant opportunities for expansion, development and growing the economy in a way in which we all wish for. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I, too, am generally content with the wording of the motion. However, I disagree with the comments made to try to support it by some of the Members who have already spoken.

5.45 pm

I consider the motion to have two parts: the first indicates concern about Sir David Varney's review of tax policy in Northern Ireland and its failure to significantly recognise Northern Ireland's economic circumstances, and the second is a call for a detailed regional economic strategy to help kick-start the economy.

I shall put the debate in context: at St Andrews, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin failed to get the Prime Minister to agree to a financial package, and it appears that, at that stage, some side-deals were made, although not for economic assistance for Northern Ireland. That is evident from the recent difficult budgetary process that we went through, and we hear of bodies and groups that are struggling as a result. In addition, each Department is having difficulty in achieving its efficiency savings, which might endanger services, and it is important that we ensure that that does not happen.

Following St Andrews, the first Varney Review was announced. The report was published in December 2007, and it stated that a clear and unambiguous case for a 12.5% rate of corporation tax cannot be made.

Recently, during a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, representatives of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland made it clear how significant low corporation tax had been in convincing foreign direct investment to come to the Republic of Ireland. I was aware that low corporation tax had been important, but, after that presentation, I better understood its significance in encouraging inward investment. With significant capital would come more jobs and increased individual productivity and regional gross value added (GVA) — a series of benefits would flow.

However, the report did not major on what I suspect would be a key consideration for the Chancellor if he were to grant Northern Ireland a lower corporation tax rate: how would the Scottish, Welsh and English Labour Parties react if Northern Ireland's attractiveness to foreign direct investment increased in comparison to other United Kingdom regions? If such a corporation tax rate were to have been granted, the time was at St Andrews,

when there would have been a political reason and momentum to deliver it. Sadly, that did not happen.

The earlier report suggested that lower corporation tax could produce an additional 184,000 private-sector jobs by 2030, and an increase in GVA of 5% per annum. It is unfortunate that that potential has not been delivered. There were potential problems with "brass plating"; however, it is thought that such problems could have been addressed by commensurate-activity taxation. Of course, economists rarely agree, and this seems to be yet another case of that. However, no one doubts that lower corporation tax would have brought more jobs to Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, since St Andrews, taxation changes have actually resulted in increased taxation for Northern Ireland. Although last year's Budget highlighted a reduction in higher-rate corporation tax, that masked the fact that lower corporation tax levels were increased from 19% to 21%, and, of course, 96% of Northern Ireland companies pay the lower rate. Corporation tax in Northern Ireland has increased, rather than decreased, since St Andrews.

The proposer of the motion advocated taxation powers to solve our woes. However, I did not hear — and it would be helpful if the Alliance Party would explain — how that would be financed. By how much does that party propose to increase income tax on working families and individuals to enable corporation tax to be lower? The process is much more complicated, and there has been no indication of that.

Mr O'Loan: Like other Members, I shall give assent to the motion. The issue is important, but I am not so sure that this debate will be important. Beyond Members stating that growing our economy is important and that they disagree with the Varney Review on corporation tax and still want it to be lowered, I wonder how much substance will come out of this afternoon's speeches. However, I shall leave that for others to judge.

I will now turn to the motion, and to the conclusions reached by Sir David Varney's review. Unlike Varney, I remain of the view that a low rate of corporation tax was central to the economic success of the Republic of Ireland, although it was not the only element. There is no doubt that reduced corporation tax has to be built in to a range of economic drivers; I guess that we all agree on that. Indeed, I do not think that Sir David Varney thought that a reduction in corporation tax would not work. I believe that he thought that it would work but that it would have repercussions elsewhere — in Scotland, in particular. That raises fundamental questions about UK regional policy, which is prepared to subsidise weak regional performance.

The opinion of informed economic observers is that corporation tax reduction was a vital contribution to the Celtic tiger. We should note the continuing success

of the Republic of Ireland in attracting foreign direct investment. A recent editorial in 'The Irish Times' stated that Northern Ireland received almost \$1 billion in foreign direct investment last year, but in that same year, the Republic of Ireland received foreign direct investment worth \$27 billion. The difference is absolutely massive. Global foreign direct investment totalled \$947 billion last year. We should note two things: the huge potential; and the remarkable success of a small nation such as the Republic of Ireland in getting such a slice of the action.

I note that Sir David Fell ruled out the possibility of gaining the corporation tax reduction; he said:

"the search should go on for a carefully tailored fiscal incentive for Northern Ireland that might find favour with the Treasury."

We should not rule out supplementary measures, but our primary focus should remain on corporation tax equivalence with the rest of the island. To that end, I welcome the fact that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has asked the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to continue to examine the matter, and I look forward to the Minister outlining the exact steps that he proposes in maintaining that campaign.

I will now turn to the development of the new regional economic strategy, which is being conducted in conjunction with Varney II. The matters addressed by Varney II are not fiscal ones; they are fundamentally devolved matters, and I have real concerns that devolved matters about the development of our economy are now back with the Treasury. For us to take full responsibility for our problems is fundamental to resolving them, and, psychologically, it is bad for us to look to London once again for a solution.

I wish to put some emphasis on the all-island aspect of our economic strategy. The Varney Report, although cautious, supports that strongly, and states:

"there is scope to go even further".

My party has produced important documents on the all-island economy: 'North South Makes Sense' and 'Shaping an All-Island Economy'. Those documents have been very influential with the Irish Government, and they have said so. The documents were instrumental in leading to contributions of £400 million to our roads programme and €60 million to the innovation fund. Under direct rule, a North/South intergovernmental document — 'Comprehensive Study on the All-Island Economy' — was produced, which I recommend to all.

I ask the Executive to produce a new document on the all-island economy, moving all those matters to the stage of practical implementation and giving full Assembly approval to it. There is scope to do much more; without that, the economy here will languish. It is vital to treat this island as an economic unit.

Alan Gillespie, the chairman of the Ulster Bank, recently proposed the merger of Invest Northern Ireland and the Industrial Development Agency (IDA). He cited the IDA as a world-class body, and it clearly has a record of great success. Other independent non-political analysts who also have our interests at heart have suggested other approaches, and I ask that we address the issue rationally and objectively and put it on the table and discuss it.

Mr Weir: The previous Member to speak expressed a concern — or perhaps he was simply making an observation — that nothing of any significance had been, or would be, said during the debate. I will therefore try my best not to disillusion him by continuing that pattern.

When I read the motion, I had a brief moment of hope. However, there is nothing particularly novel in it. Indeed, even the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel said that parts of the motion, particularly those that referred to the regional economic strategy, have been overtaken by events somewhat. Perhaps we can excuse the Alliance Party for that; to be fair, the motion has been kicking around the Business Committee for a long time, as Mr Neeson said.

I had a brief flicker of hope when I read the Alliance Party's motion, which expressed its concerns at the Varney Review, particularly following that party's attempts during the budgetary process to push constantly for higher taxation and for raising the regional and other rates. Indeed, Che Farry tried to bring us into some sort of latter-day Cuba. I thought that the motion would be an attempt by that party to retreat to the proper ground of low taxation to ensure that the economy was properly stimulated. Unfortunately, however, we have not really heard that today; indeed, the Alliance Party has come out with the same old mantra.

There has been nothing particularly novel in this debate. Understandably and for their own reasons, the SDLP and Sinn Féin have been competing over which of them is most in favour of an all-Ireland economy and over the supposed advantages of harmonisation. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel talked about the dangers that are involved in having two education systems, and he suggested harmonising them into one. That might be a useful step for us in Northern Ireland to take — that is if we could reduce our education systems to two. We have to deal with the economies of scale before we consider trying to harmonise our system with that of the South.

In proposing the motion, the Alliance Party Member for East Antrim was so downbeat about the Northern Ireland economy that I am surprised that he is still in the Chamber; I thought that he might have gone to phone the Samaritans to get some consolation, given that he painted such a black picture of the economy.

No matter how many times Mr Beggs is told, he consistently reiterates that no money supposedly came into the economy, when, in fact, a £2 billion package has been injected through additional capital and other sources of revenue.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I will not; I have fewer than two minutes left. The Member has been told often enough that there has been an injection of £2 billion, which is £2 billion more than the party opposite got through the Belfast Agreement.

There is disillusionment with the Varney process. To be fair, the Executive, the Committee for Finance and Personnel and others produced a constructive case that dealt with all the technical issues. The Department also put forward a strong case that overcame some of the issues that were raised about gold-plating, the Azores ruling, and a range of other issues. Whether it is as a result of Treasury orthodoxy or whether the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is concerned about the implications for other parts of the United Kingdom, Varney was undoubtedly disappointing, principally for political reasons that came from London.

However, we must look at the matter positively. Varney II is an opportunity to examine our economic policies and the way in which we deliver them. Given the expertise that exists and that unlike the Varney Review, there is direct input from the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Northern Ireland officials can bring a level of local expertise to the process. I am hopeful that we will see results from that.

It was mentioned in the Budget debate that the aim of Varney II is to feed into the regional economic strategy and to be ahead of the game on the investment conference. All these things must work in tandem, and that is the proper route.

6.00 pm

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

The business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. Therefore, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until it is completed.

Ms J McCann: Like my colleague, I have some sympathy with the sentiments expressed in the motion. The Varney Review was undertaken to examine current and future tax policy in the North. There are several major obstacles to the progressive development and delivery by the Executive of a new social, economic and political reality that recognises that economic sovereignty, prosperity and economic equality are linked. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the fact that taxation and public-expenditure policy are set in London.

As republicans — although I do not know how green we are according to Peter Weir — we in Sinn Féin believe that the only context that will truly deliver the sustainable economic and social progress to which the people of the North are entitled is that of a united Ireland. However, in the immediate future, we are faced with the challenge of achieving the best possible outcomes within the economic and political realities here and now, so that is what we are dealing with.

Despite several submissions to the Varney Review from stakeholders and Departments recommending a differential rate of corporation tax in the North, as well as several other business tax incentives, Varney ruled out any cut in corporation tax. He said that the case was not proven that it would encourage foreign direct investment, despite the fact that a strong case was made to suggest that lowering corporation tax would be a positive step towards encouraging potential investors to come to the North and towards developing a strong and balanced economy.

The North of Ireland's economic performance has been, and continues to be, poor in comparison with the rest of Ireland and with Britain. The local economy has an imbalance in the contributions of the public and private sectors to economic activity, inward investment is sluggish and the growth of local business is low-key. Employment is concentrated in the service sector, which has many low-paid, low-skilled and low-security jobs.

Public spending is responsible for 63% of our gross domestic product, so economic output here is about 20% below the British average, and it has been falling steadily behind that of the Twenty-six Counties as well. Low unemployment figures of 4% conceal the fact that the levels of economic inactivity are much higher, and the number of people in receipt of incapacity benefit is 74% higher than average. The North has the highest proportion of people who are economically inactive, and almost 100,000 children here live in poverty.

Through various submissions to Varney, arguments were made that the North of Ireland has particular circumstances when compared to Scotland, England and Wales and that the differences in corporation tax and excise duties between the North and South constrain our competitiveness.

The argument was also strongly made that political instability in the North has stifled its economic growth and development. However, it is not only the political instability and the deep divisions created during 30 years of conflict that have resulted in the lack of economic development. There are other problems, and they are exacerbated by an artificial border, which is a major obstacle to the progressive development and delivery of a strong, vibrant economy.

Although there can be no doubt that the lowering of corporation tax is important to the economy and that

having a level playing field on the island of Ireland would go a long way towards attracting and sustaining foreign direct investment, we need to do much more to deliver investment in people, skills and infrastructure.

The absence of economic sovereignty is the biggest single obstacle facing the economy in the North. Fiscal policy, taxation and public expenditure are all set in London, which presents problems. Consequently, the North is excluded from the economic advantages experienced by the Twenty-six Counties and lumped in with the rest of the so-called UK, where it tops the list on practically every deprivation indicator, yet no special provision is made for a society that is just emerging from conflict, with all the attendant social and economic disadvantages.

Partition is wasteful and inefficient and duplicates government and public-service structures; it imposes an unnecessary administrative burden on those wishing to do business in both jurisdictions, and it creates barriers to economies of scale. Each jurisdiction on the island of Ireland is competing with the other for economic investment as well as with the rest of the world. An all-island approach would eliminate this.

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

Mr Simpson: I express my general support for the broad concerns of the motion, and I begin in that way because I believe that the wording of the motion could have been better. It is in Northern Ireland's interests to reach as much agreement as possible on those matters. I intend, therefore, to express general support for the motion, despite its shortcomings. It has been tabled not by one, or two, but three Alliance Party MLAs; it is an official, formal Alliance Party motion that has been agreed by that party's Members.

It is an Alliance Party motion that refers to Northern Ireland's economic circumstances and financial dependence and which calls for a step change in Northern Ireland's economy. Those concerns have been raised at different times in different ways by different political parties. The irony in the motion is that those calls are now being made by the very same Alliance Party that believes that the best response to Northern Ireland's economic challenges is to shackle our economy to a high-tax regime. It is a bit like Heather Mills McCartney offering marriage guidance.

If the Alliance Party is serious about our economy, it should develop serious policies; to date, it has done the exact opposite. I hope that over the coming weeks and months, the Alliance Party will mature and come into the real world and propose valid solutions and policies for the challenges that the Province faces.

Nevertheless, even though the motion comes from the high-tax Alliance Party — and anticipating a step change in Alliance Party policy — I can accept the motion. However, I suspect that the party that will

have the greatest difficulty with the motion and its outworkings will be the very Alliance Party that tabled it; but that is a problem for its Members.

Economic growth, productivity, unemployment, the economically inactive, public-sector dependency, research and development levels, and the relationship between business and Government have been a cause of concern over many years. The findings of the Varney Review were disappointing, if not unexpected. There are issues that the Province has to tackle. I have mentioned some of them: improving the skills base and reducing economic inactivity; public-sector efficiency; innovation promotion; and promoting trade and investment. Those are issues that the Executive are addressing through the Budget and the Programme for Government.

We need the correct balance of skills and an environment conducive to science and innovation. We should be able to offer enhanced tax credits for training and for expenditure on research and development that would make Northern Ireland an attractive location in which to invest.

My time is almost up, and there is more that could be said, but time does not permit it.

Northern Ireland has come a long way but has a long way yet to go, and I urge the Executive to lead it on that journey.

Mr Cree: I say at the outset that the Varney Review was not just disappointing but failed miserably to offer Northern Ireland any constructive help whatsoever. It recommended a set of policies that were almost identical to those already set out in our Programme for Government and in the draft regional economic strategy.

The Varney Review failed to address the evidence presented by those who advocated a lower rate of corporation tax and who demonstrated how the resulting £300 million revenue loss could be absorbed. He failed to consider the dynamic effects that lowering corporation tax in Northern Ireland would have on levels of foreign direct investment. His concern was that, if Northern Ireland were to be given a favourable rate of corporation tax, that could open the door for other UK regions to demand similar benefits, and why would they not?

High business taxation must be avoided in order to compete in today's economy. Northern Ireland is the only UK region that has a land frontier with the euro zone. Northern Ireland is the only UK region that suffers the distorting effects of the Republic's tax system, not just when it comes to paying corporation tax but for excise duties and aggregate tax, and so on.

Those tax differences place real constraints on our economy's competitiveness and are experienced more acutely here than in any other part of the kingdom. The case for treating tax differently in Northern Ireland rests on the fact that existing measures have failed

because they are inadequate for attracting substantial, high-value foreign direct investment. In turn, we have failed to develop true economic convergence with the rest of the United Kingdom.

One can argue that that is the responsibility of the UK Government, whose regional economic policies have failed to bring about the planned convergence. However, we are where we are. A reduced rate of corporation tax would enable growth-oriented SMEs to undertake investments that would not have been possible at a higher rate of taxation, and they could, therefore, increase their output performance. Invest Northern Ireland's FDI package, which mainly produces lower-wage, lower-value jobs from overseas, is proof of that.

What can we hope for from Varney's second report? Last December, the Prime Minister stated:

"I have said to people in Northern Ireland that I want them to get all the advantages that are available ... in the Republic".

I say to Mr Varney that his second report must amount to a great deal more than regurgitated policies and aspirations; it must be about more than R&D tax credits. We need to be able to compete on the world stage, and we must be ready for May's investment conference.

I thank the Alliance Party for tabling the motion. We all know that the Alliance Party is a vocal supporter of tax-varying powers, which really means tax-increasing powers. I will not support any motion from that party that would increase the tax burden on business in Northern Ireland, and I trust that that is not the case in this instance. Therefore, I am happy to support the motion and sincerely hope that Varney II will deliver.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to introduce to the debate the experiences of petrol retailers in border communities. I have raised that matter previously in the presence of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I listen to the people in my constituency and try to convey to the House what they say. I refer to places on this side of the border corridor, such as Castlederg, Strabane and Clady. Differences in excise duties have meant that, for decades, petrol retailers in those areas have experienced terrible disadvantage when doing business. Why would people not travel to Lifford, in the case of those from west Tyrone, or to Emyvale, in the case of those from south Tyrone, to get cheaper petrol or diesel?

6.15 pm

When I raised the matter previously, Members on the Benches opposite immediately mentioned fuel smuggling. The standard knee-jerk response is to ask about all the fuel smuggling that takes place. I have a wonderful idea as to how we can eradicate that problem: harmonise taxation and duties for businesses such as

petrol retailers. Forgive me for raising the issue, but I am listening to the people who elected me — business people in West Tyrone who have a point to make.

I would like to think that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is listening and that he can factor that point into any future discussions with the British Treasury, as that is how it should be done. If we are going to make a difference — and we have often said that local political institutions will make a difference — then I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to listen to that point.

Recently, I had a meeting with a large group of construction workers in Omagh. We talked about incentives to attract business to the area, and about the disincentives — the corporation tax differential was mentioned throughout the meeting. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to listen to what people living in the border corridor are saying and to remember that he is their Minister, too. In their contributions to the debate, Mitchel McLaughlin and Jennifer McCann emphasised the particular circumstances of that society.

I am pleased to note that the Alliance Party's motion refers to:

"recognising the particular economic and geographical circumstances of this region".

I take issue, however, with the fact that yet another motion emanating from the Alliance Party suffers from short-sightedness in relation to North/South possibilities. When we debated arts funding, the Alliance Party saw it merely in an east-west context, when investment in arts in the Twenty-six Counties would be best practice. The Alliance Party should look at the North/South possibilities for developing the situation, as well as focusing on the east-west aspect.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Varney Review — as I welcome any opportunity to discuss matters relating to the development of the economy in Northern Ireland. I support the motion generally, although perhaps not the way in which it was moved.

It has often been said — and it is worth repeating — that the economy is the Executive's number one priority. That has been well illustrated by the Programme for Government, backed up by the Budget. It is clear from those documents and from others that it is not the case, as the proposer of the motion said, that we are pinning our hopes on the US/NI investment conference in May. We are not simply pinning our hopes on a two- or three-day conference in May; it is a much wider, longer and more detailed strategy than that.

If, as Mr Neeson said, he and his party do support that conference, they could perhaps reflect on the comments that he made in the Chamber today and be a little more optimistic and upbeat about economic prospects in Northern Ireland.

As the motion points out, the Varney Review was a flawed process and, therefore, produced a flawed outcome. A strong and convincing case was presented to Sir David by the Executive, various Assembly Committees, Northern Ireland business and its various representative groups. There was always some doubt and concern about the outcome that Sir David would reach, and he did not let us down by trotting out, ultimately, Treasury orthodoxy. However, one of the good things to come out of the first review — if anything good could come out of it — is that the supposed legal barriers that were being thrown up as to why corporation tax could not be lowered in Northern Ireland, apart from other regions in the United Kingdom, have been well and truly shot down. Clearly, the reasons that the decision is not being taken are purely political — not political reasons pertaining to Northern Ireland, but rather to other regions of the United Kingdom.

Some of the well-highlighted and documented flaws pertain generally to the estimated £1 billion cost over a decade of cutting the rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. Sir David paid no heed to the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland's suggestion that banks or public utilities be exempted from any derogation from a lower rate of corporation tax, thus significantly reducing that cost. Given the likely increase in FDI that would come from such a cut, it is absurd that he assumed historical trends of FDI flow into Northern Ireland.

Another flaw was the lack of sustained local input throughout the review. I hope that Varney II, as it has become known, will follow in the tradition of sequels such as 'The Godfather: Part II' rather than other movie sequels, in that it is better than the original. At least DFP officials are intimately involved with Varney II, and I am optimistic, if not completely confident, about it.

Mr Weir: Based on your film analogy, should Members hope that there will not be a Varney III?

[Laughter.]

Mr Hamilton: It could go on for years, like the 'Rocky' franchise.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Weir should speak through the Chair.

[Laughter.]

Mr Hamilton: Members are drifting away from the subject of the debate and making Mr O'Loan's point for him.

I fear that, important as they are, there has been too much focus on tax incentives at times. Many measures that are required to turn the economy around — to close the productivity gap, incentivise the private sector to grow, and improve the efficiency of the public sector — lie in the Assembly's hands and competencies. One such measure is the allocation of more resources to key

Departments, such as the Budget provided for DETI, DEL and DRD. Other measures include the investment strategy, which provides £18 million, and the correction of problems, such as making the Planning Service more fit for purpose.

As alluring and potentially transforming as a cut in corporation tax may be, other essential building blocks must be put in place. If there are not sufficient people with the requisite skills, or the infrastructure is not in place, there is little point in achieving a cut in corporation tax to incentivise people to invest in Northern Ireland.

We should not concentrate so much on Varney and on continuing to plug away at trying to achieve a cut in corporation tax that we take our eyes off the work must be done in the Assembly.

Mr B McCrea: The motion is fairly superficial, and it misses the point. I do not want to be harsh on people who are doing their best, but we must focus on other issues.

I want to talk about financial dependency, targeted intervention and the vision for the future. First, on financial dependency, the correct figures are that Northern Ireland raises £9 billion in tax and pays out £18 billion. It would be quite a stretch to reach that figure of £18 billion, and it will not happen any time soon. Apart from London, only two regions are net contributors and everywhere else in the United Kingdom takes money out, and those fiscal arrangements provide many benefits to Northern Ireland.

There is more to productivity than simply raising money through taxes. Productivity is good because it tends to get people into better jobs in which they earn more. Increased productivity means healthier people, less poverty, and so forth. It is not simply about tax: it is about creating a positive environment in which people want to live.

There is much talk about the productivity gap, but the main issue is that, with an unemployment rate of only 3·2%, most people in Northern Ireland are fully employed. As the Assembly tries to attract foreign investment, where will the people come from to take the resultant jobs?

The argument about corporation tax and what a cut in the rate did for the Republic of Ireland is old hat: that was then and this is now. Twenty years ago, when America first sought to outsource its manufacturing, it looked around and Ireland seemed to be a good base, and the guys there did a great job.

However, places such as Estonia now offer 0% corporation tax. The real reason it worked in the South was because at that time, there was 17% unemployment and 40% economic inactivity. After de Valera, the Southern economy had huge problems: tremendous slack had to be taken up. Those conditions do not apply now.

When I was in Washington recently, I was encouraged by people's positive attitudes. They told me that what they value most is Ministers, with whom they can have a chat and sort matters out quickly. It is worth telling those Members who seek inward investment that they also told me that they were £1 trillion only in debt. I do not know what £1 trillion is in real money; however, it seems to be an awful lot. There are serious issues over there that will affect not only Northern Ireland's economy, but others across the whole of western Europe. A crunch is coming. People will have serious problems. There will be job losses; firms will go to the wall and there will be devastation in the construction industry. What did the Fed do about it? It cut rates aggressively. What does the Assembly do about it? It simply has another debate. The issue is what will happen in the future.

I am glad that Barry McElduff has come back into the Chamber, because I want to tell him that, although I share his concerns about fuel, the £250 million could be generated through the introduction of toll charges on vehicles that come from the South, use Northern Ireland's roads, but do not pay taxes. I suggest to Mr McElduff — through you, Mr Deputy Speaker — that that would be a good means of raising the money. There are, therefore, ways that the Assembly could deal with those matters creatively.

In America, people stress that the most important measure is follow-up. If the Assembly is serious about getting the economy in order, there needs to be targeted intervention, not the blunderbuss approach of corporation tax. Lowering the rate of corporation tax is not going to happen and will not do any good. There are, however, many measures that the Assembly can take, including bringing people home. That is Northern Ireland's big challenge. The number of good people who have left the country during the past 30 years is astronomical. If the right jobs, education and incentives are offered, those people will return and make Northern Ireland better.

In conclusion, I concur with others, such as Mr Simpson, who said that the Assembly must take a collective approach. We must join together and speak with one voice; that is the future of Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Members' comments, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have listened carefully and with interest to the debate. Although much of it has been constructive and helpful, I must admit to being a little dismayed at some of the points that have been made on economic policy and the dynamics of Northern Ireland's economy. At times, those particular points displayed a naïve understanding of economics, finance and Northern Ireland's constitutional funding mechanisms. I will deal with those specific issues shortly.

I shall begin by saying that these are certainly challenging times for any economy. All the major

economies of the world are struggling to control market volatility. It is clear that a small, open economy, such as that of Northern Ireland, has little or no control over the prevailing financial environment in which citizens must live. The key issue for the Executive is to ensure that we create a policy environment that will facilitate economic growth and development in Northern Ireland. That growth and development will be achieved only by delivering the economic vision of an outward-looking, export-orientated, innovative, wealth-generating economy.

I make no apologies for reiterating what I have said many times before in the Assembly: a domestic market of 1·7 million people will not provide the basis for higher growth and productivity. Northern Ireland's private sector, with a few notable exceptions, is too insular and reliant on local demand. That must change.

One obvious way to transform the local private sector is to encourage and facilitate foreign investment in Northern Ireland. The role of foreign direct investment in transforming the Republic of Ireland's economy highlights how significantly higher levels of economic growth can be generated. Northern Ireland needs to make a concerted effort to market itself as an investment location.

6.30 pm

I have listened to the references that have been made during the debate to corporation tax and to the first Varney Report. Let us be absolutely clear: a lower rate of corporation tax would have been great; we should not — and the Executive will not — give up on that objective. If and when the circumstances become more conducive to the argument for a lower rate of corporation tax, we will be ready.

However, anyone will recognise that putting the same case to the same people within a few months of them having rejected it will lead to the same result. Therefore, we will wait until the appropriate time to again take up the argument for lowering corporation tax rates with whichever party may be in power at the time. In the meantime, we have a responsibility to get the best deal for the people of Northern Ireland. If there are further advantages that we can get from the Treasury, we should do so.

The Varney Review was never going to provide a panacea for all the ills of our local economy. Multinational companies are efficient at managing their tax exposure around the world; therefore, a decision on whether to establish themselves here was never going to be determined by the prevailing UK rate of corporation tax alone.

Potential investors consider a portfolio of factors, and Northern Ireland already scores well on many of those: we use the English language — or a variant of it; we have a well-established regulatory and legal framework; we are located in the EU single market; we

have relatively low labour costs by EU standards; and we have a large pool of young and well-educated labour. I could go on, but those are the factors that influence investment decisions, and those are factors that we need to present at the forthcoming US investment conference.

That conference will provide an ideal opportunity to market all that Northern Ireland has to offer. We now have a Programme for Government that stresses the importance that the Executive place on economic development. I remind Members that the Executive have primary responsibility for transforming our economy, not the Treasury in London. Although many economic variables are outside our control, and, indeed, the control of any Government, the decisions that the Executive will take over the next few years will be of critical importance in helping to shape our economic fortunes.

I must confess that I was unsurprised at the outcome of the first Varney Review. Our key focus must not be to apportion blame or to wonder why, but to find out what we can achieve ourselves. I repeatedly urged people to be cautious in their expectations of corporation tax being lowered as I judged that Sir David Varney was always going to be concerned about the wider UK repercussions of granting a regional dispensation on corporation tax.

Northern Ireland is unique in its proximity to a country with a more attractive tax regime, and, indeed, because it has come through decades of instability and conflict. However, it is difficult to ignore the Treasury's view that Northern Ireland's other economic characteristics are not unique. The headline statistics on unemployment, employment and GVA show that other UK regions are in a worse position than we are.

The second Varney Review should be welcomed as a constructive and objective assessment of the current state of the Northern Ireland economy. It can only be helpful to have someone such as Sir David, assisted by the full analytical resources of the Treasury, undertake a critique of Northern Ireland's current economic policy suite.

The findings of the second Varney Review will assist us in preparing the new regional economic strategy. I remind Members that that will be the Executive's strategy — unlike the draft strategy, it will not be a legacy of direct rule. That strategy will set out the range of policies that we can implement to assist and facilitate economic growth.

However, it must be tempered by realism. It will only reflect policies and programmes that lie within the gift of this Executive. Some Members seem to have difficulty in differentiating between what is and what is not within the gift of the Executive. Members have raised the need for local fiscal powers, but we need to appreciate that that is a double-edged sword.

The Alliance Party has consistently argued that we should have more control over such fiscal matters, but increasing the tax take in Northern Ireland will generate additional public expenditure — possibly at the expense of constraining regional competitiveness and making us a high-cost region to operate in. We could decide to lower certain taxes, but that would reduce available public expenditure, impacting directly on the public services that many in this Assembly have lobbied for so vociferously.

Today's motion refers to fiscal deficit. At around £7 billion per year, I do not think that Her Majesty's Treasury envisages allowing lower tax rates to apply in Northern Ireland. That would increase the size of the deficit.

I will touch on some of the issues raised by Members around the Chamber, dealing first with the issues that came from the Sinn Féin Benches. Ms McCann attempted to suggest that if we were to move towards a united Ireland, things would be much easier; that the separate structures' being combined would make it much more viable. That sounds like a very good argument for the Republic of Ireland to come back into the United Kingdom, and I am pretty sure that that is what she was really advocating.

In his remarks about fuel duty and the fuel differential, Mr McElduff was concerned about the loss of revenue to the British Treasury. One other method that he might want to advocate to his constituents is to have tighter border controls to ensure that there is no smuggling across that border.

I warn Roy Beggs, as best and in as friendly a tone as I can, that he needs to watch that he does not appear on every occasion to be a one-trick pony — especially as the trick does not work. He again raised the issue of the financial package. There was never a financial package dealing with revenue matters — it was always a financial package dealing with capital expenditure. The argument that was advanced was in relation to the infrastructure loss that there had been over a long period of time.

At present levels, about £2 billion will come to the Northern Ireland economy as a result of that package, in addition to the £100 million that we received in cash to deal with water and the innovation funding. That was on top of the very helpful changes in the reinvestment and reform initiative, where we were able to correct the errors of the Ulster Unionist Party and therefore hold rates for the next three years. The Ulster Unionist Party's changes had caused rates to go up by 62% over the last five years.

Those are all advantages to the Northern Ireland economy, and indicate that — while the Ulster Unionists produced nothing at the time of the Belfast Agreement — a financial package was gained in the St Andrews negotiations to the benefit of the Northern Ireland

economy. Perhaps, even yet we can go further, and I have not even touched on our getting the front-loading of EYF.

I indicate to the Alliance Party — and also to Mr McElduff — that I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the issue of fuel duty. I did so before the UK Budget was announced, and I am pleased that the Chancellor postponed the 2p increase in duty that was planned for this month, which would have made matters much worse. As a Member of the Northern Ireland Select Committee, I pushed for the Treasury to deal with the differential in aggregates duty as well as the differential in fuel duty.

Those are matters that need to be resolved, whether they are resolved by the Republic putting its duties up, or the United Kingdom putting its down. That has to be dealt with, either through the differential being reduced or through HMRC taking proper measures to discover those who are involved in fuel smuggling.

Fuel smuggling occurs across Northern Ireland. In my constituency of East Belfast, some garages are selling smuggled fuel. The problem is endemic in Northern Ireland and must be dealt with.

My colleague Simon Hamilton mentioned that Sir David Varney had ignored the ERINI suggestion that local banks and utilities should be excluded from a lower rate of corporation tax. I can tell him that I have written to Sir David on behalf of the Executive registering our concern at that specific element of his report.

In conclusion, I ask Members to consider carefully the strengths and weaknesses of our economy. Many are too easily inclined to focus on the negatives. I feel that the region has much to offer potential investors, and that is the message that must be conveyed at the upcoming investment conference. We must become better at marketing Northern Ireland, rather than making a pitch to the US, the EU or elsewhere that the situation is so bad here that we need their assistance. In short, it is time that Members stopped whingeing and started promoting Northern Ireland.

Dr Farry: I welcome the fact that we are having a debate on the Varney Review. However, I feel that we are on the graveyard shift following the earlier debates in the Assembly. This is the first opportunity that Members have had to discuss the outcome of Varney I in the Chamber — an issue that was supposed to be very important to Northern Ireland. Although David Simpson may criticise the motion for being an Alliance Party motion, the reason that it is such is because the Executive have not come to the Chamber to facilitate a debate on Varney I, never mind provide a comprehensive rebuttal to it. Therefore, it has fallen to the opposition to bring this issue to the Chamber today.

There is a perception in the wider community and in the business community, in particular, that the Executive

have given up on corporation tax. That perception remains in the wider community even though the Minister said today that the battle goes on and that he will raise the issue again when the opportunity arises.

In particular, Varney I badly neglected a number of issues, and the Executive have not addressed those properly either. I will focus on three particular issues, which others have touched on in the debate. The first is that the report is very much centred on London and the south-east of England. The UK is seen as a single economy, and the perception is that what is good for London and the south-east is good for the economy as a whole.

That approach is not good enough; it creates major difficulties for sustainability. That is not just an issue for Northern Ireland; it creates difficulty for the other nine dependent regions too. We simply happen to be the region that is in the most extreme situation.

There is also the issue of the all-island economy. Varney — and it is important to make this distinction — made a lot of comments about what is happening in Northern Ireland and then compared that with what is happening in the Republic of Ireland. At no stage did he recognise that, in many respects, we have an all-island economy; nor did he recognise Northern Ireland's unique geographical situation and that we are competing with the rest of the island, which has a different local taxation regime.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the Varney Report does not envisage any meaningful conversions in terms of GVA — in other words, productivity. It does not believe that the Northern Ireland economy will see a step change in its relations with the rest of the UK. In essence, Varney sees Northern Ireland as a glorified county council. He seems to be quite satisfied that London and the south-east can be the driver of the UK economy, and that Northern Ireland and other regions will benefit from the Barnett formula as regards expenditure.

That is not good enough, and it creates a political challenge for the Assembly because the people of Northern Ireland have expectations of devolved government and the difference that Members can make.

Corporation tax has been discussed, and Ulster Unionist Members, in particular, have downplayed its significance. Corporation tax is important and is a means to an end; that end makes the economy sustainable through public expenditure, the public sector share of GDP and productivity.

6.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member produce a paper that shows how we can make up the £9 billion gap by decreasing taxes? He admitted that we are part of a bigger picture and cannot do that. The Member is focusing on the wrong issues, but if he has a plan, he

should tell us the numbers so that we can see how to close the gap.

Dr Farry: I will happily address that matter, and corporation tax is one of the key issues.

Mr Basil McCrea decided to give Members an economics lesson and talked about how corporation tax does not make much of a difference to the economy. He says that he is a friend of business, but the business community regard corporation tax as an important issue. He also said that, because we have a relatively high rate of employment, it is not a big deal. However, it is important for us to move from being a society with low-productivity industries to one with higher-productivity industries, which is reflected in the Programme for Government. In doing that, we must increase the level of exports from the local economy, which to an extent can be done through local businesses. However, the big change will come from a greater share of foreign direct investment.

Declan O'Loan made a point about the nature of the volume of FDI in the two parts of the island of Ireland. Volume is one aspect, but there is also an issue about the quality of that FDI. We rely on a strategy of offering grants for investment to come in through selective financial assistance, so the investment that we receive is less productive in comparison with that in the Republic of Ireland. That must also be challenged fundamentally.

Although Varney II is something over which we can exercise more control because our officials are central to the process, it is narrower in its scope because it deals with what lies in the control of the Assembly. In essence, it is a lesson for our officials from HM Treasury, but it does not challenge the underlying macroeconomic policy in the wider UK. The Minister said that the Assembly is the driver of the local economy, which is true only to a certain extent; we are in control of economic levers that are set elsewhere and can only influence the economy in the context that HM Treasury sets for us. That context is flawed, which is the wider point of which we should not lose sight in the challenges that we seek to make.

Adrian McQuillan spoke about the Programme for Government being the regional economic strategy. He should know that there is a specific regional economic strategy to be proposed. We are aware that the regional economic strategy is a work in progress, but it is important to recognise that our motion was drafted in early January 2008 in the aftermath of Varney I. Therefore, it has taken a while for the motion to get to the Floor and has, to a certain extent, been overtaken by events.

Mr McLaughlin acknowledged the flaws in wider UK regional policy, with which I agree.

Roy Beggs went into the background of the situation, and spoke of the St Andrews Agreement and promises over peace packages and financial packages. I concur

with the thrust of that, but I am not interested in playing the blame game and looking backwards. If blame is being apportioned, it must be recognised that the boat was as much missed in 1998 as it was in 2006. Therefore, the problem of missed opportunities applies across the board.

Declan O'Loan spoke about the importance of the all-island economy.

Peter Weir said that the Alliance Party has a high taxation policy and constantly banged on about Cuba, with which he has a fascination.

The Alliance Party is not a party of high taxation; we are a party of effective taxation. We are also a party that wants to fund public services properly.
[Interruption.]

The Minister referred to local fiscal powers and said that those powers could go one of two ways — it would result either in the Alliance Party's raising taxes or in its lowering taxes and having to find money from elsewhere to make up the difference. However, there is a third alternative, which involves consideration of the balance of the overall tax cake. A lower rate of corporation tax could make a big difference to our economy. The Executive have not made provision in the current three-year Budget to allow for a differential rate of corporation tax if the ability to lower it were to come before the Assembly.

Simon Hamilton referred to the 'Godfather' movies and I have no doubt that, at some stage, he will tell us who he thinks the godfather is in Northern Ireland.

The debate has flagged up Members' concerns about the Treasury's response to Varney I. On behalf of the business community and the wider community in Northern Ireland, we must urge the Executive to do more to ensure that this important fight goes on because it will make a difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its deep concern at the conclusions of Sir David Varney's Review of Tax Policy in Northern Ireland; maintains that it is flawed in not sufficiently recognising the particular economic and geographical circumstances of this region; and calls on the Executive to bring forward a detailed Regional Economic Strategy that will address the economic and financial dependency of Northern Ireland, and facilitate a step-change in the Northern Ireland economy, in terms of closing the productivity gap with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), the remainder of the business on the Order Paper, which is the motion on Forkhill military site, has been postponed until such time as the Business Committee determines.

Adjourned at 6.52 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 1 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

Second Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the debate at Second Stage should be confined to the general principles of the Bill.

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

That the Second Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill (NIA 12/07) be agreed.

Before I deal with the detail of the Bill, I should like to say a few words about how we have reached this point. Victims and survivors need and deserve the strongest possible voice. In making the decision to create a commission, we have taken a significant step that enables us to draw on a wide range of experience, expertise and commitment. We believe that that will ensure that the needs of victims and survivors are addressed fully: their needs are all-important to us.

I should say that at this stage there will be no attempt on the part of my office or that of my deputy — or of those who support us — to prevent a full debate on the issues in question. The debate today is not about the operation of the commission; it is about creating the commission in law so that it can do its work. Everything that is taken in hand and decided on will be subject to full and free debate in this Assembly, and all Members will be entitled to say what they desire to say.

Those who have set themselves up in opposition are entitled to oppose what is being done, but they are not entitled to blame us entirely for the way in which the Assembly conducts its business. A Business Committee exists on which all parties are represented, and they must make their voice heard on that Committee when the decision is being made as to whether debates such as these take place. Therefore, they are responsible for whether a matter comes to the House. Knowing the

agility of the people who are on that Committee, instead of blaming those who are trying to deal with Assembly business, surely they can find a way in which to ensure that certain business reaches the Floor of the House.

Of course, the trouble with many people is that they have no experience of a debating chamber such as this. They think that they can behave just as they do in local councils. However, this is not a local council: this is a parliamentary forum, the rules of which we all have to abide by. All of us have had to learn in the hard school that there is a particular way to do a job and that we have to do it that way.

I am sorry that the Chairman of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is not present, but I hope that the attempt to have an argument between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — and those who support them on these issues — is a legitimate political argument and has not been arranged before they hear what we will ask of them. I hope that it was not arranged before the debate that certain people would vote against this particular issue. If that is the case, those people cannot then expect us to co-operate fully with them. I said at the beginning of the process that we want to have a good relationship with the Committee. We want to give its members all the information possible. That is what we have been doing, and it is what we will continue to do. However, if they continue to feel that it is their business to make a case against everything that we plan to do, that is too bad.

On behalf of the Administration, I am saying that we will all keep in mind the people who need our help: the victims and others. I want to make it perfectly clear that even if people want to adopt a certain line, we will not be deterred from carrying out the task that we have been set. In making the decision to create a victims' commission, we have taken a significant step that enables us to draw on a wide range of experience, expertise and commitment. It is a step that will, I believe, ensure that the needs of victims and survivors are addressed fully.

I am amazed that in other realms, not a word of protest is said about the size of commissions or about the work that they do. However, on this all-important matter, about which people have said that something must be done, there seems to be an immediate desire to stop the House from making progress. That progress will not be stopped; it will proceed legitimately through the House. The deputy First Minister and myself, and those who support us in the Executive, will continue with this matter — we will not be stopped.

I say to the victims: we are your friends, we will help you, and we are determined to do what we promised to do. Addressing the needs of victims and survivors is one of the priorities of this Government; it is not a second-rate issue or something that is to be kicked like

a football to score cheap political points. This is about people's lives and futures, and it is about the healing process that this beloved Province of ours so badly needs. We will see that it will get it.

The victims are not going to be abandoned or their needs forgotten. The commission demonstrates the importance and pre-eminence of the needs of victims and survivors, which will always be prominent in this Administration.

The Bill will make only minimal changes to the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It will enable the appointment of a number of people to a commission for victims and survivors. The Bill provides for the appointment of such numbers of members to the commission as may be required. No other substantive policy changes are proposed. The functions of the commission will be the same as those envisaged in the 2006 Order. It is to facilitate those technical changes, which will underpin the work of the commission, that support for the Bill is being sought.

I appeal to Members to support the Bill today in order to allow us to get back to the Assembly with the proposals that people make to us. Those will come from Members of this House, from people further afield, from the commissioners themselves and from the various victims' organisations that have been working on this matter for a long time. All of those voices will be heard, and I trust that the people of Ulster will be briefed properly so that they understand what we are attempting to do.

The provisions of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, as regards the status, the general powers, the constitution and terms of office of a commissioner, will apply to the new commission. Because the commission is made up of more than one member, all of whom have equal status, the Bill deals with how the commission may regulate its own proceedings. It also has provisions to ensure that the work of the commission can continue in situations which might arise where the number of members of the commission is reduced.

It must be remembered too that some of the commissioners were unable to take up their posts immediately owing to other work commitments. While we intimated to the House at the time that this Bill would be forthcoming, we had to wait until the commissioners could secede from their previous positions and take up their jobs full time.

As the deputy First Minister mentioned yesterday during the debate on accelerated passage for the Bill, in recognition of the difficulties surrounding the definition of "victim", both of us will ask the proposed victims' forum to examine urgently the definition of "victim" and to bring forward proposals for consideration. We must deal with and face up to the

fact that there is a difference of opinion in the House about who is a victim, and that is what we are attempting to do. We cannot bury our heads in the sand; the matter must be out in the open. All Members must have their say, and we must use the instrument of democracy to allow that to happen.

The purpose of the Bill, as indicated by the long title, will be to achieve the single policy objective of replacing the commission for victims and survivors referred to in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 with a commission for victims and survivors for Northern Ireland.

I commend this short Bill to the House, and I hope that, when it is passed, the commission can swing into action and that we can proceed along the democratic way and ensure that people's rights and needs are met under the terms of this legislation.

10.45 am

Mr Moutray: I welcome the remarks made by the First Minister this morning. As I have already stated in the Chamber, the four recently appointed commissioners represent a great opportunity for the innocent victims of the Troubles. Throughout the Province there are thousands of men, women and children who each day face the physical and mental scars of the Troubles. Those people demand our assistance, and I am glad that the House has been able to demonstrate a commitment to those innocent victims through the appointment of the commissioners. That is the type of practical —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No, I do not intend to. You will have an opportunity later. That is the practical —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it proper that the Member has already twice this morning referred to "commissioners", as opposed to "commissioners designate"?

Mr Speaker: Point of order taken, Mr Ford. I ask the Member to be more accurate when he is speaking.

Mr Moutray: Thank you for that. I have been well chastised, but it is typical of the Alliance Party to indulge in party point-scoring, as it has done all along.

The First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Surely one is entitled to mention what is stated in the Bill. It refers to those people as they should be referred to if it becomes law. It cannot be a point of order, when we are debating a Bill, that one must not say, think or anticipate that the Bill is going to go through the House. I may say that the Member who brought up that point of order is not going to stop the Bill. His party tried it yesterday, and had no success. There is power in this House to ensure that the Bill is passed, and I can assure the people of this country that it will be passed.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to keep, as far as possible, to the principles of the Bill. I am not trying to stifle debate on this very important issue, just reminding Members once again.

Mr Moutray: I am confident that much of the alienation experienced by many innocent victims and the groups who represent them will be addressed by the “commissioners designate”.

A Member: Say that again for him.

Mr Moutray: Happy, Mr Ford?

Throughout the political process spearheaded by the Ulster Unionist Party, and especially under the Belfast Agreement, the interests and concerns of the innocent victims of the Troubles were largely ignored. No one was more affected by the Troubles than the innocent victims and the security forces, yet those two groups were the most neglected by the Ulster Unionist Party when it led unionism. The UUP failed to deliver on matters of importance to victims, and still today it, along with others, is dragging its feet as others seek to deliver assistance to those who suffered most as a result of terrorism.

When my party took over the mantle for unionism, we made the issue of innocent victims a priority and ensured that they were given a voice through the establishment of a commission. We will not let the victims be forgotten.

The recent Budget announcement concerning victims is also to be welcomed. Over £30 million has been set aside for the ends of the victims. That is the largest ever Budget allocation for that purpose, and I trust that, in the very near future, innocent victims will see the practical benefits of that money. I trust that the House will join me and fully support the work of the commissioners as they seek to deliver for one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the Bill and agree with the First Minister about the good working relationship that we need between the Committee and the Ministers in order to develop the work and to progress as quickly as possible, not only on this issue but on many others that have come before us. The victims need to be given their place and the opportunity to have a forum and a commission to deal with the issues that they have wanted to see dealt with for a number of years.

If the Assembly is to mean anything to people, it is important that it, with its local knowledge and responsibility, responds to the needs of the victims and the community.

I hope that this short, clear-cut Bill that legislates for the establishment of a commission rather than one commissioner attracts unanimous support today. All parties have been crying out for the legislation to be

enacted. Instead of yesterday’s party politicking, we must make progress as quickly as possible.

It is important that we get support for victims so that they can see that the Assembly is tackling the issues and that there is a commission to which they can talk. Victims will be able to highlight their needs, to which the Assembly can then respond.

I hope that the Bill can be progressed today and that the commissioners designate can be put in place. I look forward to the rebuilding of working relationships among members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Elliott: As we debate the general principles of the Bill, I am pleased to hear that it is victims’ needs that should be addressed; I fully support that principle. I am also pleased to hear the First Minister say that Members will be allowed to express their views.

I seek clarification on a certain issue. During my contribution to yesterday’s debate, I was challenged to provide a Hansard record of what had been said by the First Minister at an evidence session of the Committee for the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I am happy to do so now. He said:

“The new Commissioner will not, of course, be bound by Mrs McDougall’s recommendations”.

For information, I will leave a copy of those minutes of evidence in the Library.

The First Minister: The Member’s point is not the source of the argument. I read the Hansard record carefully, and my argument with the Member is that he ought to bear in mind what was actually said rather than putting his spin on the words, which is what he did. How could any new commission be bound by the actions of the former Interim Victims’ Commissioner? That commissioner’s report has been published, but its recommendations cannot be considered until the new commission is in place. I am sure that the recommendations will be examined once that happens. I do not know what the Member’s argument is, but I welcome that fact that his heart has been regenerated and that he is prepared to help us rather than hinder us.

Mr Elliott: I thank the First Minister for his quite lengthy intervention. For the record, yesterday’s Hansard report and the minutes of evidence for the Committee meeting of 20 June 2007 will clearly show what the First Minister and I said.

I was pleased to hear the junior Minister say that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is preparing a comprehensive strategy. That process is at an early stage, but I would be willing to listen to those proposals in the future, which should come via the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Unfortunately, in the past, the

Committee has not received the information that it should have.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I assure the Member that the draft strategy will be brought to the Committee before it is published for general consultation. We have made a lot of progress, and many of the proposals will be familiar to the Member from Mrs McDougall's report when he reads the draft strategy. The Member should also bear in mind that Mrs McDougall is one of the commissioners designate; no doubt, she will influence the working of the commission, because of her earlier report.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that Members should speak on the principles of the Bill, and not on wider issues. I do not want to stifle debate but Members must only address the principles of the Bill.

Mr Elliott: Others Members have talked for longer than I have since I got up to speak so it is not my fault that we have strayed from the matter. I was trying to clarify what was said yesterday. I could have raised that issue in a point of order but I am keeping it simple by doing so now.

When did the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister take the decision to change the process from appointing a commissioner to appointing a commission? That issue must be dealt with, and Members need to hear about it in the Chamber. Members must be able to see that the process is moving forward in a positive manner that will help the real victims in this society. I am hugely concerned that this process is actually going to help people who are not the real victims.

I welcome the announcement of the enormous amount of funding for victims — which Mr Moutray referred to — but I want to know how that money is going to be spent. That may be revealed in the draft strategy, but I have doubts. How much will be swallowed up by statutory agencies and administration? How much will go to the real victims? How much will be swallowed up by the commission itself? Those questions have not been answered. Indeed, I am concerned that accelerated passage will mean that they will never be answered.

Mrs D Kelly: As a party that is well-documented as having supported and championed the needs of victims — and one that did not create any victims over the last 35 years — the SDLP welcomes the opportunity to speak about victims and the accelerated passage of the Bill.

At the outset, the First Minister said that the needs of the victims had been prioritised. Why, then, was the House told that a decision would be made before the summer recess last year? Why were Members told in September that it would be issued shortly, and why was the whole thing turned on its head by December?

There are now four commissioners designate rather than the single commissioner originally envisaged. The Committee has not had an opportunity to discuss in detail whether there is an upper limit on the number of commissioners designate that can be appointed, and I seek clarification from the First Minister on that point. The draft Bill, as sent to the Committee, contained no such upper or lower limit.

The First Minister referred to other commissions. However, I remind him that it has been proposed that the victims' commissioners designate will each receive a salary of £65,000; a number of other commissions only receive up to a maximum of £5,000 per individual. That is a substantial difference in salary for what is, in essence, the same job as before.

It is my understanding from previous discussions — and certainly from Bertha McDougall's report — that the victim's forum is going to progress several issues that the commissioners are to address. Members need to know the distinction between the commission and the forum; and we need to tease out the thoughts of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on the work of the forum vis-à-vis that of the commission.

The forum's first piece of work should not be the divisive issue of the definition of a victim. Political parties have had little agreement on that point, and it would stymie the advantages for victims and survivors if the forum had to deal with it.

One of the big issues that we have heard about in meetings with many victims' groups is truth-telling, and Bertha McDougall refers to that. It is an opportunity for victims to tell their story of how their lives were affected by their injuries or by the death of their loved ones.

11.00 am

I note that in an earlier debate in this House there was little support for the work emerging from the consultative process led by the Eames/Bradley group. How will that pan out? We have a legitimate interest in such questions and want to learn more. The integrity of the House was mentioned yesterday, and Hansard records the genuine concerns of many Members. Never mind all this bluster: we did not create the indecision and inactivity around the victims. OFMDFM did that, as it has done in respect of many other decisions. Matters have been kicked into the long grass, partly because Sinn Féin gave the DUP a triple veto in many decision-making processes. Shame on it for that.

I hope that the First Minister will respond to the points that I have raised. I have attempted to put them in the context of accelerated passage. This is not the way to do business. Had we really wanted to do justice by victims and survivors, this Bill would have been introduced last May.

Mr Ford: I begin by agreeing with the First Minister and the spokesmen for the DUP and Sinn Féin. This is certainly a small Bill — in fact, it is a grubby little Bill whose grubby little purpose is to cover over the complete inability of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to agree on the appointment of a victims' commissioner.

Dolores Kelly has reminded us that this appointment was to be a priority in May 2007. An appointment was to be made before the summer recess, and then there was to be action in the autumn. There was a flurry of activity in the few days before Christmas — an urgency to interview people so that an appointment would be made. What did we end up with in January? A fudge.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister cannot agree on what goes on, and the sole purpose of this Bill is to keep them together. All the bluster that we have heard from the First Minister, and the lectures on how to be in opposition — and I grant that his experience in that role is greater than mine — do nothing to conceal the fact that the reason for this Bill —

Some Members: Nonsense.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Ford: All the bluster does nothing to conceal the fact that the reason for this Bill is to cover over the complete failure of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to put victims first, as they promised they would do when devolution was restored. They are the ones who failed and who made a complete mistake of things.

My colleagues and I believe that the needs of victims will be far better served by the original proposal, which the First Minister and deputy First Minister were working on until December 2007 — the appointment of a single victims' commissioner, who could have taken a single unified approach and ensured that the Balkanisation referred to yesterday by Francie Molloy, with every victims' group having someone to speak to, did not happen. An opportunity to bring together some of those victims' concerns and to begin the healing process has been lost. To allow Balkanisation of the process of dealing with victims exacerbates the problems, and that is what this Bill will do. It is designed to do that to spare the embarrassment of OFMDFM.

The arguments produced by the First Minister today and the deputy First Minister yesterday might have had some credibility had they been brought forward in May 2007. They have no credibility whatsoever on April Fool's Day 2008.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Several years ago — before I ever came into public life — the Alliance Party made another failed electoral attempt. One of its slogans was "Pulling together, not pulling apart", and the picture showed two donkeys. I do not know whether they were members of the

Alliance Party at that time. Will today's party leader tell us what valid, viable and useful contribution the Alliance Party will make to this process, rather than being a continual hindrance, whether about finance or some other issue?

Mr Ford: I take great pride in being a hindrance to a process that promotes Balkanisation and division and continues to maintain segregation, and I thank the Member for giving me the opportunity to say so.

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Gosh, the Minister is very busy this morning.

Mr Donaldson: If the Alliance Party is opposed to Balkanisation and supports integration, why does it support a separate education system? Why will it not support the state education system as being the best means of integrating education in Northern Ireland? Why does the Alliance Party agree with Balkanising education?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, before you tell me off for straying from the purpose of the debate, I must respond briefly. The Alliance Party was party neither to the Programme for Government that established those methods of education nor to the St Andrews Agreement, which cemented those methods. Therefore, it ill behoves members of Executive parties who established those arrangements to criticise others.

However, if I may return to my — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Members are straying from the principles of the debate and the Bill. I appreciate that the debate has many legs. However, I again remind Members, as far as possible, to debate the principles of the Bill.

Mr Ford: If DUP Members can restrain themselves from making generalised attacks on the Alliance Party, I will manage to stick to debating the principles of the Bill. *[Laughter.]*

Until the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced the plan to establish four commissioners designate and released those individuals' names, they had not suggested that the concept of a single commissioner was flawed. Only when they failed to agree on one commissioner did they produce that argument. Similarly, since May 2007, the matter has not been considered urgent. Despite the Executive not working on it for 10 months, it is suddenly a matter of urgency. However, that change will brook little, if any, concern about amendments or proper consideration of the Bill.

I understand that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that, although a resolution was urgent, it was more important to get it right. At the moment, the Bill gets it

completely wrong. Although it is effectively a one-clause-plus-schedule Bill, the current proposals are flawed. Standing Orders require the four commissioners — by that stage, they will be commissioners — to agree unanimously. However, nowhere does it state how they are expected to achieve that agreement. There is talk of potential direction from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, given their inability to do their own job and run a Government, I suspect that having lectured the Alliance Party for providing an opposition, they will proceed to lecture the commission on how it should operate.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister will hand four coequal commissioners the responsibility of reaching consensus without providing any direction on how to achieve that, which will create problems and will be sensitive and difficult for the commission when it is established.

This debate has proved that the First Minister and deputy First Minister cannot agree on the definition of “victim” — moreover, they cannot even agree on the name of the region that they govern — yet they expect to delegate those difficult problems to four recently appointed commissioners. There are serious concerns over whether that model is workable. The First Minister criticised the number of people appointed to, for example, the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission. However, those commissions employ a chief commissioner, a full-time member of staff who is paid a salary similar to that proposed for each of the victims’ commissioners, and a number of part-timers who are paid modest rates. That is more appropriate than the model —

The First Minister: I objected to the compositions of those bodies, which are totally unfair to the unionist population. If the Member is suggesting that unionists should not have a leading role, we do not want those bodies. That is a fact. The Member may rub his moustache again, but it means nothing.

Mr Ford: I shall not stray from discussing the Bill in order to respond to that completely irrelevant point.

The concept of having one full-time commissioner and a number of part-time commissioners would have been a credible way of amending the idea that a single commissioner would not have been practical. However, that is not what we have. We have four coequal commissioners, each of whom, apparently, has a veto. They hold that veto in much the same way that the First Minister and deputy First Minister hold vetoes over each other: and look at what that has achieved for us.

As Mrs Dolores Kelly pointed out, there is not even a cap on the number of commissioners who may be appointed. Will we be in the position, in four years’ time, in which six or eight commissioners have been appointed? Is that a realistic and sensible way to

proceed? The Bill is defective in that respect, because even though I understand that that matter was raised in the Committee, the Bill stands as it was proposed originally. That is another example of where the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have simply failed to introduce a Bill that provides a workable and meaningful way of addressing victims’ needs.

I notice that none of the DUP or Sinn Féin members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister contradicted the criticisms that Naomi Long made yesterday. That is a rather interesting statement, which shows that the Committee failed to get answers during that hurried, private session, when matters were not considered properly and when there was not even a fair consultation with the Committee at that point. Perhaps the speechwriters had not written the answers for the Back-Bench Members.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Even though Sinn Féin Members do not give way, I will do so.

Mr Molloy: I do, in fact, give way.

The Member may remember that I said yesterday that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers attended the Committee meeting and answered the questions that all members of the Committee asked. There was no time limit on the questions being asked, and the Committee discussed the issues for a fairly lengthy period of time. I made that point to Mrs Long yesterday. She covered a range of issues, and I do not think that it would be expected that Sinn Féin Members, or any other Members, would respond to every one of them. The Committee discussed the issues in detail in the meeting at which the Ministers were present.

Mr Ford: Given the absence of a record of that meeting, it is difficult to tell what happened. I have been given to understand that no substantive answers were given, and the fact that a letter followed, which also contained no substantive answers, indicates that the matter was not thought through fully.

Mrs D Kelly: Further to Mr Molloy’s intervention, as a member of the Committee who was present and who paid attention to what happened at that meeting, I know that many questions were left unanswered. I asked about the policy framework and the job descriptions of the commissioners, and no answers were given. Furthermore, no advance notice was given to the Committee about asking for accelerated passage and, at the request of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Committee meeting was held in closed session. That brings a new dimension to smoke-filled corridors.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for her intervention, which backs up my second-hand understanding of what happened during the Committee meeting.

It is noteworthy that there was no detailed response yesterday, and, certainly, the Hansard report does not record any of those Members giving detailed responses to Mrs Long's points. Perhaps the speechwriters had not written those responses; perhaps they are upstairs now busy scribbling in order that we will get them later in the debate. It shows the failure, at that point, of the matter being taken up properly by the Committee.

There are huge potential problems with the Bill. The danger of a commission being set up that does not function properly concerns me hugely. The needs of victims must be prioritised, and that would have been best achieved by implementing the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and by the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreeing on the appointment of a single commissioner.

I put it to the House that the example of Mrs Bertha McDougall's work as Interim Victims' Commissioner, in spite of the way in which she was appointed by the then Secretary of State, was a clear example of how one individual, regardless of personal circumstances and background, was able to reach out across the community and engage with victims' groups from different sectors. Although we cannot agree the definition of a victim, to have the example of an individual who came from one particular grouping and who was able to engage with others seems to prove that the Bill is not only dangerous but unnecessary.

There should have been proper scrutiny of the Bill in Committee Stage, which has been refused. On that basis, and given the inadequacies of the Bill, my colleagues and I have no option but to oppose the Bill at Second Stage.

11.15 am

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The principle that we are discussing today relates to the appointment of the victims' commissioners. The Assembly has accepted that the Bill will be given accelerated passage; we are now discussing the Bill.

Some of the contributions from the parties who appear to be opposing the entire process are missing the point. It does not matter what the Alliance Party, the SDLP or indeed Sinn Féin think about the commissioners; what matters is what the victims and survivors think of them. If the Bill is passed, then, over time, they will be able to judge whether the commissioners are carrying out their task well. The victims and survivors will judge that; not the parties in the Chamber. If they return with a strong voice to say that it is not working out, there will then be a duty on us as politicians to reconsider the matter.

Party politics is being played over the issue, and that should not be done. This is a debating Chamber, and it is natural that we politicians will have a go at each other over many different issues. However, it is a

mistake to play with this issue. The proposal is for four commissioners instead of one, and it is better for the two leading parties in Assembly to have made that proposal, rather than having stalemate and deadlock. The people who would lose out because of such a stalemate would be the victims and survivors.

Mr Ford: Will the Member inform the House who has caused the stalemate and deadlock since May 2007?

Mr O'Dowd: The Alliance Party and the SDLP have said that the matter should have been sorted out last May. If it had been sorted out then, the Bill would have to have been passed by accelerated passage because the Assembly only came into being on 8 May 2007. Those parties wanted the Bill rushed through, but if it had been, the Committee would not have been consulted, the victims would not have been consulted and the interviews would not have taken place. Instead, discussion and debate has taken place on how to move forward this important and difficult matter.

Mr Ford, you are missing the point — through the Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

The difficulty for the Alliance Party is that the matter has been sorted out. The Alliance Party does not want the institutions to work. It cannot see a future for itself within institutions in which the two main political groupings on this part of the island work out an agreement. This Bill is an outworking of the work that has been carried out.

I am beginning to come to the opinion that one of the reasons that the Alliance Party is so vexed about the commissioners is because none of them are serving, or former, members of the Alliance Party. It used to be that Alliance Party members would retire and be put out to grass with public appointments: they would receive their fat salaries and be happy forever.

Mr McElduff: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I want to point out that the closed session was agreed to by Committee members to allow serious examination of the issues and a full opportunity to raise all issues. Those issues are not even being raised this morning. Time and again, the Speaker has had to remind Members to address the principles of the Bill. Members have waffled all morning, but those principles must be addressed. It does no credit to the Committee that neither the Chairman nor the Alliance Party Deputy Chair could see fit to be here for the Second Stage consideration of the Bill.

Mr McNarry: That is a cheap shot.

Mr McElduff: When one of the commissioners designate appeared on television and said that they wanted to be enabled to carry on with their work, the SDLP Minister said on the same programme that the Executive would move heaven and earth to see that

they could do so immediately. Let us allow them to get on with their work without any further delay.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for that contribution.

The Bill allows the commission to get on with its work of helping and assisting survivors and victims of the conflict. It is not about the party political differences that may exist between the two senior political parties in the Chamber or the other political parties in the Chamber. The Bill is about allowing the victims' commission to move forward and carry out its duties, which every political party in the Chamber has demanded. I am disappointed that the Chamber split yesterday over the accelerated —

Mr McNarry: The cosy coalition.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. Every other Member will have an opportunity to speak.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but I was not listening to him anyhow. It was just a drone in the background.

It is disappointing that the House divided on the vote on the accelerated passage for the Bill because, as my colleague Mr McElduff said, public pronouncements on television programmes to move heaven and earth mean diddly-squat. Members must come forward in the House — the House has the power, not the studios of UTV or BBC1. The Chamber has the power to advance matters: it is where raising the hand to vote counts, where going through the Lobbies counts and where legislation is made. I urge Members to allow the legislation to progress unhindered, allow the victims' commission to be established and allow the commissioners to get on with their work.

Mr Shannon: It is important that the members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister make the Assembly aware of the lengthy and vociferous discussions that took place on the accelerated passage to get the Bill to its current position. All of the Committee members asked questions and put forward their points of view.

Yesterday, Mr Ford mentioned the accelerated passage and referred to Standing Order 40(4). However, when an explanation was given, he was sitting on one of the soft seats at the back of the Chamber and did not listen to the explanation. Instead, he was yammering — which is the Ulster Scots word to describe what he was doing — to one of his colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that it is vital to try, if possible, to keep his remarks to the principles of the Bill. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Shannon: I will endeavour to do so. It was important to make that point — the Member was so vociferous yesterday that it was important to make

everyone aware of what he was — or was not — doing. It is imperative that we support —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As I have been named, do I get an opportunity to respond to that point?

I am not sure how good Mr Shannon's hearing is, but I am perfectly aware of what happens in the Chamber. The deputy First Minister had failed to address my points in his proposing speech, which was the point of order that I had raised; moreover, I listened to him fail adequately to address them in his summation.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has already spoken, but he could ask for an intervention.

Mr Shannon: I can hear doves flying between half a mile and three quarters of a mile away, so I am well able to hear what the Member was up to at the back of the Chamber — nothing.

It is important to support the Bill. It is important to debate it in the Chamber and it is important that all Members wholeheartedly support it. We are here for one reason — to hear the voices of the innocent and the cries of the suffering. I support the Bill because I have listened to the people I represent, some of whom have lost loved ones. I urge Members to listen to those people, to support the Bill and not to thwart it.

Mrs D Kelly: As a fellow member of the Committee, will the Member acknowledge that, contrary to Mr O'Dowd's comments, the reason that the Committee meeting was in closed session was a possible judicial review of the decision and the seeking of legal advice? That was the sole reason given to Committee members. Furthermore, we were not told in advance that we would have to make a decision.

Mr Shannon: There may be a slight difference of opinion. That was the Member's opinion of what happened, and many of us had views on other issues. The important thing was that most of us realised that it was important to advance the issue, that it was important for the Bill to have accelerated passage, to have the debate in the Chamber today, and to respond to the victims. The people I represent have told me that they want the Bill to be passed as soon as possible.

I urge Members — including all the parties with questions about it — not to try to obstruct and thwart the Bill, but instead to support it. If Members want to help the victims and make their lives better, we must move forward. I urge Members to support the Bill.

Mr B McCrea: Once again, there is a political fudge.

The so-called senior parties seem to have sorted this matter out between themselves, and they appear to think that the rest of us therefore need not bother ourselves with it. That does not seem to be the right approach. If this is such an important topic, is it not

right that we should have a proper debate on it? Is it not right that we should discuss the issues and be allowed to express our reservations? That is what UUP Members meant yesterday when we talked about the process. We opposed accelerated passage, not because we are in any way shy of supporting victims, but because we do not think that taking that course of action would do victims justice. If we are to do this, we must do it right. We must be inclusive and bring everybody around the table, and we must confront the past.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member says that he opposed accelerated passage on behalf of victims. Can he tell me which victims' groups approached the Ulster Unionist Party and asked its Members to oppose accelerated passage?

Mr McNarry: We are talking to them right now — right this minute, upstairs.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must tell the Member that I will not warn him again. He has interrupted and tried to speak from a sedentary position. I simply want to warn the Member.

Mr B McCrea: My colleagues have talked about victims in general, but I will mention a particular constituent of mine. He was an RUC detective sergeant who was shot six times, but who is still alive. He had to relocate. He was informed through the HET of who shot him, and, according to this information — it has not been tried — the people who shot him have associations with people in the Assembly. What do those people have to say? There is a wide variety of information, and I am not trying to trivialise what has to be said. I accept that we must deal with the past and find a way forward. However, if some Members think that the two senior parties can get together and ram this Bill through without taking any cognisance of what the rest of us think, they are wrong. They may be able to carry the vote, but they will not be able to carry the people.

The UUP Members want there to be due process; it is our right to express our points of view and concerns and our absolute disdain about the definition of "victim". Let me put on record that the Ulster Unionist Party is not happy about the definition of "victim". We will table an amendment, through the proper channels and at the proper time, and that is why we are rejecting this motion. We will want to see what Members have to say when we come to discuss the victims. Are DUP Members really happy with the current definition of "victim"? Do they not want to change it? Have they not thought about that issue? Did they just forget about it?

Mr Donaldson: Yes, we did think about it. We voted against a proposal by the Member.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr B McCrea: Did they just forget about it, or is it the truth that their cosy coalition with the Members

opposite did not allow them to come up with a proper definition of "victim"? The First Minister took issue with me yesterday when I said that, as far as I am concerned, a "victim" is someone who was passive, who had something done to them through no fault of their own. Many innocent people suffered at the hands of others, and we have an obligation to sort that out. People may well want to discuss other issues and other people who have suffered. Fair enough; let us talk about that.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way, and I am interested to hear whether the Minister's attitude today is different from his attitude last night.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. We have heard a lot about the definition of "victim", but can the Member remind us of the Ulster Unionist Party's definition of "victim" when it held the office of First Minister? What did the party do for victims at that time? How much money did it apportion to victims? Please remind us of what the Ulster Unionist Party did then.

Mr Donaldson: Nothing; absolutely nothing.

Mr B McCrea: Well, I am very sorry —

Mr McNarry: We never gave the Provos an amnesty.

Mr B McCrea: I am very sorry — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I have already warned Members not to speak from a sedentary position.

11.30 am

Mr B McCrea: I am disappointed that the Minister is not aware of the UUP definition of a victim. Perhaps if he had gone through the due process and taken this discussion through the Committee, he would have known. Instead, a spark of light has suddenly hit him, and he is now asking the question. Let us address the situation properly, confront it and talk about it. The Ulster Unionist Party is not afraid to take on those tough issues. The party will discuss the matter and find a solution.

Mr Durkan: The Member should remind the DUP that, when the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was set up, there already was a victims unit in the Northern Ireland Office. Despite that, the then First Minister and deputy First Minister insisted on setting up a victims liaison unit, because they said that devolution could not simply shrug its shoulders because somebody else was dealing with those problems. Those Ministers also introduced, and had a full consultation on, a strategy for victims. Funding for victims was also provided not only in the Department but under European funding; it was a priority in the European Peace programme.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the intervention from Mr Durkan.

People talk about stalemate, and one can see why, given that the issue has been going on for so long. There is stalemate because people cannot reach agreement. Until, and unless, the genuine concerns of all people are at least considered, we will not make progress. The Ulster Unionist Party will not support the Bill until it finds out what is happening about the definition of “victim”. If people do not like that, they should understand that inclusivity means exactly that.

Mr Moutray: Will the Member give way?

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I was just about to finish, but there is a queue of interventions.

Mr Moutray: Some Members find that Ulster Unionist Party opposition on this issue is rather half-hearted. In yesterday’s debate, exactly 50% of UUP Members bothered to turn up to oppose the motion.

Mr Donaldson: Earlier, the First Minister clearly stated what was being done about the definition of “victim”. Victims should have a say, and they will be consulted. The SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party do not want to hear from the victims and do not want them to have a voice in this matter. However, we believe that victims should have a say. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Donaldson: Victims should have a say on how “victim” is defined. It is a matter of regret if the Ulster Unionist Party opposes that. The commission needs to be put in place now; UUP opposition, while we wait for the response, is ridiculous.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should be discussing the principles of the Bill. I remind Members that the definition of “victim” has nothing to do with the principles of the Bill.

Mr B McCrea: The fundamental point is that the definition of “victim” has a bearing on the appointment of four or more commissioners. Members accuse the UUP of not caring about, or listening to, victims. People who make those statements are not interested in what the victims have to say; they are interested only in their own statements. The DUP is interested only in what happens between it and Sinn Féin. This is shoddy work.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share my recollection that during consultation with victims’ and survivors’ groups, many victims advocated that there should be more than one forum because they would have difficulties sharing one with the perpetrators of violence?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for her intervention. I am well aware that Members on different sides of the House have different attitudes about whether victims should have to share forums with the perpetrators of the crimes that affected them. Frankly, to have to do so is a disgrace.

There is a critical issue about the responsibilities of commissioners. What is it that we want them to do? That is the issue that we want to get to the bottom of.

In conclusion, the Ulster Unionist Party has always stood by the victims. We did not create any victims — neither by action nor by words. We are trying to find a solution. If Members ramrod this legislation through without listening to wider society, they are doomed to failure, as is Northern Ireland. Therefore, the real message is: get real, we need to work this out and we need to talk about it openly.

Mr Durkan: I refute the point that was just made by junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson about the SDLP having no wish to hear from victims. He said that in response to the issues about the victims’ forum. Mr Donaldson knows full well that the SDLP has long advocated having a victims’ and survivors’ forum. Furthermore, he knows full well that he and I had many conversations — both when he was in the UUP and the DUP — about the issue. During those conversations he explained that his difficulty with a victims’ and survivors’ forum was the definition of what constitutes a victim; who would be on the forum; and that victims would have difficulty sitting with perpetrators. Mr Donaldson now says that he sees a role for a victims’ forum. However, having come late to that concept, it is a bit much for him to accuse the rest of us of not wanting to hear from victims.

I made the point yesterday that when we were advocating having a victims’ forum, during negotiations in 2003 at Hillsborough before the joint declaration, we were told that the reason it got no more than consideration in the document that was produced by the two Governments was because the UUP — of which Mr Donaldson was then a member — and Sinn Féin objected to it. We were told that that was why more substantive progress on that issue was not made. Therefore, we are not going to take lectures from people who are in no position to give them.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that had the Bill gone through the normal Stages — including the Committee Stage — there would have been ample opportunity to hear the views of victims and their representatives? That would have enabled us to establish whether they are in favour of the Bill, or whether that assertion is simply spin being put on the issue by certain political parties for their own ends.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that point, which I was going to make during my remarks. Accelerated passage was granted yesterday owing to the Sinn Féin/DUP axis. The rest of us are now being told that by raising other issues or other considerations, we are trying to hinder progress on the issue and that we are against victims. However, we are simply trying to do

the work of due diligence that is required from a proper legislative Assembly.

That is on a par with what happened in the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We have been told that that Committee agreed to the accelerated passage of the Bill; however, the issue was not even on the agenda of that Committee meeting. The decision was taken in closed session. Taking a decision entirely in private about the public process of legislation is creating a dangerous precedent. It could well be that the reasons for accelerated passage had to be shared with the Committee in closed session, and I understand that there were legal sensitivities that Ministers wanted to share with the Committee in closed session. That is entirely legitimate and it was responsible of the Ministers to do that. However, it was not legitimate and responsible to insist that a decision had to be taken in closed session.

The First Minister: It was the prerogative of the Committee to say whether it would meet in closed session or not. The Member should not blame people who had no say in the matter. The Committee made the decision that it would be a closed meeting.

The Member is trying to tell us that an undercurrent ran beneath that decision. There was no such undercurrent. The Committee did not even tell us that it would not meet us in closed session. As the Member rightly points out, for legal reasons certain matters could not be discussed in open session.

Mr Durkan: The First Minister has completely missed the point. I raised no direct objection to the Ministers having asked the Committee to meet them in closed session; some of the issues that they wanted to discuss were matters of legal sensitivity and, therefore, legal jeopardy could have been an issue. That is the right and proper procedure to have followed. Obviously, the Committee made a reasoned and responsible decision to hear the Ministers in closed session. However, the insistence by the Sinn Féin/DUP axis that a decision about accelerated passage must be made, there and then in closed session, was neither reasoned nor responsible.

Mr Molloy: Does the Member accept that the Committee would have needed to agree to go into closed session and that a Committee member would have needed to propose that the meeting come out of closed session? No such proposal was made by any Committee member — not by a member of the SDLP or the Ulster Unionists — or by the Ulster Unionist Chairperson of the Committee. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Durkan has the Floor.

Mr Durkan: There was a proposal at that meeting not to make a decision on accelerated passage during that meeting but to return to the matter at the Committee's next meeting. The Sinn Féin/DUP axis

voted that proposal down and forced a decision through that day.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for giving way again. The Member raised the issue of closed session. No proposal was made by the SDLP member of the Committee either for the meeting to be in public session or for it to come out of closed session before a decision on accelerated passage was made.

Mr Durkan: Clearly, the proposal was made not to make a decision on accelerated passage that day while the Committee was in closed session; it was decided that the Committee would return to it at a later meeting. That was the proposal that was made and the position that several members and parties adopted. That is a fact.

Clearly, a dangerous precedent has been set in which a decision on the public business of legislation — the question of whether to support accelerated passage — was taken during closed session. That is absolutely unprecedented.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that the fact that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister actually attended that meeting represents progress? During the previous dispensation, for some of which the Member was the deputy First Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister attended the Committee of the Centre only once, regardless of whether its meetings were held in closed or open session.

Mr Durkan: I certainly attended the Committee of the Centre: as to who was with me is another matter. I never refused or made excuses about any request to attend that Committee; none whatever. That is the truth.

The Bill has been put before the House purely on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. That is wrong. The devolved Assembly certainly could have done better by its own spirit and responsibility, and it certainly could have done better by the victims. However, the SDLP recognises that there has been a long delay on the issue, both prior to and since devolution. My party does not want to create unnecessary further delays. If it believed that opposition to the Bill would create and guarantee a better outcome, it would be prepared to oppose it. However, it has no reason to believe that successful opposition to the Bill would lead to a better, more rational outcome that included, for example, Mr Ford's suggestion of having one senior commissioner and other part-time commissioners.

My party wants to ensure that a commissioner or a commission exists to act on behalf of victims. The SDLP is not opposed to that concept. It believes that there could have been a much better outcome than the current proposal for a commission that comprises four commissioners.

The way in which that decision was made was questionable and wrong. However, to compound the

delay and confusion would not be better for victims or for the reputation of the House. At least there is now a proposal, which may or may not work: it may work well; it may work not so well. The Assembly has a duty to ensure that the four commissioners will be in a position to do the best possible job.

11.45 am

Had the Bill been given full and proper consideration, the Assembly would have been in a position to ensure that the role of the commissioners would be better understood, supported and appreciated. Proper consideration would have allowed victims' groups and others to give evidence to the Committee and raise issues and questions, and it would have ensured greater consideration and understanding of the remit and role of the commissioners. Using the proper legislative route would have been better for the proposed commission and helped to relieve many concerns and address many questions.

Furthermore, the Assembly would have had to face up to its responsibility in addressing some of the issues that it is ducking, such as the definition of "victim". Had the Assembly been debating a more comprehensive Bill through a more complete procedure, Members would have been able to table amendments and take on board suggestions and evidence from others on how issues might be addressed.

People may have thought that the victims' commission would deal with the definition of "victim". Why should it not address that particular issue? Instead, when introducing the motion for accelerated passage yesterday, the deputy First Minister told the Assembly that the problem of defining "victim" would be left to the victims' forum. Given that the definition is such a vexed issue — one about which Members have been sniping at each other — is it fair or responsible for the political parties in the Assembly and Executive to devolve to victims the most difficult issue of all?

Does the Assembly want to make a success of the victims' and survivors' forum? The forum has been handed the most difficult issue even though we do not know exactly how it will be run and the precise relationship between it and the commission is unclear. Yet the Assembly was simply told that that dangerous issue is to be left to the victims' and survivors' forum — that is absolutely irresponsible.

The First Minister: The honourable gentleman misunderstands what the deputy First Minister said yesterday and what I said today. Therefore, I will repeat what I said earlier: "As the deputy First Minister mentioned yesterday during the debate on accelerated passage for the Bill, in recognition of the difficulties surrounding the definition of "victim", both of us will ask the proposed victims' forum to examine urgently the definition of "victim" and to bring forward proposals for consideration."

The forum will not make the decision: I have said, and will repeat, that the House will have the final say on all matters.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I still do not believe that the matter is clear enough, and the First Minister's words are at variance with the way in which the point about the definition of "victim" was made yesterday. Simply to hand the issue to the victims' and survivors' forum, particularly when it has been the subject of such vexed exchanges in the House, is to duck responsibility for the issue. It will cause some apprehension among those who may wish to serve on, or contribute to, the victims' and survivors' forum.

Had the Assembly considered the legislation through the normal procedures and processes, those issues would have been more fully explained and any fears and apprehensions better allayed, because the concerns would have been aired and shared more effectively and credibly.

The Bill provides an answer — although maybe not a good answer — to the long-standing demand to ensure that there is a victims' commissioner: we now have commissioners in a commission. They have a very difficult job, not least because their jobs are not clear. Neither the Bill nor previous legislation makes the locus of the commission clear in respect of issues such as the victims' funding package that we have been told about. A lot of emphasis has been placed on the fact that there is a funding package for victims, but it is not clear exactly what locus or oversight the victims' commission will have on that. Will it be entirely up to Ministers, the Executive, the Departments, or whatever; will the commission have a serious oversight role, or will it just have the right to intervene if issues arise about individual spending decisions? None of that is clear.

The commission's precise role in respect of the victims' strategy is also not clear. Will it be developing or proofing the strategy, or will it be playing an intervening, regulating or adjusting role? It is not clear whether those responsibilities are for the Executive Ministers and what role the victims' commission will play.

If there had been fuller consideration of the Bill, Members would have been able to explore the issues; relevant amendments could have been proposed, and assurances and explanations provided. This is a recipe for a lot more confusion. All we have been given is an answer to the problem of appointing a victims' commissioner — we now have four commissioners appointed, and their precise role and remit is not clear. However, it is clear that it will be difficult.

Mrs D Kelly: For the record, Mr Speaker, when moving the motion for accelerated passage, the deputy First Minister said:

“We recognise the difficult issues that surround the definition of “victim”. Victims and survivors should consider that issue. We will, therefore, request that the proposed victims’ forum makes it a priority to examine the definition of “victim” and brings forward its proposals.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p16, col 2]*.

Is the First Minister not aware of that?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her point. I have already said that this will be a difficult issue to devolve to a victims’ and survivors’ forum, particularly by those who previously resisted the idea of such a forum and were very hostile to it, and that went back several years. It is not right or proper to hand the one issue that the Assembly has great difficulty with to the forum, without Members having considered the matter further. *[Interruption.]*

The junior Minister is saying that we are suggesting that we ignore the victims. We are not. The people who are ignoring the victims are those who want accelerated passage for a Bill that denies victims the right to have their say on an issue that is meant to be about them. Yesterday, we heard Sinn Féin and the DUP talk about the need to have a victim-centred approach and a victim-led approach — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Durkan: We now have a means of legislation that does not even allow us to hear from victims and allows us to make no reference to victims whatsoever by way of taking evidence from them or receiving other considerations. The people who imposed accelerated passage are the people who do not want to hear from the victims. We are not even hearing from the victims’ commissioners — the people whom we are meant to be equipping and appointing — because of accelerated passage. We cannot hear about their ambitions, hopes, and sensitivities. That would have been helpful in ensuring wider confidence and consensus in the House, and it would have garnered greater confidence and support in the community at large. We have been denied that opportunity, and the victims have been denied that opportunity.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member clarify whether the SDLP will support accelerated passage or will continue to oppose it?

Mr Durkan: To clarify for the Member: the decision on accelerated passage was taken yesterday. The Sinn Féin/DUP axis pushed accelerated passage through to ensure that Committees could not give the Bill proper consideration — *[Interruption.]* It seems that I have to tell the Teller — and to ensure that there would be no opportunity for victims to express their views on the legislation.

Mr O’Dowd: The Member’s colleague Mrs Kelly has been quoting from yesterday’s Hansard report, and my colleague Mr McElduff has intervened on the

matter of accelerated passage. I shall refresh Mr Durkan’s memory on what he said yesterday:

“I do not go as far as advocating outright opposition to accelerated passage”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p20, col 1]*.

Mr Durkan: That is correct, but if the Member reads on, he will see that I asked the deputy First Minister to respond to several issues. Those were not addressed, and for that reason we voted against accelerated passage. The issues that we wanted Ministers to address in order that we could have assurances on them were very clear. Given the nature of the debate and the contributions that Sinn Féin and DUP Members made — particularly those that misrepresented the role and the record of other parties — we certainly felt that we had no choice but to vote against accelerated passage. If we had voted in favour of it, Members of both Sinn Féin and the DUP would misrepresent that vote, both now and in the future.

Now that a decision, with which we disagree, has been made in favour of accelerated passage, the SDLP as a party must decide whether it will oppose the Bill. I have already mentioned that we have concluded that we cannot oppose the Bill, because that would not necessarily guarantee any of the better outcomes that have been discussed. In theory, those better outcomes would be available; in theory they were available before the First Minister and deputy First Minister came to the House with the proposal to have four commissioners.

We want some certainty now, and we need some traction. I wish that we were in a position to have a better decision, a better outcome and a better Bill, with better consideration and better input from all Members, and, particularly, with a better hearing from victims. Unfortunately, we have been denied that because the issue was delayed for too long and has been scrambled.

However, I notify the House that the SDLP will consider tabling amendments to the Bill and will consider how to use the opportunity that the Bill presents to address practically and positively some of the issues that we and other parties have identified. Furthermore, we will consider fully whatever amendments other parties or other Ministers may table.

I understood from a comment that junior Minister Jeffery Donaldson made yesterday from a sedentary position that Ministers might address the fact that the Bill does not currently limit the number of commissioners who may be appointed. At one point Mr Donaldson said that that matter will be addressed; we will wait and see whether that happens. It was pointed out yesterday that there is no cap on the number of commissioners that could be appointed and that their number would not necessarily be limited to four. Perhaps that is how the job-creation targets in the Programme for Government will be met. Perhaps there will be lots of commissioners for victims — it will be

Northern Ireland's biggest growth sector if we approach the role in that way. *[Laughter.]*

Just as Ministers may want to reflect on the desirability of some amendments, other Members may want to do the same. Unfortunately, we are unable to do that through the best possible legislative conditions, such as the Committee Stage, during which there is proper consideration of different issues. Therefore, parties will have to take their chances on amendments.

It might be that, as the other parties table amendments, the cosy alliance of the Sinn Féin/DUP axis will continue to drive things through. I ask Sinn Féin and the DUP to show greater respect for the role of the devolved Assembly and to show greater sensitivity to the diversity and complexity of victims' issues. Those parties have no right to associate themselves with victims as though that association were a badge that belonged to them exclusively. Both parties have a record of ghettoising victims, and they have no right to come to the Assembly and patronise victims based on the claim that they are the only parties that are proposing the commissioners and driving through this proposal, thus concluding that only they care for victims.

That sends out a very dangerous signal. It is dangerous to argue that anybody who has any difference of view on the practicality of the legislation suddenly does not care about victims. We care about victims, and we care about our legislative responsibilities in the House. We want to do our job properly, and we want to ensure that the commissioners — who will inevitably be legally empowered as a result of the Bill — will be in a position to do a good job. The Assembly will have legislated the commission's job into existence; however, the way in which Sinn Féin and the DUP have produced the legislation will not allow us to look the commissioners or victims in the face and say that we know what that job is. That is a poor bit of legislation.

12.00 noon

However, if that is all that will be done for victims, and if it is the best legislation that we will get — and that seems to be the case, because it is the best that those parties can come up with — the SDLP will not stand in its way.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party opposes the Bill's Second Stage, because it is a flawed Bill, which carries a major risk of providing a flawed solution to the problem of victims and survivors in society.

If the Bill does not go through, we will not let victims down, because the existing legislation will remain in place, and the challenge will go back to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to fulfil the task that they set themselves last spring of appointing a victims' commissioner. We can move forward without the Bill; it is not necessary for addressing the issue on the way forward.

There is a major substantive issue for debate; the Bill is not simply a technical one that we should rubber-stamp in the way in which, for example, parity legislation has been granted accelerated passage in the past. The commission was an afterthought on the part of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Nothing has been said to challenge the Alliance Party's theory that, instead of deciding that a commission, rather than a single commissioner, was the better way forward for victims in Northern Ireland, and consulting victims on that point, the First Minister and deputy First Minister — having argued and argued over the appointment of a single victims' commissioner — decided to split the difference. They decided to appoint four commissioners as a means of covering up their inability to show leadership to society and to develop a shared way forward for dealing with the victims issue.

That, in itself, was a major let-down for victims in our society. However, beyond that, it is an example of an extremely bad approach to policy-making. Policy-making should be based upon strategic thinking, rather than on people dreaming up mechanisms to cover up their inability to agree. The First Minister lectures the Alliance Party on how to perform in opposition; however, perhaps, he will reflect on those realities in the next few minutes.

How will the commission work? Is it actually workable or feasible? Who will ensure that the commission will express a single, coherent view? Those are the key questions, and we have received no reassurances or details on them. There is a concern about open-ended membership and whether four commissioners will become six, or eight, or 20, or 70,000. We simply do not know the answer, and we have received no reassurance on that point.

The biggest concern for Members and the public in Northern Ireland is the potential emergence of a Balkanised approach to the issue of victims. Francie Molloy more or less confirmed yesterday that there would be a situation in which different victims' groups would feel that they should approach different commissioners to address their particular concerns, as opposed to looking to a single body with a coherent perspective.

My comments are no reflection on the four individuals who have, so far, been designated as commissioners by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I have high regard for those individuals. I have no doubt that they are people of integrity, but they have been placed in a totally invidious situation. We should reflect on that in great detail.

There has also been much discussion about a victims' forum and the definition of a victim. The Bill does not change the definition of a victim. It merely contains an amendment to the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which includes the definition of a

victim. Therefore, that issue has been prejudged. Members of a victims' forum will be there on the basis of the existing definition of a victim, and if they are asked to address that issue, it will already have been prejudged. The forum's first task will be to revise the definition of a victim and, in practical terms, to decide who will have to leave the room as they will no longer fit the new agreed definition.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that an absurd situation is being created? On what basis will the First Minister and deputy First Minister establish the forum, given that they have no agreed definition of a victim?

Dr Farry: It is a paradoxical situation. The only legal basis on which the victims' forum can be created is through the existing provisions in the 2006 Order. Therefore, the definition of a victim remains, and it has been prejudged. The forum's first act will be to decide who it will throw out of the room, and that is patently absurd. Furthermore, the forum will be granted what in rugby terms is deemed a "hospital pass" to deal with perhaps the most difficult issue facing society. Our political leaders should reach agreement on the issue, but they cannot, so they will pass it on to the forum to come up with a solution. There is a real risk that we will end up with several definitions of a victim, and that will further perpetuate a Balkanised way forward on victims' issues. Again, that is not an ideal situation.

Those major issues would have benefited from the Bill having a proper Committee Stage, as it would have provided the opportunity for victims' groups to give their views.

People are prejudging what victims' groups actually want. There is an assumption that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are perpetuating the idea that victims' groups are in favour of such a solution. That would take a long stretch of the imagination. It is important that we give victims the space to offer their comments if we are serious about having a victim-centred approach rather than an approach centred on overcoming the blushes of the First Minister and deputy First Minister because of their inability to agree.

I wish to refer to comments that were made by other Members — in particular, John O'Dowd. He said that the Alliance Party is raising this issue only because a member of the Alliance Party was not designated as one of the commissioners. David Ford paid a glowing tribute to the work of Bertha McDougall as a single victims' commissioner, and, as far as I am aware, she has never been a member of the Alliance Party, so there we go. She is not a member of the Alliance Party, yet we have recognised that she has done good work.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr O'Dowd's question requires an answer. Who are the Sinn Féin, UUP, DUP and SDLP members on the commission?

Dr Farry: That is quite right. There is a major fallacy in trying to attribute —

The First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I will give way in a minute.

The First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it right to refer to the political parties of the nominees and to make the assertion that they belong to Sinn Féin, the DUP or other parties? Is that in order?

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that it is important to get back to the principles of the Bill.

Dr Farry: Thank you for that clarification. I was about to make the very point that the First Minister made had he allowed me to continue my remarks for a few more seconds before giving way.

It was not the Alliance Party who introduced comments about the political affiliations of the commissioners. In fact, I was about to make the point that that is a dangerous route to go down, and it is one that we should avoid at all costs.

As for how we have got to this stage, there has been a great deal of discussion about the procedures adopted by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the nature of the closed session that it conducted. It is worth putting on record that the Committee's decision to grant a closed session to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister was based on a request to discuss the nature of the appointments of the commissioners designate and potential legal ramifications arising from that. The goalposts were shifted during that session when the new issue of accelerated passage was introduced. A number of parties have made the point that that second discussion on accelerated passage raised an important issue about transparency and accountability in the political system. That discussion should have taken place in public so that the people of Northern Ireland could hear exactly what was being said.

There are broader issues of transparency and accountability for the Committee to consider. It is tasked with holding the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to account, but a majority of the members of that Committee belong to the same parties as the two top office-holders. Those members act effectively on a party basis, following the dictates of Ministers. That creates major difficulties for the role of the Committees, which is to hold Departments to account, and which was set up in the Good Friday Agreement and ratified by the St Andrews Agreement. All Members of the Assembly should reflect on that.

Mr O'Dowd said that the Alliance Party is here to oppose for opposition's sake, and recited his usual mantra, which is to say to us, "How dare you oppose anything", and declare that opposition in the House to what the Executive are doing undermines the institutions.

What we are doing is clearly the opposite of that. The Alliance Party has worked for more than 35 years to build stable political institutions in Northern Ireland. Society was held back for 35 years by the parties that are currently in office.

We are here now: let me illustrate for Mr O'Dowd the importance of democracy. Democracy is not about Governments making decisions and having them rubber-stamped by legislators. It is about proper scrutiny, accountability and challenge. The Alliance Party will not be deflected from fulfilling the important role of opposition, which is integral to ensuring that we have stable political institutions. Let me nail that issue comprehensively.

Major issues of substance have been raised in this debate, not just by the Alliance Party, but also by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. These are important issues, and, unlike yesterday, when the spokespersons for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister failed to address the substantive issues and engaged in platitudes, it is important to have a detailed response from the First Minister to the detailed challenges that have been raised by Members in the House. That is the purpose of the Second Stage of a Bill. Simply saying that this is for the good of victims, that we have had enough delay, and other platitudes will not do.

The deputy First Minister said yesterday that we are all responsible for where we are in society. That will not do either. The Alliance Party is not responsible for anything bad that has happened in society. We have worked for progress, which is a lot more than can be said for the two parties that have come to the House today seeking a rush job to cover up their own inadequacies and failure to make progress in the past 10 months.

The First Minister: This has been a very interesting debate, although well wide of what we were supposed to be discussing. I have no intention of getting into the boglands occupied by those who oppose the Bill. I am only interested in heeding and harkening to the innocent victims. It is a disgrace for a Member of this House to suggest that our desire to consult with a victims' forum is a betrayal of the House.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

The First Minister: No. In view of what you said about the affiliations of the people who have been appointed, I will not give way. As far as I am concerned, none of them were ever members of the Democratic Unionist Party. *[Interruption.]*

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. The First Minister has the floor. Every other Member has had an opportunity to speak.

The First Minister: The other parties will be able to make statements after they consider what the honourable lady has said. I do not believe that that matter should

have been dragged into the debate. It is a bit late for the Alliance Party to be speaking about supporting, and coming to the assistance of, Mrs McDougall.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

The First Minister: No, I will not give way. The Speaker told me that lunchtime is approaching, and I do not want the Member to die; I want her to live. I know that she does not believe that —

Dr Farry: On a point of order, given that the Alliance Party has supported Mrs McDougall from day one, is it appropriate for the First Minister to make completely false statements regarding that support?

Mr Speaker: Order. The First Minister shall continue.

The First Minister: Its members must have whispered their support. The matter before the House is whether we should proceed to establish the commission and go forward. All right-thinking people in Northern Ireland are saying yes; the time has come for real action in relation to that matter, and all the excuses and the baring and clapping of hands on breasts will have no effect. For years, people have suffered, and we want to react now and get the job done. As far as I am concerned, we are faced with a simple proposition: having achieved accelerated passage, should the Bill proceed?

The current course of action emerged from the Committee, which deliberated in secret, although it may as well not have bothered because we have heard everything that happened in that Committee. We have heard four versions of the Committee's minute, and no Committee member who spoke agreed with everything that was said.

The last Member to speak appears to think that there is something wrong with a Committee if it fully represents the electorate's wishes. The wish of the electorate is that the majority on a Committee, regardless of who is in office, reflects the majority in the House. The Member wants Committees to be set up in order that those who support the Government will not be heard although he will be heard. Of course, for many a long day, that has been an Alliance Party feat. Under direct rule, how many Committees were Alliance Party members appointed to? It had appointees on all the quangos —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker; on several occasions you reminded Members about the importance of sticking to comments about the Bill. Some of us have been restrained and have not responded to entirely off-the-record attacks. Will you ask the First Minister to stick to the Bill?

Mr Speaker: I remind Members from all sides of the House that it is vital that, as far as possible, they stick to the principles of the Bill.

The First Minister: Those Members were calling on me to give answers and, when I start to give answers, they do not seem to like them.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

The First Minister: No, I will not give way. The Alliance Party did well out of quangos; however, those days are over. Democracy has taken over, and democracy dictates that the House —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker; on several occasions you have reminded all sides of the House about sticking to the Bill. Will you please now ask the First Minister to address the issue, because some of us came here to debate whether the Bill will provide for victims, and not the merits or demerits of the Alliance Party?

Mr Speaker: People following the debate know that I have given all Members some latitude. There is no Committee debate on this issue, and for that reason I am sympathetic to Members' attempts to widen the debate as far as possible. As I said earlier, it is, unfortunately, inevitable that the debate will take on legs.

The First Minister: Those who maintain that we must get on with the job for the sake of the victims say that they have been lambasted, their position misrepresented and their very words — which are on record — dismissed. However, when an opportunity arises for comment on what they have said, they get angry. There have been many interruptions for bogus points of order, because I seek to deal with the issue. It is a sad day for the Assembly when it spends so much time on an issue that did not need any time devoted to it. We have heard eulogies on the characters of the four victims' commissioners designate, who are great people who must be honoured, yet Members use the debate to oppose their appointments. *[Interruption.]*

Those Members do not like it because no Alliance Party member was appointed. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The First Minister: All I say is that we must do the job. Who are we talking about but the victims: people who need a voice, deserve to be heard and who were largely forgotten in the last Assembly — no matter what the leader of the SDLP has said about his party. The victims' case must be faced up to.

I appreciate that Members want to know what is happening, and they will be kept informed. Every decision that has to be taken will be brought to the House, and Members will have the opportunity to have their say. We are not trying to close down the debate: we are trying to have the real debate on the innocent victims, and we intend to do that.

I had nothing to do with the decision by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First

Minister to discuss the matter behind closed doors. Under the circumstances, I would have been happy to meet the Committee. I have responded to every invitation. When other parties ran the Executive, they were not so attentive; rather, they appointed two helpful, independent people to take over the issue, and full-time Ministers did not attend the meetings. The Chairman sits there; he knows that; and I have looked at the minutes of those meetings.

Ministers have attended Committee meetings, will attend others and are glad to do so. However, I do not want to attend Committee meetings to witness a repeat of this debate. We need to hit the ground running in our efforts to help these people — the victims. We believe that that will be done.

Question put,

The Assembly divided: Ayes 49; Noes 15.

AYES

Mr Adams, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, 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 Ayes: Mr McElduff and Mr Shannon.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McNarry, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Long and Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill (NIA 12/07) be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. 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 12.36 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Combating Underage Drinking

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Ms J McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the levels of underage drinking and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce effective measures to help combat alcohol misuse, including the clear and identifiable marking of carrier bags provided by off-licences.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When this motion was first tabled, it was forwarded to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). We were advised subsequently that the matter was the Department for Social Development's (DSD) responsibility. We do not want to divide the House on the motion or the amendment, so we want to assure Members that we intend to consult the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people anyway. We would like any proposal to be time bound, with action taken during this session of the Assembly. If that is the case, we do not have a problem with the amendment.

There has been a marked change in the patterns of drinking among young people over the past 10 years; statistics show that more and more of them are misusing alcohol. Indeed, health professionals and others have stated that children have started drinking at 11 and 12 years of age. Ireland, as a whole, has one of the highest levels of binge drinking among 15- to 16-year-olds in Europe. If we look at our streets at the weekend or over holiday periods, we can see the level of alcohol misuse, particularly among young people. That must concern us all.

Alcohol misuse can lead to a number of problems, both for the individuals concerned and for their families and the community in general. Young people are more vulnerable to suffering physical, emotional and social harm from drinking alcohol. Again, there is a relationship between the misuse of alcohol and drugs by young people and suicide. That is an important point to note.

The young people then become involved in antisocial activity, and, although it may start off as antisocial activity, I must point out that, in the past year, alcohol-related crime has increased by 26% in the North of Ireland. We know that that can lead to more serious crimes such as murder, rape and assaults on people and property. It is important to flag up that issue.

By tackling underage drinking and providing alternatives for younger people, it is possible to prevent some of them becoming involved in antisocial activity and coming under the influence of more sinister elements that are involved in criminal activity. Often, particularly in my constituency, I see younger kids — 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds — standing on street corners drinking with 15-, 16- and 17-year-olds. The older ones give the younger ones drink to try for the first time. That is a very disturbing image.

There are a number of initiatives happening in local communities, with statutory bodies and political representatives working alongside community representatives. The community representatives, in particular, must be commended for the sterling work that they do.

It is clear that more needs to be done to tackle underage drinking: we need to use existing legislation more vigorously and introduce further legislation, where needed, to curb on-street drinking.

It has almost become socially acceptable in some areas for large crowds of young people to drink on the streets. There are a number of designated areas where it is illegal to drink on the street, but the law is very rarely enforced and does not seem to be working. We need to debate the possibility of a total ban on all on-street drinking. As some people have said, that might create a number of problems in relation to festivals and other social activities and events, but if we are innovative, and if we look at the legislation in the proper way, we can improve on the existing law and examine the possibility of banning on-street drinking.

There is evidence of a link between the number of outlets selling alcohol in a given area and the level of alcohol-related problems in that area. There is also a link between the price of alcohol and the level of consumption. There is a clear onus on off-licences and supermarkets that sell alcohol to do so in a responsible manner. That is the reason for proposing the motion today. One step we can take immediately is to ask off-licences and supermarkets that sell alcohol to label their carrier bags so that the sources of the alcohol being consumed by young people are identifiable and traceable. I am not claiming that those off-licences and supermarkets are selling alcohol to underage drinkers; other people are buying it for them. It would be easier to trace that if the bags were identifiable, because we see them lying on the streets — it is not as if the young

people bring them home and dispose of them; they are left on the streets.

The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) must look at the way alcoholic drinks are promoted. Alcohol promotion needs to be more controlled so that, for example, large quantities of alcohol cannot be purchased by one person, as evidence shows that it can end up in the hands of the wrong people, particularly young people. When individuals buy vast quantities of alcohol in one go — and I have seen it myself — it is obvious to those selling the alcohol that those individuals are not buying it for themselves. They will perhaps visit the same off-licence three or four times. There must be some level of control over the promotion of alcoholic drinks and in the way that alcohol is purchased, whether through working with those who own the off-licences or through some other means. Until now, a voluntary code of practice has been agreed by some local off-sales and the local community. However, there must be a greater element of compulsion.

Adolescence is when young people begin to experiment with substances such as alcohol. Young people are very impressionable, and they are also influenced by their peers. We must help them through that period, because we must ensure that they realise that the choices that they will make will have a long-term impact on the rest of their lives. I know people who started drinking at a very young age and have continued to drink, and their lives have been totally destroyed.

Everybody has a responsibility with respect to on-street drinking, particularly parents, who have an important role to play. As a parent of three young children, I know that it is very important for parents to know where their children are and what they are doing. I have worked with community safety organisations in my local area. Sometimes we are out at midnight and beyond, and we see young kids of 11, 12, and 13 years of age roaming the streets drinking. The onus is on parents to act responsibly and to know where their children are.

The Government, the Executive, the Assembly, schools, communities, the police and the drinks industry also have to ensure that the scourge of underage drinking is tackled, and that young people have positive influences when they are making life choices. We need to look at putting new initiatives in place, including the provision of more intervention projects, such as midnight soccer, and opening youth centres late in the evenings and at weekends, where trained people can be available for young people who need to talk about problems.

Not long ago, an Adjournment debate on midnight soccer took place in the Assembly. Its influence on taking young people off the streets is evident; putting their energies into something more productive and

more positive brings results. Around 80% of the young people who were interviewed at one particular project said that they would be drinking on the streets, were it not for midnight soccer.

Young people who have addiction problems must also be considered and helped. No residential service is available to which young people can go, simply as young people. Those who start to drink at 11 and 12 years of age have a real chance of developing an addiction early in life. When those young people get older, it is important that a residential service be available to provide the help and support that they need for that addiction.

We must also be proactive and intervene with those young people when they need, and want, help. That means meeting them on the streets, which is a purposeful way of engaging with young people. It is important to see what they are doing and to understand their mindset. Not everyone suddenly becomes addicted to alcohol; it can be a process.

I shall finish in a moment, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Underage drinking has become acceptable, and it creates problems for the community in general. Passing the motion today would be a first good step towards combating it.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “on” and insert

“the Executive’s Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to bring urgently before this Assembly proposals to combat underage drinking.”

I pay tribute to Ms McCann and Ms Ramsey for bringing this important motion to the Chamber. I know that that can sometimes be a trite means of opening a speech; however, I am genuine and sincere about that. Underage drinking is an issue that we can tackle collectively, and that will have a significant impact on the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I understand the reasons that the proposer set out for directing the motion towards the Department for Social Development, but I am sure that the Minister will confirm that her powers to deal with underage drinking are somewhat limited. An overarching, all-embracing approach is required. Therefore, our amendment is sensible and I hope that it will command the support of the House.

It can be argued that the issue involves health, education, sport — which is the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) — and the police. A range of agencies and people must be involved. We are not alone in having to challenge alcohol abuse among our young people. In America, where 21 is the age at which people are allowed to drink, there are significant problems. Earlier this year, the Surgeon General said:

"For the most part, parents and other adults underestimate the number of adolescents who use alcohol. They underestimate how early drinking begins, the amount of alcohol adolescents consume, the many risks that alcohol consumption creates".

He went on to say that the first step in solving the public health problem of underage drinking comes with an examination of our own attitudes to alcohol. We must challenge the acceptance that it is part of a rite of passage — something that young people go through — and that it is OK. We have heard that some parents buy drink for young people; some people buy more than a little bit of drink.

People do not understand the real challenges that young people face. Those problems are not only on the physiological side. There are connections between alcohol and underage and inappropriate sex, and between drinking and drug and solvent abuse. There is even a direct link between drinking at an early age and smoking at an early age, which leads to other problems. When all those issues are brought together, a strong body of evidence suggests that people who are involved in underage drinking do not do particularly well at school and fail their exams. That causes problems.

It might give some idea of the size of the problem to know that, in the USA, 75% of sixth formers drink. Despite the USA's having a legal drinking age of 21, 66% of O-level-age people drink. Unbelievably, 20% of youngsters who are in the American equivalent of our third form drink.

When young people drink, they drink to excess. If people drink before the age of 15, they are four times more likely to become alcohol dependent than if they do not start drinking until the age of 21. Frequent binge drinkers are also more likely to engage in risky behaviour.

2.15 pm

When one examines how this problem should be best addressed, the initial reaction is often that education provides the key. The assumption is that if people are educated on how bad the problem is, they would use common sense and stop drinking. Those approaches have been found to be unsuccessful. More advanced treatment, based on social-influence models, became important — norm-setting, addressing social pressure, learning to say no, and informing families. Parents' ability to influence their children is well documented and is part of the solution that we must find.

In 2004, a Home Office survey indicated that there is a problem in the UK — it is not confined to America. It was found that England, Scotland and Wales had the highest levels of underage drinking in Europe: 88% of 16- and 17-year-olds had taken a drink, and 29% of 10- to 13-year-olds had taken a drink, mostly alcopops. The problem is that most of those children obtain alcohol from supposed friends, older people or parents.

Underage drinking leads to all sorts of unfortunate issues for society, such as criminal damage and theft. Some 14% of people who drank once a week or more committed 37% of crime. Conversely, the 45% who did not drink committed only 16% of offences. That demonstrates a link between petty crime — burglary, criminal damage, and so on — and alcohol.

The Scottish Government accept that underage drinking is a problem in Scotland, too. In 2003, their central research unit produced similar statistics about the early age of drinking. Most importantly, however, those statistics showed that there is a strong connection between the purchasing of alcohol and delinquent activity. The purchasing of alcohol is actually more significant than drinking lots of alcohol. People must go out to buy alcohol, and 25% of those young people who purchased alcohol were involved in a fight during the previous year.

There are other areas from which guidance can be sought, and that is one of the reasons that I recommended that the Executive subcommittee should assess this issue. In 2007, Stoke-on-Trent City Council examined how to deal with the supply of alcohol, including the issues that have been discussed — plastic bags, police-enforcement issues, working with schools, and so on. Interestingly, off-licences accounted for only 25% of the source of alcohol; 75% of it came from elsewhere.

Parents are the key to solving the problem. If they drink, their children are likely to drink too because it is regarded as acceptable behaviour. There is a similar link between advertising and television programmes, and how children behave. Those factors must be addressed.

The statistic that I found most striking was that 71% of young people said their parents or carers were aware that their children drink regularly. Underage drinking is not happening behind the scenes. Parents know that it is happening, but they do not realise its scale.

Liverpool John Moores University recently published a survey that produced a startling statistic: for very child aged between 15 and 16, three pints of beer were being drunk each week. Obviously not every child drinks, so some children are drinking an awful lot. The university concluded that there is no real guidance for parents or other adults about the acceptable level of alcohol consumption for young people.

From my understanding of the way in which such matters develop, there should be zero tolerance to underage drinking. I say that not because I am a killjoy or do not want people to go out and have a drink. However, people do not understand that alcohol is addictive and that young people who are aged between 14 and 16 years old face challenges with their emotions and hormones and have not developed all the adult safeguards that will allow them to make proper decisions. We must, therefore, find a way to sort that out.

I have recognised that other Members brought the issue to the attention of the House, and part of the reason that I was keen to speak to the motion is that a young man from my constituency called Aaron Montgomery was killed outside a nightclub about three or four weeks ago, through no fault of his own. It was a case of mistaken identity; he was standing outside the nightclub waiting for a taxi, someone identified him, and another young man hit him on the back of the head. He is now dead. That illustrates that many issues in our society are drink related, and we must find a way to deal with that.

Other Members will suggest solutions, which must all be considered, but a cross-cutting approach is required. We must consider the price of alcohol — is there any benefit in increasing it? We must consider advertising — is it acceptable that some billboards outside our schools advertise alcohol? How will we talk to people in the appropriate way in order that they listen? Sport, such as midnight soccer, and measures such as getting young people involved in leadership and youth activities, are also important. Those issues are all-encompassing. Most importantly, we must use peer pressure to ensure that young people are safe.

The Executive subcommittee has the teeth to deal with the issue. I agree with the proposer of the motion that the process should be time bound. I want that subcommittee to report, and I want us all to work together to show the people of Northern Ireland what we can do if we work together.

Miss McIlveen: Underage drinking has an impact on us all, not only because of the damage that it can do to the health of young people, but because of the violence, antisocial behaviour, littering and other petty crime that it can cause. The costs of such behaviour include policing costs, the cost of the administration of justice, loss to victims, healthcare costs and the creation of a society where people do not feel comfortable or safe walking the streets at night.

In general, drinkers are not criminals who are involved in sudden crime waves that sweep across Northern Ireland. However, if Members were to spend the day in a Magistrate's Court, they would discover that, in a high proportion of criminal offences, the consumption of alcohol forms part of the plea in mitigation.

Given that young people are not generally drinking in their homes and are not served in bars, they find themselves drinking on the streets. That is of great concern because they are drinking unsupervised, often to excess.

The motion gives me the opportunity to be parochial and mention a scheme in my constituency of Strangford. The scheme is run by Ards Borough Council in conjunction with the police and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The Ards Anti-Social Behaviour team was formed in 2004 to tackle what was perceived

to be a growing problem. That team operates out of Newtownards police station and carries out pre-planned patrols with the police during peak antisocial behaviour periods in areas that have been identified for attention. The scheme also has an educational element, which consists of making presentations to schools and youth groups in the Ards borough, and information campaigns, such as the publication of leaflets and advertising to raise awareness of antisocial behaviour, underage drinking and the negative effect that those have on the community. The team has established, and is maintaining, effective working partnerships with relevant bodies and organisations, including the Housing Executive, council departments, the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the police. Those partnerships assist the team in meeting its objectives.

Tackling antisocial behaviour, and underage drinking in particular, can happen only if all constituent parts of society work together. It cannot be done by different Departments working independently, nor can it be done without important stakeholders bearing their share of responsibility.

As part of the scheme, off-licences in the Ards borough were contacted and encouraged to sign up to a code of practice that outlines the legal responsibility of the owners and the impact that drinking can have on crime levels and health. Thirty out of 33 off-licences have signed up to that code of practice.

As part of the code, there are nine key principles — many of which were outlined by the proposer of the motion — which have been accepted by off-licences. Those principles are: staff will not sell alcohol to persons under the age of 18; staff will ask for formal identification from young adults; staff will question a person buying large amounts of alcohol on more than one occasion in one day; alcohol will not be sold to an intoxicated person; training should be provided to staff, including casual and part-time staff, on the details of the code of practice; within 12 months of signing up to the code of practice, the off-licence will ensure that all carrier bags are branded with the name of the off-licence; a door sticker and posters will be displayed in a prominent location in the sales area; staff will liaise and co-operate with local police about possible offenders; and staff will welcome visits to their premises by police and council officers as a deterrent for potential underage customers.

The scheme, in its current form, has been welcomed by people in the Ards borough, who have noticed an improvement. More than 75% of those surveyed have reported seeing “some” to a “very marked” improvement since the establishment of the team. Although they are limited by resources, I cannot commend the work of the Ards antisocial behaviour team and its partners enough. As a local representative, I have called on

them to assist constituents, and I recommend that such a scheme be introduced across Northern Ireland.

With greater investment, including in manpower, and perhaps a greater obligation on off-licences — rather than simply allowing participation in the scheme to remain voluntary — further improvements could be made. Wider investment across Northern Ireland should not only aim to spend money but to save money, prevent crime, create a more comfortable society and, perhaps, save lives.

Mrs Hanna: Underage drinking is a crucial issue for our society. Unfortunately, it is widely recognised that young people are drinking larger amounts of alcohol and doing so more often. The Health Promotion Agency's report on drinking behaviour among young people in Northern Ireland demonstrates that disturbing trends are emerging. Males and females as young as 11 drink excessively. Some young people are classified as regular drinkers at the ages of 14 and 15, and that is clearly a huge problem.

Young people drink for several reasons, including attempting to demonstrate maturity, being subjected to peer pressure and to rebel against their parents. However, most disturbing is the increasing number of young people who drink to escape their problems. Indeed, 40% of those surveyed cited that as a reason for their drinking, and most people would agree that that acts as a slippery slope to alcohol dependency and, in some unfortunate cases, mental-health problems.

Although the majority of people will not become dependent on alcohol, starting to drink at a young age sharply increases the chance of developing alcohol-related problems in later life. For young people, the short-term effects of drinking, or binge drinking, are demonstrated by severe intoxication and alcohol-related accidents, especially drink-driving incidents, which have, sadly, led to the loss of many young lives in road traffic accidents.

Every weekend, the negative consequences of underage drinking are visible in our accident and emergency departments, and alcohol abuse has a crippling impact on National Health Service resources. The detrimental effect of alcohol misuse is visible in schools through poor academic performance and young women dropping out as a result of becoming pregnant after engaging in sexual activity while intoxicated.

There is a link between alcohol, crime and antisocial behaviour, such as vandalism, carrying weapons, risky behaviour and drug and solvent experimentation, which go hand in hand with alcohol abuse. In my constituency of South Belfast, it is commonplace to see young people drinking in the evenings, during weekends and school holidays in local playing fields, parks or alleyways. Such spots are risky environments; they exist in all constituencies, and young people regularly drink on the

streets. However, the closure of lanes and alley-gating schemes initiated by residents serve only to move the problem to another location.

2.30 pm

The safety of young people is jeopardised when they consume too much alcohol, but the safety of the wider community is also put at risk, especially that of older, more vulnerable people. Antisocial behaviour fuelled by alcohol is the plague of this society. I do not in any way seek to demonise young people who gather in groups. Young people have always congregated in groups, but they were not seen as a threat before this plague emerged.

Children's attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol are shaped by their families and parents, who act directly as role models and indirectly provide varying levels of support, control and conflict, which are all related to underage drinking. Parents should know where their children are, and they should be able to notice quickly if a son or daughter comes home drunk at night. They must take responsibility, and, if they need support, it must be provided, whether it takes the form of addiction services or simply help in controlling their children.

Prevention is much better than cure, so we should aim to prevent this problem from arising in the first place. There should be robust ID checks, as that is a very important way to deter underage people from purchasing alcohol. Licensing laws and regulations should ensure that customers' ages are verified. Illegal access to alcohol is rife across Northern Ireland.

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

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, because we must get to grips with the problem of underage drinking.

Ms Lo: We are all concerned about the worrying drinking trends among young people, some of whom start drinking as young as 11, and many of whom are drinking to dangerous levels, according to the Health Promotion Agency. To follow on from Mr McCrea's statistic, I will refer to some research that shows that Ireland, as a whole, has one of the highest levels in Europe of binge-drinking among the 15 to 16 age group. In a recent survey, one in four youths claims to have been drunk 20 times in the previous 30 days.

As we all know, drunkenness can lead to antisocial behaviour or even crime, which quite often occurs in South Belfast. I welcome this opportunity to discuss the issue, but the problem must be addressed through a joined-up approach that involves not only DSD, but other relevant Departments and agencies, including the PSNI. I therefore support the amendment, which calls for a holistic approach on the part of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people.

Government alone cannot solve all our social problems. Parents, teachers, youth workers, the drinks industry

and communities all have responsibility for addressing the issue of underage drinking. There must be more awareness-raising in schools, youth clubs, community settings and at home about the short- and long-term effects of alcohol on a young person's mental and physical health.

As other Members have said, parental guidance and supervision must play a significant role in preventing underage drinking. Young people say that they drink because there is nothing to do or because they want to escape problems or feel confident. There should be more places where young people can meet to enjoy healthy pursuits and engage in sport or leisure activities, instead of hanging around drinking in parks. Building young people's self-esteem and confidence may mean that they will rely less on alcohol to make themselves feel relaxed and confident.

DSD could look at best practice elsewhere. The London borough of Bexley has launched a 'No Booze for Kids' campaign. Off-licences premises in the Sidcup ward will be asked to agree to a code of conduct preventing the sale of alcohol to juveniles or to adults suspected of buying alcohol for underage people.

Shop staff are asked to report illicit attempts to buy alcohol to the local neighbourhood policing team. Some of our local councils already employ similar strategies, and that should be replicated throughout Northern Ireland.

More CCTV (closed-circuit television) provision is needed outside off-licences to show whether groups of young people are approaching adults to buy alcohol for them. It must be made clear that it is an offence — and unacceptable — for adults to buy alcohol for children. More PSNI community safety wardens are needed to patrol areas, move on troublemakers, and confiscate alcohol from youths who congregate near off-licences.

The placing of health warnings on alcopop containers should be considered, as well as curbing aggressive advertising that is aimed at young people. All efforts must be considered — and that should include input from young people — to address the growing problem of underage drinking, which can have a very negative social and economic impact on our society.

Mr Craig: The growing problem of underage drinking has sparked much debate — and not only in the Chamber today. Much of that debate concerns efforts to find the best strategy to counteract the problem. Alcohol is far too affordable for young people, and it is much too easy for them to purchase it. We have all seen the increase in the number of off-licences and the mass sales of alcohol in supermarkets. That has led to alcohol being far too accessible.

Some argue that changing lifestyles are to blame, and they cite society's attitude to alcohol as a bad example for our young people. Social factors such as our attitude

to excessive behaviour among young people, economic deprivation and family breakdown play major roles.

It is undeniable that a small minority of retailers — and I am being generous — make mistakes and sell alcohol to individuals who are underage. Such individuals or companies who continually break guidelines should be weeded out by the PSNI and prosecuted.

Those who say that nothing can be done about those issues should examine the positive results that have been achieved in Lancashire, where a recent police sting operation was designed to test whether retailers asked for identification. That has led to more retailers in Lancashire being prosecuted for serving under-18s than anywhere else in the UK. That has had a positive effect in that the level of underage drinking there has considerably decreased. That should be replicated in Northern Ireland.

Combating this major issue requires re-examining education and enforcement policies that apply to young people. Some young people commit offences due to drinking, and others are victims of alcohol abuse. It is important that both of those major issues be addressed and dealt with.

I support the Federation of the Retail Licensed Trade and its zero-tolerance approach to tackling the problem of the supply of alcohol to children. All MLAs should pledge their support to that welcome move.

Experience has shown that excessive consumption of alcohol by minors results in a host of health, social and economic problems. However, that is not just a problem for publicans and politicians — it is an issue that affects society as a whole. Many people have a role to play — most crucially parents.

I appeal to them to do all that they can to ensure that their children do not seek to obtain alcohol. We need to ensure that alcohol becomes less accessible to young people.

A recent police operation to tackle underage drinking in Lisburn and the surrounding areas revealed that some parents actually purchase alcohol for their underage children. Operation Marsham, which is part of a new Home Office initiative to tackle underage drinking in public areas, ran for three weekends and resulted in over 736 items of alcohol being confiscated. Assistant Chief Constable Duncan McCausland said that in many cases the alcohol was supplied by parents who bought the drink for their children to consume in local parks with older friends. That is a major issue that society must tackle.

Mr Ross: The Member referred to the responsibility of parents. Does he agree that that is the key factor in tackling the issue and that in countries where there is strong parental influence or strong family structures — such as France and the Netherlands — there is a much

lesser degree of alcohol abuse or alcohol consumption by those under the age of 18?

Mr Craig: I fully concur with the honourable Member's remarks. The breakdown of family structures in Northern Ireland is contributing to some of those issues.

The team of officers that operated, not only in Lisburn, but in Dunmurry, Moira, Glenavy, Antrim, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus, cautioned 51 young people and referred them to youth diversion officers. Another 24 adults have been reported to local councils for further action. The operation detected children as young as 14 drinking illegally. I commend those officers for the work that they have done.

Underage drinking often leads to criminal damage.

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

Mr Craig: I thank you for your perseverance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the motion. I have been impressed by the range of opinions that have been voiced in support of the motion and the amendment. The social consequences of the abuse of alcohol have been amplified. Without question, we are living in a time in which there has been a change in the cultural mores regarding the consumption of alcohol.

Increasing numbers of young people now experiment with drink at a much earlier age and become involved in binge drinking. We have heard a litany of the consequences of such behaviour. Some have been traumatic and terrible for families as loved ones have been injured and, in some cases, killed. The root cause can be traced back to alcohol abuse. Indeed, some Members have highlighted the extent to which that line of defence has been deployed during court proceedings.

The motion calls on the Minister for Social Development, whose attendance I welcome, to take action on this issue, and the amendment calls on the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people to bring proposals to the Assembly. Both calls imply that a degree of study needs to be conducted in order to address the issue.

Rather than rehearse some of the arguments that have been made, I commend the scheme that has been deployed by Ards Borough Council, to which Michelle McIlveen referred. Useful lessons could be learned from that scheme and deployed across every local government district in the North.

When someone goes into a supermarket to purchase groceries, those groceries will be packed into a bag that prominently displays the name of the supermarket and advertises its services; however, if he or she goes into the off-sales on the same premises, the alcohol will

be put into a plain bag. An issue has been identified by the industry that must be addressed. I raise the issue in order to support calls by Members for identification on bags. If due cognisance is to be paid to the Assembly's view on the use of plastic bags — that they should be replaced with degradable paper bags — the same principle should be applied to advertising the names of vendors.

2.45 pm

Jonathan Craig referred to the difficulty that some off-sales staff experience in trying to establish the age of a person who seeks to purchase alcohol. Although the practice is to challenge the individual and to ask him or her to produce proof of age, Members are aware that some young people manufacture fake ID cards to satisfy that requirement. I suggest that the Minister and the subcommittee commission a study on the benefits of raising the age limit for the purchase of alcohol in off-sales in order to avoid the problem of underage people purchasing alcohol with bogus ID cards and that of older people in the same peer group purchasing alcohol and supplying it to younger people. There may be benefits in conducting such a study and of making appropriate recommendations. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Simpson: On 25 June 2007, my colleague Iris Robinson received a written answer from the Health Minister that explained that during the previous year, 155 under-18-year-olds were treated for alcohol-related injuries or illnesses in Northern Ireland. That is a shocking figure that should serve as a wake-up call to everyone in the Chamber. Although that figure is exceptionally high, it is not the end of the story. When the age range is set a little higher to examine how drinking at a young age affects people as they get older, matters get far worse. On 28 November 2005, I received a written answer from Shaun Woodward MP in response to a parliamentary question about the number of under-30-year-olds in Northern Ireland who had been treated for alcohol-related illnesses. The figure was not 155, but a staggering 842. One lesson that has been learned in recent years is that the problem is not simply that people begin to drink alcohol at a young age, but that the pattern of binge drinking is established early and continues into adulthood.

Mr Shannon: The Health Promotion Agency has released figures that illustrate that point: young people in Northern Ireland are, on average, 11 years old when they take their first drink, and 24% of young people who are aged between 11 and 16 years drink at least once a month. I urge the Member and the Minister to take note of the Challenge 21 scheme, which is carried out by one supermarket in Northern Ireland — by the way, I believe that you will get a minute for my interjection, David, so please bear with me. The Challenge 21 system is clear: if a salesperson decides that someone who seeks to purchase alcohol is under

18 years of age, he or she will ask that person to show ID. It is an effective system that works in supermarkets. I urge the Member to agree that if the Challenge 21 scheme were introduced in all off-licences and stores that sell alcohol in Northern Ireland, it would be beneficial.

That should give you 60 seconds.

Mr Simpson: Mr Shannon chanced his arm; however, he managed to speak for a minute. I certainly agree with him. It is staggering that 842 people received medical treatment for alcohol-related illness.

However, it is important to stress that, in many cases, the pattern is set at an early age — frequently when the individual is under the legal drinking age. According to a 2003 Health Promotion Agency survey, from which my colleague Jim Shannon quoted, by the age of 16, only 19% of young people had never had a drink, and the mean age at which they had taken their first drink was between 11 and 12 years of age.

The same survey found that 24% of year 8 pupils, 38% of year 9 pupils, 51% of year 10 pupils, 62% of year 11 pupils and 72% of year 12 pupils reported being drunk at least once. The most frequently cited drink of choice was alcopops, and the venue of choice for those who had been drunk more than four times was outdoors.

Drinking that commences at such tender years is a ticking time bomb for individuals' lives and for society as a whole. Unless underage drinking is tackled, the trends will persist, and hundreds of young people under the age of 30 will continue to be treated for alcohol-related conditions. That cannot be allowed to continue.

In my constituency, groups of young people, some of them underage, have traditionally used public spaces such as Solitude Park in Banbridge, Lurgan Park in the south of the town, and the Bann Boulevard and People's Park in Portadown for drinking alcohol. Recently, Ennis Green in Lurgan's Kilwilkee estate has been plagued by underage drinking. That and similar situations must be tackled in order that residents across the Province might live in peace.

Underage drinking impacts on many young lives, on the Health Service, on the delivery of government, on tourism and on shared public spaces. Something must be done, and I call on the Minister for Social Development to take action. I do not want to lay all the responsibility at her door, but I ask her to enlist her Executive colleagues so that everyone can work together.

Mr Beggs: I thank Ms Ramsey and Ms McCann for tabling this important motion. I am pleased that many Members have supported the UUP's amendment, which widens the range of issues that must be addressed in order to tackle the problem.

Alcohol abuse and the resulting antisocial behaviour are not the responsibility of one Department: the

problems affect our entire society, and, therefore, the responsibility for tackling them crosses Departments. The amendment calls on the Executive's subcommittee on children and young people to add the matter to its agenda and to address it using a multi-departmental approach. The subcommittee is in a unique position, in that it can focus on a range of issues rather than solely on licensing or on the introduction of identifiable plastic bags. I acknowledge, however, that those remain important issues.

Have children been educated on the adverse effects of alcohol on their physical and mental health? A policing issue also arises, and there is merit in the subcommittee's including a representative from the Northern Ireland Office, because that allows a degree of continuity across a range of areas.

It is important not only that the subcommittee deals with the issue but that there is a tangible outcome. I welcome the thoughts of other Members who said that the process of tackling underage drinking should be time bound. Action must be taken: the issue must not be buried in a subcommittee, because it is important to provide outcomes for young people.

Is education in schools on the subject of alcohol appropriate? The Assembly should try to find out which schools employ best practice and ensure that it is made more widely available. Are teachers, youth workers or specialist providers best placed to educate young children about the dangers of alcohol abuse?

In my constituency of East Antrim, the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group had an outreach programme. It worked in post-primary schools and was well received by the young people and the teachers. It was funded from community safety funds, which, sadly, have come to an end. Who will carry on that important work? Voids are being left in some locations.

Our young people are not aware of the dangers of binge drinking and how it adversely affects the liver. More and more young people are presenting to our hospitals with chronic liver diseases, which costs the Health Service and the individuals concerned. As I said earlier, there are costs to people's mental health.

Recently, I took part in a consultation with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. I met a group of teenagers, and I was shocked to hear some of the children present, who were between 12 and 15 years of age, say that they drank regularly — several times a month. It is astonishing that young people have access to drink and that they and their parents do not know the dangers that they are inflicting on themselves.

In 2007, I shadowed a police patrol on an evening weekend shift. Every 999 telephone call was related to alcohol or drug abuse. It is a huge societal problem. If children and young people start off on a bad track, that

is where they will end up. On that night, sadly, one young man had collapsed on the street. Anything could have happened to him, and he would have been unaware of it. That vulnerable young person on his own could have been attacked, mugged or robbed.

The ministerial subcommittee is well placed to progress the issue. ID could also be considered. I advocate a greater use of electoral registration cards. Too many forms of ID are easy to duplicate with high-technology scanners and colour printers. Why not use something that is free? We should also encourage young people to act responsibly by registering for electoral registration cards.

A range of subjects could progress the matter, and the ministerial subcommittee is best placed to benefit our young people.

Mrs M Bradley: I have been approached on more than one occasion by people who have been asked by youths to buy alcohol for them, but who have refused. Undoubtedly, those young people succeed in convincing some people to do just that. Adults must think about their actions, and so must we, as elected representatives. We need to think long and hard about what we can do to help our young people to make better use of their lives.

Our schools need help to impress on their students the dangers involved, and that must be reinforced at home. Doubling the price of alcohol may make it more difficult for younger members of our communities to buy it, but they will do what they can to ensure that they get the money.

If permitted, young people can be wild at heart and quick to act. They are also vulnerable, although their youthfulness would not allow them to admit to that. It is obvious in today's society that a lack of direction and, in some cases, a lack of parenting — and, unfortunately, a very strong urge to live a life of drug and alcohol misuse — is all too common. We can implore parents to act as parents and not as buddies, and to carry out their natural duty, which is to guide and direct their young people, and to impress on them the dangers of alcohol and drug misuse.

The sad, hard facts of the matter are that the number of underage drinkers is increasing, and it will continue to increase if allowed to do so without strict guidelines and severe consequences being introduced by the Departments and statutory bodies that have a responsibility to control the enablers. Regardless of how small that role may be, it is, and will be, an important role in the endgame.

We have seen medical staff abused and injured in transit to hospital and in hospitals. I spoke to one of my GPs, Dr Tom Black, who is the deputy chairperson of the Northern Ireland general practitioners' committee of the British Medical Association in Northern Ireland. He was very vocal about the dangers of alcohol abuse.

He said that it is a genuine worry about our young people, which will not go away without urgent and extreme intervention.

3.00 pm

Although I welcome the motion, it does not go far enough. A comprehensive strategy must involve Departments other than just DSD. The Department of Education (DE) has a leading role to play in educating our young people about the responsible use of alcohol. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a role to play in promoting a healthy lifestyle, and DCAL can also contribute through the promotion of sport and healthy living recreation activities.

I support the amendment, and I support its being given to the ministerial subcommittee for consideration. However, the work of that subcommittee must involve all Departments.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I am grateful to Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann for providing the Assembly with the opportunity to discuss this very important topic. I am also grateful to Basil McCrea and Roy Beggs for tabling the amendment.

It was intended that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is responsible for strategies to tackle drug and alcohol abuse, would respond to the motion. However, as a result of his absence and the inactivity of the Business Committee, I am delighted to respond to the motion and to welcome the amendment.

I understand that the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people will meet next week to discuss its key priorities for the coming months. If the motion is agreed to and full consideration is given to the amendment, I will be happy to present them to the subcommittee for discussion.

The scourge of alcohol abuse is one of the most pressing problems that faces our society. If we were to read the newspapers any day, watch television any evening, take a walk around our town or city centres any weekend, we would see the most obvious effects of that problem. Alcohol abuse can also lead to several social problems, which, although less immediately obvious, are certainly no less serious. Those can include damaged health, shortened life expectancy, depression, domestic violence, or perhaps even a criminal conviction.

Alcohol abuse is not confined to Northern Ireland — we, along with our neighbours in the South of Ireland and Great Britain, have the dubious distinction of having some of the highest per capita rates of alcohol consumption in the world, and we face all the damaging consequences that that can cause. The problem is not confined to any community or age group. It seems to be endemic to these islands and is on the increase. It is

no surprise that many of our young people reflect that culture in their behaviour. They are doing what young people everywhere have done since time began — learning from their elders, absorbing the good with the bad, rebelling against restrictions, and using their initiative to get around those restrictions. The dilemma is clear. As a society, we are trying to control underage drinking — that is, alcohol abuse by the young — by telling them to do as we say, not as we do. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many young people drink to excess.

I take on board Mr McCrea's point about parental influence, because although any serious attempt to tackle alcohol abuse must involve legislation, such legislation is not an answer on its own. A strategy to tackle alcohol abuse must range across areas such as parenting, education, child protection, community safety, and above all, enforcement. All contributors today reflected that point.

I am responding to the motion by virtue of my responsibility for liquor licensing and for licensing legislation; that is my only responsibility in respect of the motion. However, the motion relates to the responsibilities of many of my Executive colleagues, as well as the Secretary of State, who has final responsibility for enforcement. Therefore, I am pleased to note the Ulster Unionist amendment, which recognises those cross-departmental responsibilities, and I thank my colleague Mrs Bradley for stressing them.

It is important that there is collective responsibility across all Departments and among all Ministers in the subcommittee to address the problem.

I assure the Assembly that policy development on liquor-licensing legislation will reflect the spirit of the amendment and will not take place in isolation. Any reform of the law will take account of the responsibilities of my Executive colleagues and the practicalities of the real world in which the law must operate. I have stated that I intend to take time to consider all the issues arising from my predecessor David Hanson's review of liquor licensing, which includes underage drinking and to take the views of the Committee for Social Development and my Executive colleagues before making decisions on the way forward, and that remains my position.

Although I do not necessarily endorse or reject David Hanson's proposals, I recognise that his review was comprehensive and thorough and that the methodology employed, involving a partnership approach, research, wide consultation and a health and social impact assessment, was robust. Therefore, it provides a useful information base from which to proceed.

The review examined liquor licensing in the round, drawing on expertise from my Department, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's drug and alcohol strategy team, the Police Service of

Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Court Service, and the Northern Ireland Office community safety unit. Those bodies represented the key areas in the matter — health, public order and public safety.

The review's findings were based on evidence from many studies that were carried out in GB and Ireland, as well as international studies and local discussions. However, the evidence is not always clear-cut, and we must be cautious in applying the results directly to Northern Ireland. Many of the findings apply to both underage and adult drinking, but I draw Members' attention to some findings that are particularly relevant to underage drinking.

Evidence suggests that lowering the age at which people can drink in licensed premises can reduce the likelihood of them drinking in unsupervised, unsafe locations. However, there is also evidence that lowering the age can increase levels of male juvenile crime. Alternatively, raising the age can reduce alcohol-related car crashes and fatalities.

Better training for staff who sell alcohol, particularly when backed by management, reinforced and used to enforce legislation, is seen as helping to prevent and deal with crime and disorder, including underage drinking. I take on board and reflect what Ms McCann said about that with particular reference to supermarkets and off-licences.

High-profile policing and enforcement of the law on underage drinking have been linked to reduced numbers of crimes and arrests. Proof-of-age schemes are perceived to be valuable, and evidence also suggests that prohibiting drinking in public places helps to reduce crime and disorder. More recent European research from 2006 endorses many of those findings and adds to them.

I will consider carefully all the findings along with other information, including the details provided today, and I will bring all the information to the ministerial subcommittee in formulating proposals on the way forward on alcohol abuse and underage drinking. Furthermore, I am examining options for stricter enforcement of the law, which is a matter for the police, the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Court Service. Among the proposals are penalty points for offences, the most serious of which would include underage sales.

Jim Shannon referred to the Challenge 21 initiative. I am happy to support Challenge 21, which is a joint trade and Electoral Office initiative to encourage licensees to demand robust proof of age from customers who look younger than 21.

Carrier bags were the substance of the motion proposed by Ms McCann and Ms Ramsey, which recommended:

“the clear and identifiable marking of carrier bags provided by off-licences”

should be introduced as a means of combating underage sales. The Ad Hoc Committee that examined the provisions on drinking in public in the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, which reported to the Assembly some months ago, recommended that my Department, together with the Police Service, should consider the feasibility of schemes that are used elsewhere for tracking sales of alcohol to minors.

In response to correspondence from Minister of State Paul Goggins on the full range of drinking-in-public provisions, I stated that my officials had examined the issue in the context of my predecessor's review of liquor licensing. I also stated that I was considering the way forward in respect of liquor licensing generally and that I would ensure that the topic was revisited in that context.

Members may be interested to note some pertinent facts. For instance, most supermarkets and local off-licence chains already supply branded carrier bags. Therefore, the likely targets of such a move would be the smaller stand-alone off-licences, which some would say are declining in number. Much activity takes place to promote voluntary codes of conduct for bars, clubs and off-licences in the Belfast area. Initial discussions with some of those involved indicate that there is a general feeling that the branding of bags would not be as effective as ongoing initiatives designed to make pubs and off-licences more aware of their responsibilities.

Wider research has so far failed to identify use of a similar legislative provision elsewhere. It has also failed to identify evidence to support the effectiveness of introducing such a provision in Northern Ireland. The South of Ireland's Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 provided for the responsible Minister there to have the power to make regulations for:

"particulars, to be affixed to any container in which intoxicating liquor is sold for consumption off licensed premises, which are adequate to enable the licensee and licensed premises concerned to be identified."

Contravention of the regulations was to be punishable by a fine of up to €2,000. In the event, the regulations were not made, as they were judged to constitute a breach of European Union regulations on the grounds that it would be necessary in most instances, for reasons of equity, to have the container marked at source; that is, before delivery to the licensed retail outlet. That would have placed an unacceptable burden on the product suppliers.

My officials are exploring the possibility that similar considerations might be a factor in proposals to mark carrier bags. They will also consider whether there may be issues relating to rules of evidence in the courts. Of course, I would welcome any further information that Members may wish to provide on this issue.

In conclusion, since taking up office, I have considered carefully the range of complex issues, competing agendas and conflicting opinions that dominate the alcohol and licensing debate. I have studied the available evidence, taken views from the major stakeholders and noted recent developments in Great Britain and elsewhere, including the review of the England and Wales Licensing Act 2003 and the provisions of the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005.

I value my Department's links with counterparts in the South of Ireland and am keen to explore the potential for greater co-operation with them, particularly in the area of liquor licensing, where our legislative codes with their pre-partition roots aim to address common historic and current issues and concerns. I have, therefore, scheduled a meeting with my counterpart Minister, Brian Lenihan. Coincidentally, I spoke to him in Dublin last Sunday to discuss our shared interests and, in particular, the findings of the advisory group on alcohol, which reported to him at the end of March, and his wider plans for comprehensive legislative reform. I have asked my officials to explore various policy options and to obtain further information to enable me to better formulate proposals to take to the Committee for Social Development for its views.

I am committed to maximising the contribution that liquor-licensing legislation, in conjunction with other initiatives, can make to tackling underage alcohol abuse, and I welcome the cross-party support of the Assembly for that work. Progress is well advanced, and I hope to bring proposals to the Social Development Committee in the summer.

On a final point, young people frequently receive a bad press, particularly in relation to alcohol and its abuse. I do not believe for an instant that those negative images reflect the full and true picture of our young people. An Irish proverb says, "Praise youth and it will flourish". I subscribe firmly to that philosophy; however, we must not only praise, but protect when needed.

3.15 pm

Combating underage drinking is a cross-cutting issue, which I am pleased to bring to the cross-departmental ministerial subcommittee that will meet next week. Underage drinking has an impact on education, health, social development and a plethora of other areas. All those matters must be taken in the round — hence the need for a holistic approach to the problem of alcohol abuse.

Mr McCallister: I thank the proposers of the motion and all those Members who contributed to the debate. It has been a worthwhile exercise, and has shown that the Assembly can lay down a marker about what must be done, and can hold the Executive to account on such an important issue.

Many themes emerged. Ms McCann opened the debate by talking about control, enforcement and purchasing powers. A common theme was parental responsibility; several Members spoke about that, and about parents knowing where their children are. They made the point that everyone has a role to play. My colleague Basil McCrea introduced our amendment, which encourages an all-embracing approach. That theme was picked up by Members throughout the debate and by the Minister, who said that underage drinking had an impact on health and education, and required the involvement of the Police Service and the Department for Social Development, as well as parents, volunteers and wider Government. Everyone has to work together; failure to address the issue will cause us further problems.

Increasing numbers of young people present to the National Health Service with alcohol problems, which are compounded by smoking, crime and antisocial behaviour; moreover, they come into contact with the criminal justice system at a younger age. Other related problems, such as unprotected sex — leading to unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections — cost society, and the individuals involved, dearly. Basil McCrea mentioned failing educational standards and the resulting low self-esteem, while other Members drew our attention to mental-health issues.

There have been some success stories, which is good news. Mr Shannon mentioned Challenge 21, and Miss McIlveen talked about some of the work done by Ards Borough Council. All those initiatives are important, and it is important to replicate successful ventures throughout Northern Ireland and to learn from them.

Members referred to the difficult statistics on binge drinking and its effects across the board. Mr Beggs made an important point, and the Minister touched on it, that whatever the ministerial subcommittee comes up with must be time bound, and we must see outcomes and action. We cannot have just another worthy debate in which Members rehearse all the right words and phrases.

It is important that the ministerial subcommittee gets to grips with this serious problem. Members must ensure that there is follow-up; the relevant Committees must be consulted and must receive feedback, and action must be taken.

Mrs Bradley mentioned the absence of, and lack of direction concerning, parenting skills, which, of course, can play a major role, and she has the support of Members from these Benches on that matter.

The Minister spoke strongly. I suspect that she was wondering why it fell to her to tackle this subject on behalf of the whole Executive. This time, she just got lucky. Nevertheless, she spoke about the scourge of alcohol — I note that I am almost out of time — and quoted the poignant proverb that we should praise our

young people and they will flourish. Therefore, I thank her and other Members for supporting the Ulster Unionist Party amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank all the Members who participated in the debate, which has been sensible and measured. Furthermore, given the levels of antisocial behaviour affecting our communities — fuelled mostly by young people under the influence of drink and, in some instances, drugs — the debate is timely and important.

Several issues were raised during the debate. The Minister for Social Development stated that a review of liquor licensing was conducted in 2004. That review considered key elements — particularly health and public-order implications — and produced recommendations aimed at striking a balance between facilitating the sale of alcohol and public safety and public interests.

As the Minister said, the outworkings of the review were due to be implemented in October 2007. However, I have been informed, and the Minister confirmed earlier, that she has taken time to consider the issues. Therefore, I ask the Minister to write to me with a time frame for the rollout of the review, because, after all, although I am aware that a different Minister was previously involved, we have been waiting since 2004, and it would be useful to get an idea of the positive and negative recommendations of the review.

Basil McCrea rightly informed Members that the Department for Social Development's powers are limited, and, as Jennifer McCann said, when she and I originally tabled the motion, we targeted it at the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety because we wanted some of the issues to be addressed through the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011'. We were advised that responsibility for some of the issues was with the Department for Social Development; therefore, we took that on board and targeted that Department.

Nevertheless, I would be happy for the Health Department to have the lead role, although I agree and accept that DSD, DCAL, DEL and, indeed, the Department of Education also have roles and responsibilities in relation to these matters. However, we took the advice that the Department for Social Development is the lead Department on some of the issues.

I am genuinely concerned about the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. Every week in the Assembly, many debates and questions cover subjects ranging from poverty to education, health, buses and other matters that are relevant to children and young people. As my party's spokesperson on that subject, and as someone who sits on the Bill of Rights Forum's children's working group, I appreciate that all

those issues will be directed towards the ministerial subcommittee, and that we might be left with nothing.

I am concerned because the subcommittee has no powers and is only able to make recommendations and suggestions. Although ideas may be directed to the subcommittee, we must live in the real world and accept that it is the Minister for Social Development who has the sole responsibility and who can take the lead on such matters. Therefore, part of me accepts that although we should ask the ministerial subcommittee to consider the matter, the Minister who can make key changes on some of the issues affecting alcohol and liquor licences is here now. Some of those issues, including that of enforcing off-sales —

Mr B McCrea: I accept that a Minister is present, and she has said quite strongly that she will look at the various issues. As we have discussed, in tackling this issue, there are roles for the police and the Departments of Education; Employment and Learning; Culture, Arts and Leisure; and Finance and Personnel. I take the point that, perhaps, too many other matters are left to the Executive, but this is clearly a cross-cutting issue on which we must work together. We should all talk to our respective Ministers to encourage them to work together on this issue and deliver results.

Ms S Ramsey: I accept that, and it is one of the reasons why Sinn Féin accepted the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. The key issue — and part of the original motion — is that the Minister for Social Development can change the legislation to ensure that off-licences are obliged to print their names on their carrier bags. We need to start somewhere, and that is a key issue.

I am glad that Basil has made that point. In the useful research packs that we received from the Assembly's Research and Library Services — and for which we are grateful — there is a press release, dated 4 January 2003, about an initiative carried out by the PSNI in Coleraine that involved the use of colour-coded carrier bags as part of a counter-attack on underage drinking. Different coloured bags were issued to off-licences in Coleraine to help the police to trace where young offenders had obtained their alcohol. That is a key issue; it is something that the Minister can take on board now and make progress with — whatever recommendations emerge from the ministerial subcommittee. We are making positive changes, and we will see them implemented before the silly season, for the good weather is coming.

Several Members — Michelle McIlveen, Jennifer McCann, Jonathan Craig and Mitchel McLaughlin — mentioned the good work being done in their constituencies. We need to commend councils, community and voluntary organisations and other agencies because

they are producing such work. However, they need help, and they are crying out for it.

I am concerned that, although legislation exists to restrict on-street drinking, residents are asking why restrictions are imposed in some places and not in others. We need to push councils to enforce by-laws, and to ensure a collective approach between Ministers and councils. Ministers should not be let off the hook of their individual responsibilities. If each does his or her bit, the jigsaw will be completed.

Supermarkets also have a part to play. There is concern about the discounting of alcohol. We need to challenge that and to end sponsorship by the makers of alcoholic drinks of sporting and entertainment events that draw a young audience. I do not want to mention the names of alcopops. We all know the meanings of some of them. We talk about WKD: that is what the kids on the street drink. That name was not thought up overnight; it was carefully chosen to target the young people on our streets.

Jim Shannon says that good work is being done by the Challenge 21 campaign, and I agree with him. We need to introduce that. As he said, positive work is being done; we need to commend that. However, it is not being put in legislation. We are faced by forward-thinking off-licences and supermarkets. Community and voluntary groups are also forward-thinking, but we need to ensure that that approach is adopted across the board. There may be good work being carried out in Twinbrook, Poleglass and in other parts of Lagan Valley; the Member for Lagan Valley may know of it. However, kids from those areas can jump on a bus and get their carry-outs from places where the Challenge 21 campaign does not operate.

David Simpson provided health statistics relating to alcohol-related incidents. It is serious when one estimate of the annual total social cost of alcohol misuse exceeds £770 million. That is a substantial sum.

Mitchel McLaughlin and others raised the issue of the age limit for off-sales of alcohol. I agree that we need to consider that, commission research and start the debate on the age limit for access to alcohol from off-licences. That is something that the Minister for Social Development can do now. She does not have to wait for a recommendation from the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. Let DSD commission that research now, and let us debate the issue of the age at which people can access drink from off-licences.

I am happy that the Assembly can be seen to be doing something positive and proactive, but I am disappointed that the Minister has stated that she will not legislate for the need for names on plastic bags. Why will she not do that? A pilot programme that was held in Coleraine proves that it works. From what are we hiding? People

might consider names on plastic bags as free advertising. It is as well that it is not Easter week, or I could say:

“Who fears to speak of Easter week?”

However, who fears to put names on carrier bags so that we can see who is making money on the backs of our communities, and we can challenge them to ensure that they are not selling alcohol to underage drinkers.

3.30 pm

I agree with the Minister that alcohol misuse in the North is not unique; nobody is saying that it is. However, we should make the names on the bags unique: let us be proactive, take the lead and set the agenda.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the levels of underage drinking and calls on the Executive's Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to bring urgently before this Assembly proposals to combat underage drinking.

International Development

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

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly: recognises its responsibility to reflect Northern Ireland's concerns about, and charity towards, the developing world; acknowledges the international support afforded to help resolve Northern Ireland's problems; commits, in line with the United Kingdom and Irish Governments, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, to embedding support for the principles of international development into devolved government, and to supporting the work of Northern Ireland-based organisations involved in the area of international development; notes the report and implementation plan produced in 2003 by the Assembly's All-party Group on International Development; endorses the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and the United Kingdom and Irish Governments' commitments to meet 0.7% Gross National Income contributions to achieving these goals in an agreed timeframe; calls for ethical and fair-trade policies in respect of purchasing by the Assembly Commission, Government departments and agencies, and other public sector bodies; resolves, including through the All-party Group on International Development, to work in partnership with relevant organisations to support long-term international development objectives, including the eradication of poverty, the promotion of conflict resolution, and economic and technical development; and further resolves to promote a strategy for development education that integrates a global dimension into the school curriculum.

Mr Wells: The Member's five minutes are up.
[Laughter.]

Mrs Hanna: I thank the co-proposers of the motion, each of whom, I am sure, will bring their perspective to the debate. It is my hope that the motion will receive the widest possible support. I also thank the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland for its help in drafting the motion, which covers the major aims of the Assembly's all-party group on international development that was established in 1999.

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

Until recently, Northern Ireland was a byword to the rest of the world for community division and strife; it was shorthand for a place in which people seemed to be unable to live together in friendship and harmony. Members know that that was never a full or fair picture. The great Omagh writer Benedict Kiely wrote movingly about the bonds of civility, neighbourliness, sharing of resources, small courtesies, common humanity and kindly instincts that embraced the majority of people, even during the darkest days of the Troubles.

Members also know that the rest of the world — the nations of the European Union; eminent and wise statesmen and influential figures from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and other places; and bodies such as the International Fund for Ireland, which

supported us financially — came to our moral and material aid when we were mired in a seemingly intractable and insoluble impasse.

The truth is that, in our very small corner of the world, we started down the road of a resolution of our centuries-old differences by widening the context of our problems and starting to look outwards. As a society and a community, it is now our turn to give something back to those who are in a worse situation than we are. In other words, it is payback time.

In these early years of a new millennium, as we move into the mainstream of a global economy, we must play our part in tackling those challenges that face the rest of the world: poverty, injustice and inequality, free and fair trade, climate change, global warming and sustainable energy development. Even as we look outwards to the rest of the world, we cannot forget where we came from and how far we have come. Little more than a century and a half ago, this island — including significant parts of what is now Northern Ireland — were racked by famine. Perhaps that collective race memory has encoded in us an instinctive sympathy with those in developing countries who are much worse off than we are. The warmth and generosity of Northern Ireland people and their concerns for the spiritual and material welfare of their fellow human beings has never been challenged. It is a fact that the generosity and kind-heartedness of the population puts Northern Ireland at the top, or near the top, of any table of charitable donations.

International development may be a reserved matter, but education and raising awareness about international development are within the scope of the devolved bodies, whether in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. The all-party group on international development has received nothing but goodwill and encouragement from successive Secretaries of State for International Development. That goodwill and encouragement from the Department for International Development has been mirrored by Irish Aid, the international and overseas development arm of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

We recognise the budgetary constraints and that there is limited scope for funding from the Executive's Programme for Government. However, even a very small resource allocation would send out the message that international development is a priority for us. Nonetheless, expertise and know-how are often as important as money; and although any local expenditure on international development must be economical, efficient and effective, I hope that we can secure modest funding from the UK and Irish governments to implement the work-plan set out by the all-party group in its detailed plan that was published in March 2003 and which is encompassed in this motion. In doing so, I pay tribute to the decades of work and fundraising by the network of international development agencies, whose expertise

and knowledge are unrivalled. We have an obligation and an opportunity to work constructively with them.

I want to mention, briefly, the millennium development goals — targets agreed by the United Nations to identify the major causes of extreme poverty in the world and which should underpin all poverty-reduction policies and activities. In summary, the goals are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development.

The goals and detailed targets set out by the United Nations enable their achievement to be measured and will provide the context in which our priority efforts could be decided. Those include education, health, agriculture, food security, water, sanitation, infrastructure and roads, trade and good governance. The contribution that we make to any sector will address a core cause of poverty. However, as the causes of poverty are so interlinked that one cannot be tackled in isolation, a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach is vital if a real and sustainable reduction in poverty is to be effected.

There are many successful and innovative projects; indeed, the all-party group has met several of them, and Members will certainly be aware of the Corporate Goat, of international aid for people with disabilities, of the Fields of Life project, and many others. Registering all that good work, we can share best and innovative practice, and perhaps working together with the Assembly and the aid agencies we could add value and set new standards in excellence.

Members have been very helpful in ensuring that Fairtrade products such as tea and coffee are used in this Building, but we have to widen that throughout the whole public service into ethical procurement policies in respect of purchasing by the Assembly Commission, Government Departments and agencies, and other public-sector bodies. That is one practical step that we can make in our own backyard. We can do it quickly, and by doing so, we can give leadership and encourage the private sector to do the same. However, if another motion in similar terms comes before the Assembly in the foreseeable future, it will be a sign that we have failed and that all we have done is indulge in pious platitudes.

Development education is not just a matter for the school curriculum; it means taking on board one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century, and important issues such as global warming, climate change and accessing sustainable development sources. It means mainstreaming the thinking on international development into every decision that we take as Assembly Members, whether at Executive or Committee level. I am confident about the commitment of Members now present in the

Chamber; I thank them for that commitment, while acknowledging that I am preaching to the converted. It is a matter of spreading the message to the rest of the 108 Members and beyond, into the 11 new councils and our administrative structures. We cannot do it on our own, and we have got to recruit support from other bodies.

We need to recognise and acknowledge the things that we are really good at such as certain aspects of our education and training systems; grassland management; growing potatoes; fattening beef cattle; excellent dairy produce; design manufacture; and pharmaceuticals. We must be generous with our expertise and share it with people who will never be our competitors. Thousands of people have religious and humanitarian instincts to do the best that they can to help their fellow human beings. Development education means putting human-resource policies in place that encourage and facilitate people to take time out to spend in the developing world, and to bring home the enthusiasm and the inspiration for the rest of us. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I commend Mrs Hanna and her co-sponsors, but particularly Mrs Hanna, on securing the debate today. I praise her for her long-standing commitment to the issue of international development, which is on show for all to see and hear today.

Some people, perhaps even some Members of this institution, will say that we should not be debating this issue today, or, indeed, ever; that we should devote our time in the Assembly to issues that affect solely Northern Ireland and its people. Certainly, as representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, there is a lot for us to do for people here at home. However, I believe that it would be wrong to adopt such a narrow view, and I am sure that many Members of the Assembly, and others, would agree with that. It is entirely appropriate that from time to time we lift our gaze and look beyond our shores at the world around us, especially where the problems others are experiencing make ours, and some of the things that we do here daily, pale in comparison.

There are many reasons why we should look to issues such as international development, and the other issues that have been raised in the debate. One of those reasons is that our own so-called Troubles over the past three-and-a-bit decades have caused us to become parochial. It is understandable sometimes, when one is feted by Prime Ministers and Presidents in the way that we have been, that one starts to think that Northern Ireland is the centre of the universe and that there is nothing beyond these shores. I am waiting for an intervention from Mr Wells, perhaps declaring some part of South Down as the centre of the universe. It is perhaps not quite there, but it is close to it — I think that it is in Strangford.

3.45 pm

Sometimes, as elected representatives and as a country, we are far too insular. As Mrs Hanna said, the world has taken an interest in Northern Ireland's problems over the years. Perhaps that interest has sometimes been malign and not for the best. However, many well-meaning individuals, organisations and countries took an interest in our small corner of the world. They offered help, encouragement and goodwill — and even finances — to help us.

Sometimes the issue of international development is considered in a traditional way as requiring monetary or material assistance. In Northern Ireland, as we move out of a period of sustained conflict, perhaps we have learned some lessons that we can share with other people around the world. That is as important to international development as anything monetary or material that we could offer. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting a senior delegation of Sri Lankan parliamentarians, who have their own development, including political, problems. We can offer something on the political development front as well.

The main reason that we should show an interest in a subject such as that that has been outlined in the motion is because people in Northern Ireland are further ahead of their political representatives on the issue. They have had a long-standing interest in the issues of international development in various guises. The all-party group works closely with the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA), which represents 19 agencies and has 150,000 active financial or campaigning supporters. That represents nearly one in 10 people in Northern Ireland. Indeed, many other formal and less-formal organisations work on the matter. There is a well-recognised generosity among the people of Northern Ireland generally, especially in emergencies. Each year, hundreds upon hundreds of people go to less-well-off countries around the world to offer their skills and expertise. The people of Northern Ireland have shown a daily interest in the subject.

Although international development is a reserved matter, the other devolved regions of the United Kingdom already support international development in the ways that their devolved settlements allow. Scotland has an international development fund that focuses on Malawi, and a similar, smaller fund that has had some informal links with Lesotho has been set up in Wales. There may be an opportunity for Northern Ireland to do something similar to other UK regions. That may not happen immediately, but it could be developed over time. I notice that Wales's engagement has only happened in recent years as it has become more settled in its own devolved structure. I support the establishment of a twinning arrangement akin to that of Scotland, which was described in the previous report of the all-party group.

Above all, supporting international development is the right thing to do. It is good for our country to get involved in such issues, to show an interest and to do what we can to resolve some of the problems that have seemed so intractable over the years.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. Ba mhaith liom fosta mo chomhghairdeas a dhéanamh le Cathaoirleach an ghrúpa as an ábhar seo a thógáil sa Tionól inniu.

I support the motion. As a member of the all-party group on international development, I thank its Chairperson and other members for bringing this important issue to the House. It is an important issue that deserves the full attention of the Assembly. I was unable to attend the meeting at which the motion was agreed, but I acknowledge the fact that the Chairperson informed me of the motion and asked me to sign it. It went to the Business Committee more quickly than I thought it would, so I was unable to sign it, and I apologise for that.

Sinn Féin totally supports this comprehensive and detailed motion. It reflects well the ethos of the all-party group, the Assembly and the Irish people's recognition of and contribution to international development work. All Members are aware of the many groups that carry out such valuable work in the field; the motion recognises that contribution and commits us to ongoing support. Indeed, a number of those groups have already made presentations to the all-party group, and their work is impressive. In particular, I commend the many individuals who volunteer for that type of work, often in difficult circumstances, which takes them away from their families for long periods.

The Assembly should support and promote international development work in whatever way possible. That can be demonstrated in a practical way through the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council by ensuring that the commitments that have been made by the Irish and British Governments to the United Nations millennium development goals are achieved within an agreed time frame.

On a practical level — and the motion touches on this — we should support the Assembly Commission in promoting ethical and Fairtrade options. Carmel Hanna mentioned that matter, and I support her views. Derry City Council's catering facilities have adopted fair-trade purchasing policies recently. MLAs, particularly those who also represent district councils, should ask that our facilities follow the examples set by Derry City Council and the Assembly Commission.

I support the motion's call for development education to be included in the school curriculum. The Education Minister was personally involved in development work

in Latin America, so I have no doubt that she will support us in adding that to the curriculum.

International support was critical to our political process. Carmel Hanna touched on that issue, and the motion acknowledges it. We now know that our experience has been of benefit to other people. We should support all aspects of international development. We should afford ourselves every opportunity to put our good intentions into action. Sinn Féin supports the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I join others in welcoming this important debate. In particular, I pay tribute to the Member for South Belfast Mrs Hanna for her long-standing interest in these issues, and for continually reminding the House of our obligations to other nations of the world.

The people of Northern Ireland have for many years shown considerable generosity to the developing world. The 2005 report 'Is it worth more than small change?' outlined that giving to overseas aid or disaster funds was the third most popular form of giving in Northern Ireland.

As a devolved Assembly, it is our duty to mirror our people's generosity to the developing world. During turbulent times in the past, Northern Ireland benefited significantly from grants, special funds, and from the European Union. In many ways, we are a legacy of the benefits of international support. As such, now that our situation has improved, we should provide help and support to countries that face direr circumstances than we ever did.

Any commitment to international development should not be taken lightly — it is a daunting task because the issues are so broad. It requires a commitment to take people out of poverty — often in countries where poverty is the norm — and providing them with aid, if that is the most appropriate way of improving their lives. Trade links also must be strengthened if a country is to develop its independence.

We take so much for granted. Improvements can always be made — and we have significant problems of our own — but we no longer live in the midst of violent conflict. Our children have an excellent education system, and we are able to access healthcare of a high standard when we require it. We have access to basic amenities, such as water, sewerage and transport. However, access to those commodities is denied to millions of people throughout the world.

There are a number of methods that we can employ to address international development. As Simon Hamilton has outlined, we can follow the example of other devolved institutions in the United Kingdom, which I congratulate on their clear commitment to international development.

There are good local examples, such as Coleraine Borough Council's development of important links with the people of Malawi. We should encourage that sort of local government activity. Those financial contributions have shown a commitment, in real terms, to dealing with the problems that face the developing world. As an Assembly, and through the all-party group, various strategies are available.

The Assembly has a duty to show a commitment to those goals which aim to provide people throughout the world with the basic entitlements that we take for granted. We must help on issues such as the eradication of poverty, education provision, equality, and reducing child mortality.

There are simple things that we can achieve easily in the Assembly. For example, we have increased our use of Fairtrade products. However, through the all-party group, we must develop meaningful partnerships with relevant organisations that can deliver "implementable" strategies — I am not sure how Hansard will make sense of that — to support long-term international development objectives.

Today, I had a productive meeting with representatives from NI-CO, which provides technical assistance to developing countries throughout the world. We should be looking towards that type of transfer of skills and expertise. NI-CO has already invented a wheel that we could use. Equally, in Northern Ireland we must look at what we can offer other countries and their people that is unique to us and beneficial.

We must take the first step on this issue, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Kennedy. Implementable is easy enough for you to say.

Mr B Wilson: I also thank Carmel Hanna for giving Members the opportunity to discuss this important issue.

People in Northern Ireland have a long record of support for aid organisations and their appeals, from the famine in Ethiopia to the droughts in India and the floods in Bangladesh. Traditionally, we have regarded such disasters as acts of God, over which we have no control. However, in recent years such disasters have increased in intensity and frequency. Scientists suggest that that is because of climate change, for which we have some responsibility.

Many local aid organisations recognise that responsibility: this year, Trócaire's Lenten campaign focused on the effects of climate change on people in the developing world. As part of that campaign, I hosted a meeting in Stormont that highlighted the Trócaire report, 'Tackling Climate Injustice'. The guest speakers at the meeting, an economist from El Salvador and a scientist from Kenya, outlined the impact that climate change was having on peoples' lives.

In Kenya, farmers are suffering because nothing happens when it is supposed to — traditional rainy seasons are no longer predictable, and the number of droughts has doubled since the late 1970s. When the rains come, they come in torrents, and that is having a disastrous effect on food security. As crops fail and livestock die, increasing numbers of people are becoming reliant on food aid.

The experience in El Salvador is similar with extended periods of drought in the dry season and more intense and prolonged rain in the rainy season. There has been an increase in tropical-cyclone activity in the north Atlantic over the past 30 years. In the past decade, there have been three times as many disasters as there were in the 1970s. Those disasters directly impact on peoples' lives by causing death, destroying homes and crops and polluting water sources.

The World Health Organization estimates that climate change in developing countries is responsible for 150,000 deaths each year because of the increases in the number of cases of diarrhoea, malaria and malnutrition. People in developing countries are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because that is where the most extreme changes are taking place. The majority of the world's poorest people live in rural areas and rely on agriculture, which means that they rely heavily on the weather. Even the smallest change in the weather can make poor people more vulnerable because of the impact on basic resources.

In addition, the existing levels of poverty mean that those communities are less able to cope with the impact of changes. People in many of the poorest countries have to adapt their lives to extreme change in climate and require large-scale investment in adaptation projects or face a large-scale loss of life. In a recent report, Oxfam warned that £25 billion was required to fund adaptation projects in poor countries. It added that developing countries cannot, and should not, be expected to:

"foot the bill for the impact of rich countries' emissions."

The Green Party believes that the polluter must pay; the countries responsible for the emissions should provide additional financial assistance.

4.00 pm

The population of Northern Ireland has a record of giving generously to aid organisations. However, we also have one of the highest levels of carbon emissions — 35% higher than the rest of the UK. The average person in Ireland emits 100 times more carbon dioxide than the average person in Uganda, but it is the Ugandan who suffers the effects of climate change. Our generous donations are, to a considerable extent, undermined by our high levels of carbon emissions.

Although the Assembly does not play a direct role in supplying international aid, we should use our influence

to press the developed world to accept its responsibility. We must reduce our own carbon emissions to below 80% of the 1990 levels by 2050, and must ensure that funding for adaptation projects is additional and not taken from the existing aid budget.

I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: The wording of the motion takes the biscuit for being probably the longest ever in the Chamber. It took the clerk almost five minutes to introduce it. However, the fact that it is wordy does not detract from the fact that it is worthy.

As a child, in reference to those less fortunate than ourselves, my parents instilled in me the importance of the adage:

“To whom much is given, much is expected.”

That saying sums up Northern Ireland's current position. We have had problems with child poverty, rates, and fuel poverty among the elderly; however, when compared with other countries, our problems are minimal. That puts a responsibility on our shoulders to help as much as is practicable.

This is tha soart o' wae ithers tuk whun they gien help tae oor sma' kintra in tiems o' need.

Indeed ther er kintra's laer Ameriky whau oarganise changing wi yung yins fae puir femelies.

En ther flichts paid tae gaun tae Americky whor they er takkin caer o' by femelies whau wush tae gie them tha simmer o' ther lives.

Whun we er tha thank fu fowk an benefits fae these femelies iver mony years, thro peece fundin etc, shud we no pass oan tha benefits whu we er abel tae dae sie.

Other countries adopted that attitude when they helped our small country in times of need, and countries such as America still organise exchanges with Northern Ireland whereby children from poorer families have their flights paid for and are taken care of by families who want to give those children the summer of their lives. We are grateful recipients of such largesse and have received many years of Peace funding. Should we not, therefore, pass our own benefits on, now that we are in a position to do so?

We have all heard the statistics and have seen the heartbreaking adverts on television that portray the awful lives of children and adults throughout the world. For example, a child dies every five seconds. To put that in perspective, during this five-minute speech, 60 children will die because they do not have enough food to survive. That shocking statistic leaves no doubt in my mind that something can and must be done, and not only by the generous people whose hearts break a little more each time they watch 'Children in Need' or 'Comic Relief', and who put their hands in their pockets to make a difference. The Assembly can do something, too.

In February 2008 my colleague Sammy Wilson tabled a question, and the written answer showed that the Department for Regional Development had spent approximately £60,000 a year on good, clean, bottled water. Across all the Departments, that amounts to a massive amount of money simply to provide employees with bottled water.

What difference could that money make? In a project in Malawi, run by the Elim International Missions department in Newtownards, a donation of £15 per month will feed, clothe and educate an orphan at a boarding school. Malawi has been mentioned once or twice during the debate. That £60,000 bottled-water bill has the potential to save more than 3,500 lives per year and break the cycle of poverty by ensuring that those children receive an education and subsequently gain employment. That is one example of how Government Departments can make a difference — by not drinking bottled water.

It is incumbent on us all to support the motion, step up and ensure that we play our part on the international stage. Northern Ireland is well known as a small country with a big heart, renowned for its charitable giving. Not many people here could turn their back and not give to a starving child. It is past time that the Assembly reflected the views of the people that it represents. Small things can make a big difference, as the charities tell us. For example, instead of drinking a can of Coke that costs 50p per day, a person could give that money to a charity to provide the £15 a month that it takes to save the life of a child in Malawi.

The Assembly must set an example and play its part, and the first step would be the recognition of our role on the international humanitarian stage. Government bodies can begin to make a difference by ensuring that the coffee supplied is Fairtrade and is bought at a reasonable price. We must not waste our natural resources by using bottled water. We can and must be a catalyst for change and make what difference we can.

There is a saying that is often used in the Assembly, and I will say it again:

“It is a fool who does nothing because he cannot do everything.”

Let us not be foolish at the expense of the countries and their inhabitants who need our help and support. Join with the proposer and us all in supporting the motion.

Mr Attwood: I join my colleagues in welcoming the debate. It might be a useful rule of thumb if, in future, the party Whips agreed to ensure that international motions are regularly debated in the House so that we can attend to international issues in the way in which we attend to local and domestic issues. I congratulate Carmel Hanna and her colleagues on tabling the motion. I am sure that they would agree that the bigger acknowledgement should be given to those in the Public Gallery

and in other places who bring these issues to our attention day in and day out.

I want to address one aspect of the motion in particular. The motion states that the Assembly resolves:

“to work in partnership with relevant organisations to support... the promotion of conflict resolution”.

Several decades ago, the late Frank Wright gave a lecture at Queen's University — Jim Wells and people of my vintage will remember him. He said in one of his books that national conflicts, when they are fully developed, revolve around issues of law, order and justice. Consequently, in order to resolve national conflicts fully, they must be resolved around issues of law, order and justice. When we apply that thesis to our conflict and other conflicts, we see the truth of it. At any one time in the past 30 or 40 years, the conflict in this part of Ireland was defined by unjust laws, kangaroo courts, the killing of innocent people or other examples of a lack of law, order and justice.

The thesis is further proven by the fact that, over and above the institutional architecture of the Good Friday Agreement, the agreement outlined five sectors or areas in which resolution was necessary to resolve our conflict. Policing was dealt with by the Patton Commission; criminal justice was dealt with through a review; an Equality Commission was established; a Human Rights Commission was established; and mechanisms were put in place for the release of prisoners. That demonstrated to all of us, and to other parts of the world, that if we deal with issues of law, order and justice, we can resolve conflict.

That is why it is so important that that motion states that the all-party group should work with relevant organisations to support the promotion of conflict resolution in other parts of the world. If we have learnt anything from what we have done over the past 10 years to resolve our conflict of the past 40 years, it should be that issues of law, order and justice have to be resolved. We must apply those lessons, where relevant, to other parts of the world that are in conflict.

That was proved when Mary Robinson came to Belfast in December 2000. At a trade union conference, she said that the elements of the Good Friday Agreement that were of most interest to the international world were those that dealt with human rights.

This week, of all weeks, when proposals for our own bill of rights have caused division, I hope that we can revisit the issue in the spirit of what Mary Robinson said on that occasion. At one stage, in recent times, the world looked to the North to see what could be learned from our experiences of issues such as human rights and to see how those experiences might be applicable to other conflicts.

The real measure of the motion will be how it is brought into mainstream government practice and political

conduct. It is how we in the Assembly should judge ourselves, and should be judged, over the coming years. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister should bring a paper to the next Executive meeting that asks Ministers to direct their permanent secretaries to identify opportunities for making the motion's intentions central to how each Department conducts itself. This most important issue should be dealt with by applying the ethos of the motion to departmental policy, staff, training, equipment and other resources.

Ms Purvis: I thank Carmel Hanna for bringing the motion to the House. Like Mr Attwood did, I also thank all those organisations that are involved in international development work.

One in 10 boys and girls in our world dies before his or her third birthday — many from totally preventable diseases. Some 850 million people go to bed hungry every night. Do we care? I think that we do, but to care is not enough. Concern must be followed by action.

I recently had the opportunity to visit South Africa, which is a country rebuilding itself after decades under an apartheid regime. That legacy presents the country with massive challenges. Poverty and housing are among the biggest challenges that it faces. I visited a farming area in a wine region where coloured farm workers were paid in tots — alcohol — not in cash or food. As a result of that, alcoholism is endemic among the region's men and women. Children there are born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Domestic violence is viewed as being the norm. Children in those communities witness and suffer horrendous violence. They lose parents in violent circumstances and are often left to fend for themselves, without food and with little or no access to school.

Charitable work helps to tackle poverty and other issues that those children and their families endure. I visited the Lynedoch Sustainability Institute near Stellenbosch. That is an example of a programme that works. Through charitable donations and the building of an educational institution for international students, it has introduced sustainable energy production and recycling of waste, and it grows its own produce. The institute has opened a school for the children of the farm workers, and those children receive much more than an education. They receive two meals a day and are taught by educational psychologists, who help to deal with the trauma that they have experienced in their lives.

I met one young boy whose mother killed his father because she was in an abusive relationship. His mother then started a relationship with another man, who then killed her. That boy was 13 years old, and he alone looked after his younger brothers and sisters. He had the opportunity to go to school, at which he studied film making. It proved tremendous for him. He went to

Norway and won an award for his work. All that was possible because of his schooling at the institute.

Healthcare is provided for each child at the school, but key to the institute is its sustainable development strategy. That is just one example of international development's working in partnership with a local community to alleviate poverty and associated issues.

Many organisations in Northern Ireland are doing great work, and the Assembly should support and facilitate that work. Our community is one of the most generous in the UK, and the Assembly needs to play its part.

4.15 pm

The Scottish Parliament has dedicated £3 million a year to Malawi. It has set up Scotland-Malawi trade fairs and is forging links in order to address issues affecting Malawi. The National Assembly for Wales has introduced a programme called Wales for Africa, which supports organisations working in international development. It is creating links between communities in Wales and those in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also aiming to make Wales the first Fairtrade country in the world.

Where does the Northern Ireland Assembly stand on international development? We have an all-party group on international development, and I thank Carmel Hanna for heading that group and for her work in previous years on international development. That group should co-ordinate the Assembly's commitment to alleviate extreme poverty and world hunger. Active groups are also working on that issue and could support the all-party group.

International development is a cross-departmental issue, and the Assembly has a key role to play. Alex Attwood talked about mainstreaming issues in the motion across all Departments, which would include the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning. We could help optimise opportunities to enable the business community to play its part. We should identify ways to influence Westminster and other Governments to meet their commitments to achieve the millennium development goals.

I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that it has not escaped your notice that Malawi has been mentioned a few times today — I recall with fondness you and I setting off to go to Zomba. Danny Kennedy quite rightly identified Zomba as a working model for linkages between the local councils of both countries. A presentation was made in the Long Gallery some time ago, and I hope that Members examine that linkage because it is a good model of practice.

The University of Ulster at Coleraine is linked with a university in Malawi. The Causeway Hospital — which sometimes gets bad publicity, but is an excellent hospital — is conducting marvellous work with one of Zomba's hospitals. Local schools are linked, as are

farming organisations and community groups. Members of the Fire and Rescue Service from Coleraine went there last year and trained local firemen on health and safety issues. I think that they also bought them a transistor radio so that they would not get bored because they have nothing else.

You will recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the schools there had no pens, paper, desks, or glass in the window frames. Today, thanks to the linkage between Coleraine and Malawi, those schools are now fully equipped.

I am sure that you will also remember that the children were no different to our children; their ambitions were exactly the same. The one difference was that they spoke two languages, which was in spite of the fact that their education conditions were appalling. I have fond memories of that place. I am proud that my wife is going out there in June for the third year running, and she will help to build a school and an orphanage for children who never get to attend school. They are called bush-children. Thanks to the generosity of local people, those children will get an education and escape from the extreme poverty that they live in.

It is opportune that the Assembly is debating this issue. When you and I went to Malawi, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Assembly was suspended. Indeed, during suspension, the only group that met was the all-party group on international development. I applaud Carmel Hanna for insisting that that work continued. I also commend her for proposing what Jim Shannon said was one of the longest motions ever to come before the Assembly.

We have emerged from the suffering of the past. It is opportune that we now stretch out the hand of friendship to other parts of the world.

Although Malawi, the "warm heart of Africa", has been mentioned many times, today we are focused on events in the neighbouring country of Zimbabwe. Please God let its true election results be honoured so that Robert Mugabe will be nothing but a bad memory. Because of his dictatorship, cruelty and barbarity, Zimbabwe is probably now registered as one of the poorest countries in the world, despite the fact that 20 years ago it had significant natural wealth.

It is important that the motion is not just for Hansard, but that it is the foundation block upon which the Assembly builds its worldwide reputation for how it deals with international — I was about to use the word "aid" but I am glad that I did not — because international development, which is a better word, is a two-way process. If the Assembly simply believes that it is giving aid to other countries, it has failed, because it has not recognised the enormous benefits that it will receive in return. Sometimes we must search to discover what they are — respect for the environment, a recognition of differences in culture and language, and other matters that can help to create a global community

— all of which are important. I hope and pray that the Assembly will continue to do what it has been doing so well. Derry City Council was one of the first councils in Northern Ireland to make a formal arrangement through its twinning with Kebele 37 in Addis Ababa. I am not sure if that still exists. However, I can tell the House that the Zomba project has brought enormous benefits.

I am surprised, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you are about to call time on me, given that you were very much part of that endeavour. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: There should be no surprise there, Mr Dallat.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas an domhain orm a labhairt ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo inniu.

I am glad that the Assembly has the opportunity to debate this comprehensive motion. Before I respond to Members' points, I want to add my endorsement that the Executive and the Assembly has a role to play in enabling and supporting international development. The Programme for Government recognises that the Assembly will develop mutually beneficial and practical co-operation with the British and Irish Governments in tackling major issues that confront us all. International development presents such an opportunity. Indeed, the First Minister acknowledged that in response to a question from Mrs Hanna in the Assembly on 4 February 2008.

At the outset, I want to join other Members in welcoming the hard-working people who are present in the Gallery today who have been daily involved in international development work for a long time.

There has always been a close affinity between people here and the developing world. That affinity is evidenced by the support of non-governmental organisations in providing direct assistance through disaster relief; humanitarian-aid activities and development. Indeed, a measure of any society is the support that it offers to the wider international community and, more specifically, that which it offers to countries that are in poverty or that are experiencing conflict. That wider global vision complements our own growth and development and is exemplified by the contribution that the international community has made to our peace and prosperity, to which several Members have referred.

Although international development is a reserved matter, under the Good Friday Agreement the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are responsible for dealing with and co-ordinating the work of the Executive on external relations.

Níor chóir dúinn muid féin a scaradh ónar gcuid freagrachtaí idirnáisiúnta; ach caithfimid a bheith réadúil faoi cad é atá indéanta. Caithfimid a aithint

conas agus cá huair a thig linn cuidiú go héifeachtach leis an fhorbairt idirnáisiúnta agus sinn ag roinnt ár n-eolais.

The Assembly must not insulate itself from its international responsibilities. It must be realistic about what is achievable and must identify how and when it can be effective in aiding development and sharing its experience. The activities of the Executive and the Assembly on the international stage must be underpinned by a strategic overview. It is in that context and the Executive's strategic priorities that international development will be taken forward.

The motion proposes that the Assembly:

“recognises its responsibility to reflect Northern Ireland's concerns about, and charity towards, the developing world;”.

Mar fhocal scoir, tacaím leis an rún agus cuirim fáilte roimh obair an ghrúpa uile-pháirtí ar an fhorbairt idirnáisiúnta.

The Members who tabled the motion rightly state that the Assembly has a responsibility to reflect concerns about the developing world. As members of a fully inclusive democratic society, we must be willing to play our part in promoting the better well-being of the wider international community. The Executive and Assembly support the work that is being undertaken by Departments, Government agencies and other bodies that are involved in providing support and assistance to other countries. The Assembly should also recognise the importance of developing informed public support for, and understanding of, the reduction of poverty and increased overseas development.

The motion further proposes that the Assembly:

“acknowledges the international support afforded to help resolve Northern Ireland's problems;”.

Although great strides have been taken to resolve political, economic and social problems, there is no doubt that the significant international support from around the world has been of benefit. Carmel Hanna highlighted the United States and the European Union as deserving particular mention. I wish to add that much inspiration came from South Africa — a nation with a troubled history and a high level of poverty — when it took time out to support political developments here.

The motion continues by proposing that the Assembly:

“commits, in line with the United Kingdom and Irish Governments, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, to embedding support for the principles of international development into devolved government, and to supporting the work of Northern Ireland-based organisations involved in the area of international development;”.

Although Westminster retains responsibility for international relations, there is scope for the Executive and Assembly to play a role in the international community. It must be remembered that our Scottish and Welsh colleagues have several years' experience of

progressing their international development strategies, but it is worth noting that several Departments provide support for international development. For example, and as has been mentioned, NI-CO, in partnership with several Departments, provides support and assistance to several emerging countries on a multitude of projects. Several locally based and highly professional NGOs are world leaders in international development. The Executive and Assembly will take their international responsibilities seriously and support the work on international development.

At meetings with the Department for International Development in Britain and the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, both expressed their willingness to embark on a joint working relationship with OFMDFM and the Executive, and we will continue down that road.

The four Members who tabled the motion also propose that the Assembly:

“notes the report and implementation plan produced in 2003 by the Assembly’s All-party Group on International Development;”.

I welcome that report, which illustrates the good work that can be done when parties work together towards a common goal. The benefits to Northern Ireland of supporting developing countries, as outlined in that report, highlight the importance of continued involvement.

The motion further proposes that the Assembly:

“endorses the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and the United Kingdom and Irish Governments’ commitments to meet 0.7% Gross National Income contributions to achieving these goals in an agreed timeframe;”.

The eight millennium development goals (MDGs) range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education — all by the target date of 2015 — and they form a blueprint agreed by every country and all the world’s leading development institutions. It is right and fitting for the Assembly to endorse those goals and support the actions of the British and Irish Governments in their attempts to achieve them by 2015. In addition to the direct decisions of the British and Irish Governments, progress towards the MDGs will be affected by several policies that the Assembly can influence; for example, the policy on trade and sustainable development can contribute. Ministers and Departments should be mindful of the impact that any of their decisions may have on achieving the MDGs.

The motion also proposes that the Assembly:

“calls for ethical and fair-trade policies in respect of purchasing by the Assembly Commission, Government departments and agencies, and other public sector bodies;”.

Last month, I had the privilege of meeting a delegation that included farmers who benefit from free-trade arrangements. I strongly support the notion and practice of free trade and the ending of exploitation.

4.30 pm

I support the motion. From March 2006, guidance on procurement of ethical and Fairtrade products has been in place for Departments under Department of Finance and Personnel procurement guidance note 02/06, which provides guidance on how that approach can be implemented in procurement practice under the EU procurement rules and policy, with the aim of promoting fair and ethical trading through public-sector procurement.

Members also proposed that the Assembly and the all-party group on international development resolve to work in partnership with relevant organisations to support long-term international development objectives, including the eradication of poverty, the promotion of conflict resolution and economic and technical development.

I said at the outset of my remarks that the Executive and the Assembly have a role to play in international development. It is inevitable — and it makes sense — that the Executive and the Assembly work in partnership to develop the aims and objectives of international development.

As for the specific objectives that have been mentioned, the Assembly has a responsibility to support the eradication of poverty and to support economic and technical development. There is no doubt that we can have a direct influence on the promotion of conflict resolution. Several Members have assisted internationally in that sphere, and that has been recognised and welcomed. I am proud of the efforts of Members to share experiences and end conflicts in areas such as Palestine and Israel, Spain and the Basque nations, Iraq and Sri Lanka. We will continue to play an increasing role in that area of work, and we are actively considering options to take the matter forward.

Members also proposed that the Assembly resolve to promote a strategy for the development of education that integrates a global dimension into the school curriculum. In supporting the motion, I am advised by the Department of Education that a revised curriculum is being introduced into schools on a phased basis. Citizenship and global issues are key parts of the revised curriculum, and a full programme of training and guidance materials will be provided to teachers to support them in delivery. The revised curriculum aims to prepare young people for life and work in the twenty-first century. Within that revised curriculum, citizenship education aims to develop the capacity of all young people to participate positively and effectively in society, to influence democratic processes and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives as local and global citizens.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment worked on the global dimension during

the curriculum review, and its input is reflected in the statutory minimum content and guidance materials for local and global citizenship at primary and post-primary levels.

Mar fhocal scoir, tacaím leis an rún agus cuirim fáilte roimh obair an ghrúpa uile-pháirtí ar an fhorbairt idirnáisiúnta.

I support the motion and welcome the further work of the all-party group on international development. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate on this extremely important issue. It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the chairperson of the all-party group who has been — I was going to say a Boadicea, but that may not be the appropriate term — a Trojan in driving forward efforts to address this important issue. Without her enthusiasm and drive, we would not be debating the issue, and the all-party group would not have achieved anything without her hard work.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland. A very active, far-seeing and hard-working group of voluntary agencies in Northern Ireland are members of CADA. Other groups such as Church organisations and Fields of Life play an equally important role.

It is also appropriate that we are debating this issue this week, because on Thursday we welcome our fifth head of state to the Assembly. We have had a visit from Her Majesty The Queen, the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, the President of Croatia, the President of the United States of America on two occasions and, on Thursday, we will host a visit from the President of Burundi.

He is a gentleman who will be of considerable interest to many in this Chamber, because he was formerly involved in terrorist activity and is now pursuing a genuinely peaceful role in trying to rebuild his country. Therefore, he has a very interesting story to tell, and I urge MLAs who have been invited to the various functions to attend them and to hear his presentation. I have not attempted to pronounce his name because I think that I would do him a disservice —

Mr Weir: Mr President.

Mr Wells: Mr President — yes, I think that is as far as I can go. We are all looking forward to that visit with great interest.

My own personal experience on this issue is largely based on the influence of my daughters, who have worked with aid agencies such as Tearfund in countries such as Burkino Faso, Chad, Mexico and Malawi, which my eldest daughter will be visiting this summer. I have visited some of the poorest areas of Kenya. I am told that, in African terms, Kenya is a relatively wealthy country.

However, some of what I observed there was, frankly, soul-destroying. It was absolute, grim poverty, to an extent that no one in Northern Ireland can really appreciate.

I am on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, ably chaired by Mr Kennedy, and we have recently considered the issue of child poverty. Although Northern Ireland has children who are genuinely living in poor households, when one sees real child poverty in Africa, the situation here is nothing compared to what our fellow human beings have to survive in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr Shannon made the very pertinent point that one child dies every five seconds in sub-Saharan Africa. That means that, during the time that this debate has been going on, 721 children will have died — or should I say 722, or 723. That is an indication of what is happening there. Out there, in the real world, there are people dying in abject poverty — as Ms Purvis said, 850 million people go to bed at night hungry. That is an absolutely intolerable situation.

A recurring theme in Members' comments was a sense of frustration that the Assembly seems unable to do something about that situation, to reach out to others and do something positive. I am envious of the work being done by the Scottish Parliament, which has a twinning arrangement with Malawi that seems to be successful. I note with interest what the National Assembly for Wales is doing in places such as Lesotho, and yet we are told that, as an Assembly, our role is extremely limited.

If nothing else, if this debate at least enables us to explore what the Assembly can do to assist with international development, it will have been a tremendous success. I listened with great interest to the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat — it is unfortunate that he is not here, because I am about to make history by praising him. What has he done wrong? [*Laughter.*] Get him back in the Chamber very quickly. The lead role that Coleraine Borough Council has taken — and I know that you will not interrupt me on this, Mr Deputy Speaker — has been an example to local government in Northern Ireland, given what it has achieved through the Zomba project.

Mr Weir: A cross-party delegation from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) connected with the Zomba project visited Malawi last year. It operated at both officer and member level. It certainly brought home to those involved with that project the significant need for western involvement. Obviously that connection was initiated in the Coleraine area, but I am glad to see that it now extends beyond that area.

Mr Wells: I am grateful for that intervention because it has allowed the honourable Member for East London-

derry to return, so that I can continue to praise him and his council for the excellent work that they are doing in Malawi through the Zomba project. I know that NILGA has been very supportive of that, so perhaps other councils can follow that lead.

A wide range of comments were made during the debate. The chairman of our all-party group, Carmel Hanna, introduced the motion and highlighted the issues of global poverty, climate change and inequality. Those were recurring themes throughout the debate. She also reminded us of the famine, which afflicted not only the Irish Republic, but parts of what is now Northern Ireland. So we as a community have suffered, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why we are so keen to assist when there are disasters throughout the world, and so positive in our support of various aid agencies.

Mrs Hanna also highlighted the work of Fields of Life and the importance of spreading the message, not only to the converted who are in the Chamber — because anyone who has sat through the debate will have some commitment to overseas development — but to the greater mass of politicians in Northern Ireland, who may not be quite so interested in the subject.

Simon Hamilton said that it was entirely appropriate that we look beyond our shores and that the world does not revolve around the centre of the universe, which is, of course, South Down. We should look well beyond that at the needs of others. He brought up the interesting point that the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland has 150,000 supporters. Therefore, if only for purely personal reasons, we should look after those people, because they are voters who have concerns about this issue.

Mr McCartney highlighted the work of all-Ireland aid agencies. Some very important agencies, such as Trócaire, are involved in such work north and south of the border. There are variations on that theme, because Northern Ireland, all-Ireland and UK-based agencies are working together harmoniously on the important issue of international development.

It was important that Mr Kennedy had an opportunity to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and he emphasised the need for access to basic services. He, too, spoke highly of the work of Coleraine Borough Council and the Zomba project, but he was the first Member to mention the importance of Fairtrade. The most basic thing that we, as a Province, should do is ensure that, given the billions of pounds that are spent on products from overseas, there is a Fairtrade policy for all Government procurement. That would do an enormous amount to benefit those who are less fortunate.

I expected Brian Wilson to highlight environmental issues, and he did not disappoint me. He brought up the extremely important issue of climate change and

the fact that we use over 100 times more of the world's resources than people use in other parts of the world. Northern Ireland's 1·7 million people have a greater demand on the world's resources than most west African countries. It is not that those countries use few resources, but that we use so many. If everyone in the world wished to consume the world's resources at the rate at which we do in Northern Ireland, they would require four planets. Mr Wilson was absolutely right to raise that issue.

Jim Shannon's comments were particularly appropriate. Departments are spending £60,000 on bottled water. If we scrapped that, how many children could we support at £15 a month? That was an excellent point. He also raised the crucial issue about a child dying every five seconds, which is a terrible indictment of society.

Alex Attwood's contribution went over my head. He went into deep constitutional political issues, which were not particularly relevant. Fortunately, Ms Purvis brought us back down to earth, as it were, by recounting her experiences in South Africa, which I found very useful.

Finally, Mr Dallat gave the House an in-depth description of the work that has been carried out in Coleraine. I am sure that the Deputy Speaker will not stop me from praising Coleraine Borough Council and saying that that was a very useful contribution — well done, Coleraine.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given your praise of Mr Dallat, I regret very much that the clocks changed the other night, because it means that it will be several hours before we can see the blue moon. *[Laughter.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly: recognises its responsibility to reflect Northern Ireland's concerns about, and charity towards, the developing world; acknowledges the international support afforded to help resolve Northern Ireland's problems; commits, in line with the United Kingdom and Irish Governments, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, to embedding support for the principles of international development into devolved government, and to supporting the work of Northern Ireland-based organisations involved in the area of international development; notes the report and implementation plan produced in 2003 by the Assembly's All-party Group on International Development; endorses the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and the United Kingdom and Irish Governments' commitments to meet 0·7% Gross National Income contributions to achieving these goals in an agreed timeframe; calls for ethical and fair-trade policies in respect of purchasing by the Assembly Commission, Government departments and agencies, and other public sector bodies; resolves, including through the All-party Group on International Development, to work in partnership with relevant organisations to support long-term international development objectives, including the eradication of poverty, the promotion of conflict resolution, and economic and technical development; and further resolves to promote a strategy for development education that integrates a global dimension into the school curriculum.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately 12 minutes.

Mr Newton: I thank the Business Committee for recognising the importance of this matter and for allowing this debate to take place. I want to put on record my gratitude to the staff and members of the East Belfast Partnership, especially the volunteer members, who have done so much to publicise the need for this project to be delivered. I will come to that aspect later.

4.45 pm

It would be remiss of me not to thank officials from the Department for Social Development's Belfast Regeneration Office, because they have suffered the same frustration as many of us in attempting to get projects under way. That frustration has not been caused by a lack of due diligence or professionalism.

The Newtownards Road is a main entry point into East Belfast. It is situated on one of Belfast's busiest intersections — the junction of the Short Strand, Bridge End, the M3 and the Sydenham bypass access. From those main thoroughfares, the lower Newtownards Road carries commuters to and from the city and beyond, serving not only the east of the city but Holywood, Bangor, Newtownards and even this Building.

In the east of the city, the Newtownards Road is known locally as "the road". If one asks people where they are going, and they say that they are going down the road, locals know that they are not going down the Cregagh Road, the Woodstock Road or the Ravenhill Road — they know that they are going down the Newtownards Road. The road has suffered dereliction as a result of the Troubles, and it has been blighted by empty buildings. That has been exacerbated by the vacation of some public buildings near the Newtownards Road, including the recent closure of the former Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) campus. It closed and took with it some of the life and local jobs from the road.

Along the main arterial route, the retail offer, which was once a thriving shopping road, is weakened by rows of empty shops and a poor streetscape environment.

The lack of open space in the adjoining area helps to contribute to that overall poor physical environment.

The area's housing stock to support the vibrancy of the main arterial route is poor in places. Indeed, the deficient physical setting leads to the demand for social housing in the area being greatly reduced. In fact, its potential is much less than it logically should be. Redevelopment of some housing stock has taken place, but it has been largely private-sector-led investment.

In its heyday, the Newtownards Road typified East Belfast in many ways. It was the place where the bulk of the area's population lived and worked, where all sorts of businesses plied their trade and where a lively level of social activity existed. Although it is true to say that people were not wealthy, they exhibited a prosperity associated with a thriving neighbourhood, and there was always an excellent community spirit. People have been proud to say that they came from, or lived on, the Newtownards Road.

The levels of vacancy and dereliction on the road warranted its being identified as a priority by Belfast City Council in its arterial routes programme, which assessed the condition of the arterial routes in Belfast in 2001.

The decline of the area has been fairly rapid, affected by the continuing downturn in the fortunes of heavy industry, people moving out of the area and changes in retail patterns, with the development of shopping centres, and so on. The proposed action to be taken involved working on a multi-agency basis, but, in 2005, there was enough concern about the lack of visible action that James Brown — a business sector member of the East Belfast Partnership — decided to establish a steering group to inject some impetus into the process.

It would be appropriate to pay tribute to James Brown. He has given generously of his time and speaks passionately about the Newtownards Road and the need to re-establish it as a thriving arterial route. Indeed, it was James who fired my enthusiasm to see something done.

When the steering group was brought together, it updated the audit of the buildings on the road, established their use and ownership and set a number of objectives, the first of which was to obtain special designation of the Newtownards Road as a development zone. Quite rightly, the group wanted to create a partnership ethos — we all recognise that that is the way to go. The Department for Social Development, Belfast City Council and the East Belfast Partnership committed specifically to the regeneration of the Newtownards Road. The group wanted to secure funding to develop a shared vision and an action plan. It wanted to secure investment and commitment to deliver the action plan, and to identify early wins as funds became available to make the environmental improvements on the road.

The key challenges for the delivery of development on arterial routes are fragmented ownership and different agendas that are not necessarily focused on any common outcome. There is a great deal of disparate thinking on any of the arterial routes. There is also a requirement that key stakeholders, particularly those in Government, work together to deliver quickly. The co-operation of the Planning Service and Roads Service is paramount in that regard.

The group is known as the Newtownards Road 2012 group. It has just completed a Newtownards Road strategic action plan, which has been forwarded to the Minister for Social Development. The 2012 group, again demonstrating its partnership ethos, obtained private- and public-sector investment from Cherton, the George Best Belfast City Airport and Titanic Quarter Ltd. The strategic action plan sets out the appropriate actions that need to be taken to regenerate vacant, derelict and underused sites and buildings along the road.

Addressing the dereliction on the road is also a key priority in the neighbourhood renewal action plan for inner East Belfast, and has been formally recognised as one of the five priorities of the East Belfast strategic regeneration framework, which was produced in January 2007.

Several factors continue to add to existing pressure. An increasing number of houses are being built outside Belfast, although in many ways, one can only welcome that. The development of key sites such as Titanic Quarter, Sirocco Quays and Victoria Square, while one would not want to see them left undeveloped, have brought with them a level of prosperity, which, if the dereliction on the Newtownards Road is not tackled, will create a “them” with prosperity and an “us” with dereliction. The development of the Titanic Quarter is to be welcomed, but the dereliction on the Newtownards Road must also be addressed.

There has been an increase in the number of city centre workers on the road, who have added to the volume of traffic using the arterial routes. I also welcome the proposed rapid-transport system for Belfast, but it must be used as an opportunity to secure wider regeneration. I welcome all those improvements, because in the greater context of the development of Belfast as a modern city, they will make a positive contribution to Belfast as a whole and to East Belfast in particular.

However, as I have already attempted to say, we must achieve a balance that will enable the Newtownards Road to service the communities who live, work and bring up their families in that area, as well as continuing to provide radial access to the city centre for increasing volumes of traffic.

All the studies that have been undertaken recognise the importance of the Newtownards Road as a barometer of success. Its continued neglect signifies a lack of

interest, and, when one talks to people from the area, there is a sense that it has taken so long that they have heard it all before. Various studies have been announced, but they have all come and gone. That continued neglect signifies a lack of interest and concern from the authorities, and any initiatives that have been undertaken have been fairly low impact.

The failure to tackle dereliction on the Newtownards Road not only obliges people to tolerate an unacceptable physical environment, but inhibits progress in the area in relation to building community cohesion and improving health and well-being. The costs of such neglect are borne throughout public services, and they are evidenced by high levels of poor health, educational underachievement and antisocial behaviour in the area. I will not quote statistics, but the area is recognised, according to the Noble index, as an area of deprivation.

It is important to note that the Newtownards Road 2012 group was established as a self-help initiative, and it has managed to secure impressive levels of support across the private and public sectors from the sources that I have already named. The Government now have an opportunity to respond positively to that initiative by ensuring that the following recommendations receive widespread support.

Steps must be taken to ensure a flexible, responsive approach by the Planning Service to the opportunities that are being presented. For example, action is required on the continued blight at the Holywood Arches, which has been evident for nigh on 20 years and is caused by the road protection lines.

I pay tribute to the East Belfast Partnership, and we are all aware of the £23·5 million that it recently secured from the Big Lottery Fund in order to regenerate the Connswater River. The area of blight sits adjacent to that project. There is a clear opportunity to add value to that £23·5 million investment.

DSD must employ a more active role in supporting regeneration. There has been some activity in purchasing derelict sites, but DSD could do more to exert influence in Government and the private sector.

Where a case for intervention has been consistently made, it is important that appropriate resources be provided and that the relevant Departments work together with local initiatives in order to deliver results.

This debate is not about coming with a begging-bowl attitude, and it is not about highlighting levels of deprivation in the area, depressing as they are. It is a call for Government at various levels to get their act together and to invest in the area. It is about Government being positive in order to secure the future of this once prosperous area, and returning the district to its former glory. In return, the Government will receive benefits much greater than the required financial investment

through having made a huge contribution towards addressing the area's social needs.

Mrs Long: As someone who grew up on the Newtownards Road, I remember when it was a bustling commercial area where there was plenty of activity. It is depressing to see the decline that has encroached on it over the last 30 to 40 years.

Complex factors have affected that area. Robin Newton was correct to identify that the decline in heavy industry has had an impact on local people's disposable income. Changed shopping patterns have also been a key factor — the building of Connswater shopping centre clearly damaged the business of commercial units along the road. Now, however, that shopping centre is a vital part of the jigsaw that we must piece together for that area's regeneration, because it is a major employer and resource in the community.

5.00 pm

The decline in the community around the area happened in two phases. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a flight to the suburbs as people migrated from inner east Belfast to outlying estates. In the 1990s and 2000s, regeneration efforts in the area had a two-fold impact. During those processes, there was inevitable displacement of the local population, as total rebuilds progressed. However, that was a slow process, and the community was never able to rebuild itself. The result was housing of better quality, but of much less density than that which it replaced. Put-back rates were often less than 20%. That matter has been raised previously with the Minister for Social Development. That removed a critical mass of population from the area and placed businesses under pressure. It also removed many of the local service providers and other community facilities, such as churches and other organisations.

Other attempts at general regeneration have moved incredibly slowly and in a piecemeal manner. When I have raised this matter previously, the blame for the malaise has often been left at the door of the people in the area. We have been told that there is too much division about future outcomes in the area for Government agencies to deliver cohesively. However, insufficient effort and emphasis has been placed on engaging with local people and on building consensus and capacity in those neighbourhoods.

We have ended up with a top-down approach, which was always going to be frustrating. That has been proven to be the case. The leadership that has been shown by the East Belfast Partnership in respect of the Connswater Community Greenway project emphasised the importance of engagement, managed to deliver cohesion and coherence, and secured a productive outcome. That is important in deciding how the process should go forward.

Political tensions and paramilitary activity, although not unique to the Newtownards Road, blighted a number

of urban areas and created a lack of confidence in the private sector, restricting investment. That created a chill factor for people who would otherwise have used the amenities on the road. Work is ongoing in the area to address that problem, but that requires support from central Government and local government if it is to be successful. As a result of the Troubles, the area was made less permeable. The disconnection of the Newtownards Road from the city centre was clearly a product of trying to find a structural solution to a community-based problem.

In the last few years, the severance of the Newtownards Road from the Upper Newtownards Road, engendered by poor transport links, has contributed to difficulties. At the break point — the Albertbridge Road junction — the majority of bus transit goes down the Albertbridge Road rather than the Newtownards Road. That creates a degree of severance that did not previously exist.

Those are the negatives — the historical factors. In this debate, we are trying to find a way forward and to look for the positives. The challenge is to regenerate this key arterial route. In the context of the massive regeneration of East Belfast, including the Titanic Quarter and the Sirocco Works site, the Newtownards Road has a key contribution to make to overall regeneration objectives. As Robin Newton has rightly stated, it is a key gateway to the city. The road can potentially benefit from that wider redevelopment, particularly where it addresses the severance of the east of the city from the rest of it at Bridge End. However, I cannot emphasise enough that it cannot be assumed that that benefit will be felt. In the past, that has not been the experience of people who live in the area.

Robin has already highlighted examples where redevelopment has happened and will happen: the Skainos project, East Belfast Enterprise Park, the health centre at the Holywood Arches, which is already in place, and the Ballymac Centre, work on which is in train. The East Belfast Partnership has regenerated two crucial sites on the Newtownards Road: its previous headquarters on the Irvine shoe shop site at Bloomfield Avenue, and its new centre at Dee Street. That has made a difference to the street frontage along the road.

It is also true to say that individual members of the partnership board — including James Brown, to whom special tribute must be paid — have made commitments within their businesses to the regeneration of the site and upkeep of the area so that it will look vibrant and provide good prospects for anyone who is considering investing there.

However, a more cohesive approach is required. I do not want to reiterate everything that Robin said about the processes that led to the formation of the 2012 group, because that is now on the record. Rather,

I will focus on a couple of issues that are crucial to the delivery of some of the projects.

Robin referred to the situation around the lower part of the Holywood Arches — specifically at the Connswater Street junction. That is one of the main sites on the Newtownards Road, and a road scheme proposed for the area has been causing blight for a protracted time. I believe that that scheme would create further community severance and, therefore, I am not a fan of it.

I also think that the road scheme would conflict with the ambitious scheme for the Connswater Community Greenway, as it would result in the culverting of the river at one of the main sections. The road scheme, therefore, does not have a lot of legs, and the uncertainty surrounding it has continued for such a long time that the site is now in an appalling state of dereliction. It is difficult to see how the rest of the road can be regenerated if that site is not adequately addressed.

There has been significant regeneration and revitalisation of that portion of the road beyond that site and up towards the Holywood Arches. My office is above the Holywood Arches, and I have noticed that there has been a trickle-down effect on to the Upper Newtownards Road and Holywood Road at that junction. However, the site at Connswater Road has acted as a barrier to any benefits moving further down the Newtownards Road. Until that problem is dealt with, it will be difficult to deal with the wider regeneration issues. I know that the Minister for Social Development is responding to the Adjournment debate, but I hope that she and the Minister for Regional Development — both of whom I have corresponded with — will try to work together to address that barrier.

The lack of cohesion and the piecemeal approach that has been taken to date also act as barriers. The 2012 group has come up with a cohesive way forward. It is looking for an overall plan that deals with community confidence, because people feel that the redevelopment of the Newtownards Road has been a long time in coming, and they have low expectations of the outcome of such processes. It would be beneficial to have a master plan, or a blueprint project, so that people could see what the road would look like in 2012 and feel that there is something to aim towards. It would, therefore, be possible to get the quick wins but also have a long term strategy.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that when the group approached the Planning Service, it got a negative reaction to that notion of having some kind of a strategic blueprint for the area that would have any statutory basis and which would be a material consideration in planning applications. The result of that is that people are concerned that planning will continue on a piecemeal and reactive basis. That does not provide the sense of certainty that is needed if we are to attract inward

investment from business people, or if we are to build a confidence in the community that the redevelopment is for the people who live in the area and that it is they who will benefit from it. That is critical. In other countries, and in many inner city areas of GB, it has been demonstrated that some sort of master-plan approach to planning, the physical infrastructure and the social regeneration is required.

It is hoped that there will be community planning as part of the review of public administration and that it, as well as the power of well-being, will be piloted on this stretch of road.

The appearance of the road is a major disincentive to people. Robin has highlighted the extensive dereliction that there is on the road, and it will take someone with a great deal of imagination and courage to see an opportunity in the face of such deprivation. The opportunities are there, but there are ways that we — through the Assembly and local Ministers — could start to build that confidence.

A number of sites along the road are publicly-owned or publicly-controlled. If we were able to do something with those sites, confidence would be engendered in private site owners who, for instance, have planning applications in the system or have had recent planning approval but are wary of committing resources to development. There are ways to boost that.

Living Over The Shop schemes and environmental improvements are also being discussed; such schemes would be welcome as they would reanimate the space, create the urban density that has been lacking and provide sustainability. There is a gap, so to speak, between the first floor and the pavement — the shop frontages. Will the Minister for Social Development consider shop frontage schemes? Such schemes have been operational in other places but not on the Newtownards Road as part of the arterial routes regeneration; they seem to be out of favour at present for whatever reason. For businesses in the area that have reached a plateau and are stable but not lucrative, such a scheme would be a worthwhile investment, giving them the confidence and courage to invest, bearing in mind that the turnover of many of them means that they cannot readily consider major capital investment.

In the short term, shop frontage enhancement could make a huge difference to people's view of the road and their perspective on the future. I hope that this will not be another long chapter in the discussions on the matter, as we need to get to grips with the issue: the people of the lower Newtownards Road have waited long enough, and the time is right to deliver.

Ms Purvis: I thank Mr Robin Newton for securing the debate. Rather than rehearse what has already been

said, I associate myself with the detailed comments of Mr Newton and Mrs Long.

I commend the Newtownards Road 2012 group, which works with the East Belfast Partnership board and the community in trying to regenerate the lower Newtownards Road. The area is one of the more isolated and excluded in East Belfast, as has been mentioned. It is a key arterial route but, like the surrounding community, has suffered years of neglect. The plan is to ensure that derelict or unused properties on the road are replaced with developments that make a positive social and economic difference to the community. That cannot happen without the support of the Department.

The Newtownards Road was once thriving and busy, with numerous businesses: bicycle shops, clothes shops, fruit shops — a cinema at one point, would you believe — butchers and bakeries. The road was the backbone of the community and represented its strong spirit. Numerous developments are taking place, which have been mentioned by Mrs Long and Mr Newton. However, from Bridge End and Pitt Park right up to the Arches and Connswater Street, the road is peppered with derelict buildings, sites full of rusting corrugated iron and buildings sprouting weeds. My own office is on that part of the road, but it is not rusting corrugated iron and weeds growing out of it — just my big “bake” on the front of it. *[Laughter]*

Although some development is happening and some is in the pipeline, such as the Skainos project of the East Belfast Mission and others, and some improvements are evident, the area needs more than a facelift. I agree that shop frontage enhancement would help. I meet many people on the road or they come into my office and they talk about the state of the road and they ask why work has been done to the shop fronts of the Shankill — new painted signs and new windows and shutters — while their road has been left in such a state. I do not have an answer for them.

Some of the derelict properties on the road were bought as retirement investments by people who have done very well in the area, thank you very much, but who have decided to let their properties sit and rot in the hope that their value will increase; some have added planning permission to the sites in order to boost their value. The issue needs to be sorted out. If they need to be vested, vest them, and let us develop the area because that is what the it needs. It is not an attractive area in which to live. Any regeneration must take account of existing businesses and community.

5.15 pm

That regeneration must have community input, and it needs to be integrated. Some cynics in the community believe that the plans to regenerate the front of the Newtownards Road are really about hiding the working-class community behind nice new buildings.

That will not work. Someone has told me that in South Africa, walls are being built around the townships to prevent visitors who are there for the World Cup seeing the blight of the townships and what goes on there. Such work is not an answer. We need to involve the community and to ensure that the regeneration of the Newtownards Road is a sustainable development; in other words, the community must be able to buy into it, businesses that will remain there must be involved, and people must have a buy-in and say in what happens.

The people on the road want to see it developed. As has been mentioned previously, Ballymacarrett suffers from some of the worst deprivation in Northern Ireland, with high unemployment rates, low educational attainment, high levels of poverty and ill health. Regeneration of the Newtownards Road should benefit the community, because we all know the effects that improving one's environment can have and the massive impact that it can have on people's life chances, health, and employment prospects.

The key to the development of the Newtownards Road is to tie it in with the other major areas that will be developed in East Belfast over the next two decades: Sirocco Quays and the Titanic Quarter. The development of the Newtownards Road can help the communities that live in and around those areas to maximise the opportunities that can be gained from those developments. It is important that those who are most excluded are able to avail themselves of those opportunities as they present themselves.

I am glad that the Minister is here, and I look forward to her contribution. The redevelopment of the Newtownards Road could play a big part in addressing the existing inequalities by affording new opportunities to the people of that road.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank Robin Newton for giving the Assembly the opportunity to discuss the redevelopment needs of the Newtownards Road, and I also thank Mrs Long and Ms Purvis for their contributions.

The outlook for our cities and towns is better now than it has been for generations. There are more economic opportunities, and we are now in a much stronger position to tackle the problems of dereliction, social division and safety.

Whether working, shopping or socialising, the people of Northern Ireland now expect a great deal more from their towns than they have at any time in the recent past. Now is the time to build on that foundation by creating initiatives that improve the environment, support a buoyant economy, provide job opportunities and, ultimately, deliver a Northern Ireland that is fit for the twenty-first century. All sectors — public, private, voluntary and community — are working together to deliver physical and economic regeneration in our

most disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. As many Members know, neighbourhood renewal is the Government's main vehicle in the drive to tackle disadvantage. Along with my ministerial colleagues, I am determined to focus funds on actions that will help to deal with the causes, as well as the symptoms, of deprivation. There clearly has to be a buy-in from my ministerial colleagues, and there must be collective responsibility for the issue.

Local neighbourhood action plans have now been established that will make a real difference to the people of Northern Ireland. The Newtownards Road will benefit from the neighbourhood renewal action plan for the area. My Department is also playing a leading role in two other initiatives that will have an impact on the area: the East Belfast strategic regeneration framework and the inner east action plan, both of which are due for completion by summer 2008. The strategic framework will guide the sustainable regeneration and development of East Belfast as a contributor to the social and economic success of Belfast. That will also set an overall context for the various Government initiatives that are operating in the area. There is a real opportunity to align all those initiatives to maximise the potential social and economic benefits. The inner east action plan will provide a vehicle to co-ordinate public-sector investment and lever in private-sector moneys to address the major dereliction that exists on the Newtownards Road.

I have referred to the importance of partnership arrangements in achieving success. I have been most impressed by the partnership model that has been set up to progress the Newtownards Road redevelopment project. Notwithstanding the contributions that have been made by Members this afternoon about the level of dereliction, the partnership process is the way in which to take forward the road's redevelopment. I commend the work of East Belfast Partnership and the Newtownards Road 2012 group in publishing their strategic plan. Both the strategic regeneration framework and the inner east action plan are aligned with that strategic plan and will take full account of the 2012 report.

It is positive that the East Belfast Partnership is taking a lead in making things happen. The public sector, community and voluntary representatives, and a wide range of stakeholders and contacts are all working together actively and constructively for the good of the area. The model of a local partnership that is actively participating in facilitating local development is crucial to regenerating that main arterial route.

I assure the Assembly that, where possible, my Department will support that partnership approach. Where there is vacant, underused or surplus public-sector land, DSD will do what it can to deliver regeneration benefits. Only last week, I visited the Newtownards Road, where I saw the level of dereliction and the

potential for certain sites. I have talked to Robin and Naomi about those matters. The former Kwik Fit site is an example of the active role that my Department plays in the area, facilitating East Belfast Enterprise's search for land to develop its new business incubation centre.

Later this year, my Department will deliver an environmental improvement scheme, costing in excess of £1.3 million, on the Newtownards Road. The scheme will include footpath upgrading, road resurfacing, enhanced street lighting, and tree planting and landscaping along the road.

Last week, I announced a major funding contribution of more than £5 million for the Skainos project, which will deliver an iconic, state-of-the-art, mixed-use development, with a new civic square fronting the Newtownards Road. Importantly, that project provides for new housing in the form of a replacement hostel, social apartments and private apartments. Work on the new hostel, which will contain 26 units, is programmed to start this year. Work on nine apartments is programmed to start next year. That innovative scheme will provide a major boost for the area and, when complete, will revitalise that part of the Newtownards Road.

My Department is also working towards developing a £3 million funding contribution to the Connswater Community Greenway, which is a £30 million environmental-improvement project that is supported by Belfast City Council and the Big Lottery Fund. It represents a significant opportunity to transform the face of east Belfast.

There is no doubt that housing is important to the regeneration of the Newtownards Road. Part of the reason for the area's decline was a reduction in population as a result of a loss of housing some years ago. I want to assure Mr Newton and his East Belfast colleagues, as well as the House, that the Newtownards Road and its people will be part of the new housing agenda that I announced on 25 February.

I am pleased to say that there has already been considerable newbuild in the area — conditions have improved dramatically in recent years. Some fine social housing can be found around Dee Street and Templemore Avenue. At the lower end of the Newtownards Road, the Housing Executive demolished unpopular and difficult-to-let flats at Harland Walk several years ago. The local housing association, Connswater Homes, provided new replacement homes on a part of the site and has just started on a second phase, which will contain 18 homes on the part of the site that faces directly on to the Newtownards Road.

The Newtownards Road may also provide a location for a Living over the Shop (LOTS) initiative. The LOTS scheme is based on the concept of bringing the vacant upper floors of town-centre or urban properties

into residential use, using grant aid. The scale of Belfast city centre, not to mention the size of the buildings, means that current LOTS projects tend not to work economically.

However, that concept may be appropriate for some parts of the city, especially arterial routes. The possibility of developing such a scheme in the area from Templemore Avenue to Holywood Arches is under consideration. Therefore, I assure the Members present that housing issues in the area will continue to maintain a high profile.

With the limited time remaining, I will address some of the issues raised by Members.

Robin Newton questioned whether I fully appreciated the problems regarding the Newtownards Road. I understand the difficulties in that area of Belfast. It has close proximity to Belfast city centre; it is a major arterial route; and it is offered potential by the development of Titanic Quarter, as referred to by Ms Purvis. Despite those factors, significant areas of the Newtownards Road are blighted by vacant properties and dereliction. I assure Members that I want that problem comprehensively addressed.

Naomi Long wrote to me at some length last week, and I will ensure that she receives a substantive response to her questions. Furthermore, I will discuss those issues with the Minister of the Environment Mrs Foster and the Minister for Regional Development Mr Murphy.

Robin Newton asked about the preparation for studies. When is the community going to see the real change on the ground? That is the crucial issue that everyone asks about. My officials and I are fully committed to making a real difference on the ground on the Newtownards Road, and I have referred to the Kwik Fit site in that respect.

Robin raised the issue of the derelict sites on the road-protection line, across from the Albertbridge Road junction, that he feels act as a barrier to the Upper Newtownards Road. I share the Member's concerns about the positive negative impact that those derelict properties have on that part of the Newtownards Road. The future is dependent on the outcome of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan inquiry, and I await that with interest. I am happy to discuss that with Mrs Foster and Mr Murphy.

Mr Newton referred to the length of time that the Newtownards Road has been left, and that that has been worsened by the private sector market. Mrs Long also raised that point. Members will appreciate that my Department's budget is limited —

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

Ms Ritchie: In my short presentation, I have not been able to answer all the queries raised by Members.

However, I am happy to write to them on all of the issues that they have raised individually.

I thank the Members for their contribution today. I assure them of my continued support for the regeneration of the Newtownards Road, since it is one of the arterial routes into the city of Belfast, and from Belfast to the east.

Adjourned at 5.26 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 7 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, under Standing Order 35(2), the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is restricted to the debating of any amendments that have been tabled. As no amendments have been tabled, there will be no opportunity today to discuss the Bill. However, Members will be able to have a full debate during the Bill's Final Stage.

The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Forkhill Military Site

Mr Speaker: Members will recall that this motion was on the Order Paper on Monday 31 March but could not be disposed of before the House adjourned.

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.

Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. A valid petition of concern in respect of amendment No 2 was presented on 31 March. The effect of the petition of concern is that any vote on amendment No 2 will be decided on a cross-community basis.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the redevelopment of the Forkhill Military Site, and believes that the Department for Social Development should consider taking the lead role in the matter.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to move the motion, which, as you said, Mr Speaker, has been carried over from a previous day as there was insufficient time to debate it then. I, therefore, welcome the opportunity to move the motion that stands in my name and in those of William McCrea and Trevor Clarke.

The motion does not state that nothing should happen at the Forkhill site; that is not what we are saying. However, we are mystified as to why the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) or its Minister should think that it is their duty or responsibility to develop military sites across Northern Ireland.

The listed responsibilities and functions of DARD tell a different story — that Department does not have responsibility for developing military sites in Northern Ireland. The DARD website states:

“DARD has responsibility for food, farming, and environmental policy and the development of the rural sector in Northern Ireland. It provides a business development service for farmers and growers, and a veterinary service with administration of animal health and welfare.”

It is difficult to reconcile those responsibilities with the development of a former army base or military site.

I see that the Minister is in her place, and I look forward to hearing her outline, in graphic detail, her plans for the site and how they will enhance the agriculture sector and bring confidence to it. Some Members are of the strong opinion that the Minister's

remit, energies and resources would be better channelled towards the agriculture industry, some sectors of which are having difficulty surviving. I have no doubt that, in a short time, she will come to the House with all the answers and put us all at ease by informing us about how she proposes to redevelop the site using her budget, among other resources. However, I will not pre-empt what she intends to say.

As I said at the outset, the motion does not state that there should be no redevelopment of the Forkhill army base. There are several former military sites across the Province, and they provide significant housing and employment opportunities for local people. Those opportunities must not be missed. However — and I will continue to emphasise this point — the remit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not cover the provision of housing or the creation of jobs in the industry sector. The Minister will, therefore, find it difficult to justify her interference in those areas.

The Minister might contend that she has an interest in all things rural, but if that point were brought to its logical conclusion, she could claim responsibility for every area of Government that affects those who live in rural areas.

The proof that the development of the site should not lie within the responsibility of DARD is shown by the method by which the site was to be purchased. The public purse would not have had to pay once for the site; it would have been forced to pay twice for the pleasure of having DARD take the lead role in its development.

The responsibility for every other similar development has lain with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department for Social Development (DSD). Given that those are the Departments that have statutory responsibility for that type of work, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development should focus her attention on the problems that the agriculture industry faces. The proper advice for the Minister — and, perhaps, her officials might whisper this in her ear sometime — is to let OFMDFM and the Department for Social Development get on with what they are supposed to be doing. Indeed, she should be reminded that the role and function of the Agriculture Minister is to look after the agriculture industry. It is hoped that, as a result of today's debate, that message will come out loud and clear and that the Minister will follow the advice of the Assembly.

DARD is in a rush to fast-track the development, regardless of its failings. One proposal seeks to establish business units on the site, despite the fact that Invest NI has not identified a need in that area. Other provisions would be developed on the site, regardless

of need or whether they replicate similar services in other local villages or rural areas.

A list of problems and failings has been identified. However, the Minister, in her mad rush to progress the development, has not taken those problems on board. Many of my colleagues are members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and are mystified by the Minister's headlong charge towards development, regardless of the problems or cost.

I am sure that the Minister and her party could not be attempting to score brownie points in the south Armagh area at the expense of another Minister and another political party. However, on examination of the handling of the development, many reasonable people may reach that conclusion.

Millions of pounds from DARD's budget will be invested in a project that may benefit the Forkhill area. However, the agriculture industry is struggling to survive. Several million pounds could have a great impact if they were ploughed into the Department's response to the Red Meat Industry Task Force. That would have an impact right across Northern Ireland rather than in only one village. Therefore, we ask the Minister to concentrate her efforts on the agriculture industry and leave those issues to others.

Similarly, pig farmers are hanging on to production by a thin thread. They lose money on every pig that they produce, yet their plight is met with stubborn inaction by DARD, compared with the "can't wait, won't wait" approach taken to the development of the Forkhill army base. Although the development, undoubtedly, has merits, the Minister must prioritise to ensure that the greatest good is delivered by her Department. If the Minister considers the plight of the pig industry, perhaps she will conclude that the millions of pounds allocated to this project — which is none of her business or concern — would be better deployed in that sector. The construction of a strategy to secure the future of beef farmers and sheep farmers must surely be a greater priority.

Similarly, the future of pig farmers in the Province might have been considered a more important use of several million pounds of public money. The establishment of a few industrial units in south Armagh may help farmers to leave the agriculture industry — a measure on which the Minister is keen — but it will not help a farming industry in crisis. The core of the debate is about the specific responsibilities of DARD. Seemingly, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development does not believe in farmers actually farming. Every policy tries to put farmers out to pasture and to move away from agriculture. Rural development must be a core aspect of DARD's activities, but it must not be the only activity.

I urge the Minister to consider carefully the content of this debate, which I hope will encourage her to return to her roots and responsibilities and pour the Department's resources, funding and energy into the agriculture industry — something for which she is directly responsible.

12.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"the role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the redevelopment of the Forkhill Military Site, and believes the department should continue to work with the Department for Social Development on it; and calls on the Department of Finance and Personnel to reconsider its position on this project to ensure that the best possible project is delivered for the people of Forkhill and the surrounding district."

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an chéad leasú ar an rún a mholadh.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has an obvious lead role in, and a main responsibility for, what is clearly a rural development project, which will have benefits for the rural hinterland of south Armagh. The Department for Social Development also has a role to play, particularly in acquiring the land and providing social housing. The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, has expressed her full support for the project and her willingness to work in co-operation with DARD to bring the project to fruition.

DARD's primary role in the initiative is to provide the finance for the purchase of the site and to develop the business plan to present to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). I note the unfounded allegations in the media that DSD had a role in frustrating the Forkhill project. According to my information, nothing could be further from the truth. DSD has been fully supportive of the project and has co-operated fully with DARD on the issue. Those who suggest otherwise are being mischievous and engaging in petty political point-scoring, which is of no benefit whatsoever to the future of the project. DSD and its Minister have a role in acquiring the site, the resources for which are to be provided by DARD, subject to the approval of DFP.

The motion has, to some extent, been overtaken by events, as, in the interim, the project has not received approval from DFP. However, that is not a reason why this innovative project should be allowed to sink into oblivion. DARD should re-examine the business case for the project and submit a revised plan to DFP, to ensure that the project becomes a reality.

The proposal is a worthy one, which deserves the support of the Executive. It is aimed at developing community facilities in Forkhill and the surrounding district, and will include business units, sporting and family recreational facilities, a community centre and much-needed social housing for the area.

The joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments of April 2003 promised vacated military sites to local people who have endured decades dominated by the Troubles:

"Many of the vacated military and police ... sites might be made available ... to ensure that the process of normalisation generates a new public asset base for those communities most directly affected by the security arrangements to date."

There is no doubt that Forkhill is one such place.

I note also the First Minister's answer to a question about the Lisanelly site during Question Time on 3 March:

"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 ... We will press the issue again shortly — directly with the Prime Minister". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p137, col 1*].

That is the response from the First Minister, the leader of Lord Morrow's party.

In response to my question on the Forkhill military site during the same Question Time, the First Minister said:

"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." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p137, col 2*].

I welcome the commitment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the acquisition of those sites, and I urge them to redouble their efforts to ensure that those sites are available to our people without further delay. I also commend the Forkhill community for the work that it has done in developing the proposal. As public representatives, the least that we can do is provide the resources to ensure that the community's vision becomes a reality.

If devolution is to be meaningful to our citizens, we must be seen to deliver on projects such as the one that is under discussion today. We have heard much talk about a peace dividend, but, to date, we have seen little evidence of it. Communities that have suffered through decades of conflict deserve recognition, and the project proposed for Forkhill fits the bill perfectly in that respect.

Finally, I call on the Departments concerned — DARD and DFP, in co-operation with DSD — to work together to ensure that our people benefit from devolution and that the best possible project

is delivered for the people of Forkhill and the surrounding district. Go raibh míle maith agat.

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

Mr Elliott: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Site” and insert

“and, inter alia, for the purposes of paragraph 1.4(f) of the Northern Ireland Ministerial Code, determines that the site shall not be acquired by, or on behalf of, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.”

I thank the Members who secured this debate today. I have never made any secret of my opposition to DARD's taking the lead role in the project. That is not to say that I am against the development of Forkhill army base. As Dominic Bradley said, the project should be developed for the community. However, I am concerned about the prospect of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development taking the lead role in the project. I base my opinion on several factors that I have aired and highlighted in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I will reiterate them again.

The development of any former military base in the Province must be handled with care. Across Northern Ireland, the public would like redundant sites — whether they are army bases, former army bases or any other sites — to be developed so that they can deliver for local communities.

In fact, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, announced recently that a new eco-village will be built in my constituency — Fermanagh and South Tyrone — which is also the constituency of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, on the site of the former Grosvenor army base in Enniskillen. That decision was broadly welcomed by all members of the community, and it is my sincere hope that the new homes will help to bring increased revenue into Enniskillen and release the ever-growing pressure on the Housing Executive to provide social and affordable housing in the area. I should be delighted to see something similar, with broader community support and development, on the Forkhill site. However, I do not believe that the Agriculture Minister or her Department are best placed to deliver on that.

The proposals for the development of the Forkhill barracks site include social housing, business units and community facilities, and are largely supported by members of my party and of other parties. However, my concern is that DARD will be the lead funder and administrator of the project: that should be the responsibility of other Departments. Where are the Departments of Social Development, Enterprise Trade and Investment, Education and Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the development? Surely bodies in those Departments should take the lead role. I,

and others, ask the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her Department why they feel it necessary to branch into the development of buildings and dwellings, and other programmes that are clearly outside the remit of that Department. The building of social homes and community facilities is not the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The essence of the project is social, and that brings it outside the agriculture and rural development context. I know that departmental bodies work together throughout Northern Ireland, with a view to providing cohesive and efficient benefits for all the people of this Province. However we set a precedent if the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development takes the lead in such a project. Will that mean that every village and town with a population of under 4,500 will expect the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to spend its money on projects in that area, and that the Department for Social Development and others will not have to do that? What does that say for other sites that are, at the moment, redundant? Will it mean that sites in the Minister's constituency and mine, such as the old Duke of Westminster High School sites in Ballinamallard and Kesh —

Mr Hilditch: If the Member has had the opportunity to read the Department's response to the question, he will, perhaps, have seen a section referring to the Department's concern that the site will fall to a private developer to turn into a housing development, which would take the population of Forkhill to well over 4,500. Is it a concern of the Department that a private developer wishes to develop the site into housing?

Mr Elliott: Clearly the Department will have a view on that. If DARD is going to develop a site such as Forkhill, other sites should also be examined, including those old school sites that I mentioned, and one even closer to the Minister's own home, in Granville. An old school there could be developed into something else, such as housing or business units. Is that under the remit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development? Those issues must be examined, because we could set a very dangerous precedent for the Department. It will cause almost a leeching of money by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to fund issues that are no concern whatsoever of that Department.

The agricultural community in Northern Ireland — as Lord Morrow said earlier — wants to see more proactive work taking place regarding situations of countrywide importance, such as the promotion of local produce, addressing the continuing consolidation of farm land, and the huge crisis facing the pig industry. Some people say that agriculturally based families and workers want to be greedy, but that is not the case. They want to see rural development progress — and I

want to make that absolutely clear. We want to see rural development go forward in Northern Ireland.

The difficulty is that large sections of the rural-development funding come from farmers; the farming community helps to support the rural communities and the rural development projects, because modulation funding has taken that money from farmers through their single farm payment. It is not fair for people to say that the whole farming community is interested only in farming. That is not the case.

Furthermore, I am concerned that, if DARD continues to lead and fund the project in the future, millions of pounds will be poured into it, but who will actually administer and run it? Will it be sustainable? The business case that I saw provides no such guarantees, nor did it fill me with confidence that the project will be run and developed positively for Northern Ireland or for the area in which it is to be located.

12.30 pm

The Northern Ireland agriculture industry requires investment, stimulation and general support, and the fundamental provider of such support is DARD, which is also responsible for rural development. As a rural citizen, and as a man with the agriculture industry at heart — and given the knowledge that so many ventures are going to the wall — how could I support DARD's leadership role in the Forkhill project?

Undoubtedly, the project is much needed in the area, and, as we heard, it has the local community's backing. I wish it success, but I do not wish DARD to be used in such a way. If the Department continues along that path, it will be making a huge mistake. My concern is that the proposal is political rather than departmental.

Rural development is a matter for everyone in Northern Ireland, and it must not be used as a conduit to build social housing and industrial units. Money for that could be better processed using other mechanisms.

I ask Members to support the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. Do not allow DARD to be dragged into areas that are not its business.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thus far, the message from the other side of the Chamber is that those Members simply do not want money to be spent on that project or in that area, and they are seeking every possible device to frustrate and prevent that happening. In many ways, the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment is more honest than the DUP's motion, which, in effect, seeks to do the same thing.

The project in that village is very much about rural development. For more than 30 years, those barracks — a huge, imposing structure covering more than 14 acres — dominated the small village from a height and were right smack in the centre of it. The movement in

and out of that site impacted negatively on lives in the community to such an extent that the primary school found it necessary to develop plans to relocate away from the barracks.

When the military and the police decided to pull out of the site, there was much relief in the area, and the case has been made that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) should, in good faith, have handed over the site for development by the community. However, of course, the MOD has sought to generate every last shilling from the site for its war efforts elsewhere in the world.

The regeneration group — which has a proven track record in stimulating economic redevelopment projects in the village — came forward with a plan that includes social housing, childcare provision, retail and industrial units and open space comprising protected walking and lit walkways, and, in doing so, secured the support of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department for Social Development, the local council and Invest NI, and involved community, sporting and cultural groups. Most importantly, the project also received an overwhelming mandate from the entire village, who wanted the site to be developed in such a fashion.

The case for the project was presented to the Departments in order to gain support. Mr Elliott and Maurice Morrow inferred that the current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's decision was political; however, the interest expressed by both Departments predates the Assembly's restoration; both were on board for the Forkhill project and both were working with the community and the local council long before last May, and I took community representatives to meet direct rule Ministers and officials from the relevant Departments and agencies.

The attempt by some, particularly the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and several other Committee colleagues from his party and the Ulster Unionist Party, to portray the project as a politically motivated initiative by the Minister, betrays the hostility that the project has faced. Their assertion is untrue, and had those Committee members investigated the history of the project, they would know that. Both Departments, as well as all the agencies, supported the project long before the current Minister took office. The Minister has simply delivered what those Departments were in the process of doing.

Mr Elliott: Given the Member's ministerial role, this may be a difficult question for him to answer, but has he read the business case for the project and seen the hypocrisy therein?

Mr Murphy: The Member's use of the word hypocrisy betrays his political attitude towards the project and the area in which it is based. Not only have I have read the business case, I was part of the group

that worked on it at the start, as were all the elected representatives from the area. That includes all members of the parties that held seats on Newry and Mourne District Council; indeed, the entire council supported the project.

I believe that the business case stacks up, and it has the support of many agencies, not just the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Member's description of the business case betrays what is at the root of the motion. The irony is that the remote direct rule Ministers, who were not in touch with the feelings of the people and who were not reflecting the views on the ground, supported the project. Yet, when the institutions are returned, we find political hostility, not from Departments or the Civil Service, but from MLAs, including those who chair Committees. Those people have generated political hostility to the project.

The project will succeed. Maurice Morrow mentioned missed opportunities, and the opportunities presented by this project should not be missed. The irony was not lost that, in the same week that it was revealed that DFP had not offered funding for the project, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the MP for East Belfast visited a community project in that area that was funded by Government agencies. If the funding is not found, the project will be lost, and that would be a missed opportunity. Someone will build on the site, and cram —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: I will not; I have only seconds left.

Someone will cram houses on to that site, and that will be detrimental for the population and that area.

Political hostility is the real intention behind the Unionist motion and the Unionist amendment.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. The role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is twofold: first, to offer support to the agriculture industry; and secondly, to support sustainable rural development.

The European Union recognises rural development as the second pillar of the common agricultural policy, and, over several years, DARD has engaged in programmes that support rural development in Northern Ireland. DARD has engaged with stakeholders, including other Departments, strategic bodies, funding bodies, and, most importantly, the local community, to develop sustainable rural development projects.

DARD's proposal to purchase the former military base from the Ministry of Defence and the PSNI takes the Department in a different direction in its promotion of sustainable rural development. Indeed, that fact was noted in the economic appraisal for the acquisition of the former Forkhill military base. That appraisal suggests that the proposals for Forkhill should be considered as

a pilot scheme, given that a well-established community development infrastructure exists.

The economic appraisal leaves several simple questions unanswered. I am concerned about the process of purchasing the property from the MOD and the PSNI. There is no legal provision for DARD to purchase property; therefore, it proposes to ask the Department for Social Development to purchase the former military base and transfer the property back to DARD. Can the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development tell us how much the process to transfer the property between the various Departments will cost, in addition to the cost of the land?

When the economic appraisal was submitted to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, it became clear that it did not explain how the complex transfer process would work. The economic appraisal also failed to show value for money, the number of jobs that would be created, how the project would address deprivation, and many other basic principles with which an economic appraisal should deal.

The economic appraisal also mentions DARD's plans for a community capital grant scheme, and suggests that the community group will apply to DARD for some £2,895,000. What is the community capital grant scheme? Can other community groups in Northern Ireland apply to that scheme?

For a number of years, the Department for Social Development has been involved in capital-development programmes, and has, in that time, developed considerable expertise in that process. Such expertise should be compared to that of DARD. The economic appraisal recognises that the proposal is a pilot scheme for DARD.

DARD has a valuable role to play in supporting rural development and assisting local communities to improve society. However, this proposal is flawed and will create a precedent that will offer nothing to help to create sustainable rural development.

The first principle of rural development is to put people first. Rural-development projects must also develop capacity, skills and confidence and must offer economic opportunities for future generations. These proposals will potentially offer such opportunities. However, they will be best achieved through the well-tested methods that have been used by the Department for Social Development.

I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the group in Forkhill for identifying that the best use of the land is for a multi-faceted development and for submitting a comprehensive business plan. That business plan considers the whole idea of rural development, including business opportunities, housing and childcare. It will ensure

sustainable development and sustainable communities, which will result in a vibrant way of life.

It has been suggested that this project does not offer value for money. However, funding has been granted to schemes that have had much smaller numbers of beneficiaries. Some 70% of people in rural areas are not farmers. Although they support farmers and will continue to do so, it is important to acknowledge that if rural communities are to survive, development outside the agriculture industry is required.

Forkhill has suffered at the hands of the British military establishment for the past 30 years. It appears that some Members would prefer to have a continued military presence. However, they have gone away, you know. The people of south Armagh, and specifically Forkhill in this instance, have the right to local sustainable development.

I commend the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for embracing all aspects of her brief. This project is about joined-up Government, and it is for the Executive to decide on which Department or Departments are best qualified to deliver it.

It is encouraging to hear that DSD is fully supportive of the project. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr T Clarke: I am more than disappointed that the project is still being discussed and led by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Although one can see the merits of the redevelopment of a disused site, I am amazed that it is being led by DARD.

Members have heard about the childcare facilities, the social housing and the various aspects of the project — much of which I still do not believe should be led by DARD.

If it were not for the recent Budget, one would almost believe that DARD has too much money and is looking for ways to spend it. If that is the case, maybe DARD officials should consider the recent Red Meat Industry Task Force report — the Department has given no help to the farmers who were discussed in that report.

There are also issues for the pig industry: farmers are producing and selling pigs for £27 less than they cost to produce. Perhaps DARD will help them. However, I do not think so. The farmer from north Antrim — on whose farm the first outbreak of bluetongue in the Province occurred — had his entire herd culled by the Department. Perhaps that farming family expected to receive help. However, it did not. In an answer to a question, the Minister said that she was not compelled to pay compensation. However, she now sees fit to provide industrial units in south Armagh.

What about the increasing prices of grain? Help should be made available to people affected by that. However, it is not. What about the ageing fleet of

fishing boats in Northern Ireland? Perhaps DARD will help those in that industry. However, they have received no help either.

All of them come under the remit of the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development. Perhaps the Minister would prefer agriculture to be dropped from her remit. Perhaps she wants to be the Minister for rural development only. That will not be the case, and I will not be part of it.

12.45 pm

Farming is a key part of business in Northern Ireland, and it should not be forgotten that farming is a way of life for many people. Instead of interfering with the remits of other Departments, I suggest that the Minister should focus on her own remit and let others look after theirs.

Mr Savage: I support amendment No 2. Before talking about that, I will mention the background to the matter.

Forkhill military site became available following the announcement in July 2005 that, due to the improving security situation, a number of army posts would be demolished. Following consultations with the local community and sporting representatives, local politicians and various agencies decided to develop a practical vision for the use of the vacant site, Bernard Boyle of Forkhill and District Development Association outlined proposals in February 2007. He stated that the site would be used for retail and business units, an all day childcare facility, a playing field, a recreation area and an illuminated walkway.

At a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 9 October 2007, the Deputy Chairperson — my colleague Tom Elliott — proposed that, although the Committee supported the development of the Forkhill army site, DARD should not be the lead Department in the development or financing of it or any other military site.

That motion was carried, because we want to see the Forkhill site developed for the benefit of the people of the area. That can best be achieved under the auspices of the Department for Social Development. However, that is not to say that DARD will not have any input.

I have read about this matter and heard a number of Members in the Chamber saying that the number of Departments should be cut. Having done so, I have concluded that DARD should take over the Department for Social Development because we could do an equally good job. However, that is another matter for another day. *[Laughter.]*

Due to the geographical and demographical area on which the site exists, common sense dictates that DARD is well placed to have a consultative role on matters of rural poverty, and some input into DSD's

plans to ensure that rural development takes place. DETI would be involved in attracting businesses to new retail and business units.

It must be ensured that the job is not only done but done right. The Department for Social Development is best placed to carry the scheme forward. That Department has the necessary in-house experience, knowledge and past experience of delivering projects such as this.

DARD ought to be focusing on a number of other issues in order to protect and promote the farming community in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister is fed up listening to Members but I want to reinforce to her my feelings about the other issues in need of address.

We must maintain our vigilance about bluetongue, especially coming into the summer, when the midge population is at its highest.

We must continue to be mindful of the plight of pig farmers. Indeed, there are many pig farmers in the Forkhill area. We must help, in any way that we can, to raise the price of pig meat in the short, medium and long term to ensure that the pig industry stays afloat.

Regarding the price of wheat, we must continue to ensure that our farmers have a more than adequate supply of feed for their animals between now and the next harvest. According to the BBC, there are only about 35 day's supply of grain with which to feed the world. That figure is falling week by week and that fact must be taken in to account.

Those are three major issues but, rest assured, there are many more.

I am confused regarding the Forkhill military site. On 23 January 2008, in reply to a question for written answer from Tom Elliott, the Finance Minister stated:

"DARD intends to make a bid in the February Monitoring Round for the £4.5 million required for the purchase by DSD of the former Forkhill Military Base."

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development seems to be doing all the running on behalf of the Department for Social Development, which is why DARD should have a bigger role.

Surely the Department for Social Development is better placed to acquire the site, take ownership of it and develop it as it sees fit.

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

Mr P J Bradley: I support my colleague Dominic Bradley's amendment, and I compliment him for including the key words:

"to ensure that the best possible project is delivered for the people of Forkhill and the surrounding district."

I repeat the words of the Member for Newry and Armagh so that Members can give them serious

consideration. We are here not only in the interests of those who voted us in but in the interest of the common good and the broader community. A responsible development committee is in situ in Forkhill. The members of the Forkhill and District Development Association are waiting for a bureaucratic wrangle to be sorted out so that they can proceed with their plans for the site, which can be activated right away. I question the size of the site; Conor Murphy said that it might be 14 acres, but I do not know whether it is as large as that. The site was vacated in 2005, and it is easy to understand the frustration of the project's supporters at the lack of progress.

The Forkhill and District Development Association has the full support of Newry and Mourne District Council. Mr Tom Elliott expressed concern about the sustainability of the project. It should be noted that the Newry and Mourne Enterprise Agency also supports the proposal. The agency is interested in becoming involved in the Forkhill project. For the benefit of those Members who do not know that agency, it has an excellent track record in providing business units, of which I will name four: WIN Business Park in Newry; Warrenpoint Enterprise Centre; Kilkeel Enterprise Centre; and Flurrybridge Enterprise Centre. The interests of the agency should not be underestimated in any way. It is a key player in getting that area of Newry and Mourne back on its feet.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is interested in the assembly of lands within the site for the development of social and affordable housing, although the provision of residential dwellings is the responsibility of the designated Fold Housing Association.

It is also worth noting that the Forkhill site has been identified in the draft Banbridge, Newry and Mourne area plan for 2015 for mixed-use development. If the people of Forkhill and the surrounding district are to be allowed to benefit from the potential of the site in the near future, it is important — as the amendment states — for the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and, perhaps, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to reach an agreement urgently that will benefit all the people. That could not happen soon enough.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support Mr Bradley's amendment. The best that can be said about the negative motion, and the equally negative amendment No 2, is that they give us an opportunity to highlight some of the issues and to expose the wrong-headed thinking behind the motion and amendment No 2.

In April 2003, a joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments stated that all vacated military

barracks should be gifted to a working Executive; it is critical that that is mentioned as many times as possible. That joint declaration has been cited several times in the Chamber, not least by the First Minister, the Rev Ian Paisley, and other Ministers as a key component in dealing with those vacated barracks sites.

DARD's name and remit cover both agriculture and rural development. It is no wonder that Maurice Morrow is mystified. When referring to the Minister, he called her the Minister of Agriculture two or three times. Let me clear that up for you, Maurice: she is the very able Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

There are four axes by which moneys can be drawn down from the rural development budget. All of those are open to farmers as well as to other rural dwellers, and I point out — *[Interruption.]*

It is quite clear that that is what you want, but the remit is agriculture and rural development.

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

Mr Doherty: Of those people living in rural areas, 70% are not farmers, and they have as much right as farmers to access funding for their various projects. There is a big challenge for the DUP and the UUP to get their thinking right on that issue. The remit of the Department covers rural development as well as agriculture, and there is nothing that those parties can do to change that.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. He is keen to quote me, and I do not retract anything that I said. Perhaps he will recall that I said that this motion does not oppose the development of the Forkhill site. The redevelopment of that site is essential, and we hope that similar sites will also be redeveloped. However, that project should not be funded from the budget of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. That is the task of another Department.

Mr Doherty: If Maurice Morrow is anxious that the Forkhill site be redeveloped, he should support amendment No 1, and not the ridiculous motion that he has tabled.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that Pat Doherty cleared up that last issue. I was going to offer Maurice Morrow a competition: what do the letters “R” and “D” stand for in the title of the Department? The Member should send his answers on a postcard.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the redevelopment of the former military site in Forkhill. This issue has been raised by Dr William McCrea through the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on a number of occasions. It is something

that he and his colleagues believe requires further clarification and discussion, particularly the matter of why my Department, rather than the Department for Social Development, takes the lead.

It is not a question of which Department leads the project. Acting on behalf of the Executive, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is helping the various community groups to achieve their ambitions, and has taken ownership of the project to that extent. To provide that help effectively, it is required that I create a capital grants scheme. It requires DSD to provide the finance for and to build both social and affordable housing. While it is not the role of DARD to build houses, we are working with DSD on that matter. We are all required to prepare a business case that stands up to scrutiny. Therefore, this is not solely a DARD issue, but it is one that I am prepared to champion.

I feel that it would be helpful to set out my Department's involvement in Forkhill, to date. As has been mentioned by the MP for the area, Conor Murphy, under the former direct rule Administration, several approaches were made to Ministers in respect of the redevelopment opportunities presented by redundant military sites. Those sites are owned by the Ministry of Defence, and its programme of disposals is based on the desire to realise receipts from the disposal of the bases as quickly as possible. In urban areas, the Department for Social Development is developing a number of those sites. My Department became involved in the Forkhill project following an approach, over two years ago, by the local MP, MLAs and councillors for the Forkhill area, to David Hanson, the then Social Development Minister.

That process has been ongoing for over two years — it is not a quick fix. Time has been taken to ensure that the project was viable and had the full support of the community.

1.00 pm

DARD has been working towards the creation of sustainable communities through its innovative rural development programmes of job creation, farm diversification, business opportunities and social enhancement projects. The Department became convinced that former military sites or abandoned public spaces in rural areas presented an additional excellent opportunity to help to bring about more holistic redevelopment, especially in areas in which social and economic progress had stagnated. Forkhill was considered particularly suitable to be taken forward as a pilot project because of its location, condition and the work that had already been undertaken by the local community group, the Forkhill and District Development Association. I add my comments to those of other Members in commending and congratulating that

group for the work that it has done to date, which has produced, through widespread community consultation, a blueprint of suitable social and economic actions for the site.

An inter-agency steering group was formed to bring forward the proposals for the site, and a business case for its acquisition and development was prepared. The site covers a large area of ground in the centre of the village. The proposals have been cleared by the Ministry of Defence. It is proposed that the site will accommodate a mixed development to include social and affordable housing, which will be led by DSD. It will also include a number of business and workspace units, for which there is a demand. A range of community facilities will be included, such as a community hall, a crèche, changing rooms, a multi-purpose games area and an illuminated walkway for health-and-safety and visual-amenity reasons, along with the associated infrastructure.

Although it is not its core business, Invest NI supports the business units that are proposed for Forkhill, under the management of local economic development units. The rural development programme has created, and will continue to create, business units and jobs under the Department's rural development programme.

DARD does not have the necessary legal powers to purchase the site, but, under the Social Need Order 1986, DSD has the power to do so. It has agreed to purchase the site on DARD's behalf. It is intended that the acres that are set aside for housing will be acquired and developed by a housing association, with the approval and support of DSD. The remaining acres will be acquired and developed by the Forkhill and District Development Association, using a capital grant from my Department of around £2.9 million. Financial support will also come from Newry and Mourne District Council, along with other funding.

DARD's involvement in the project fits clearly with the overall theme of its rural strategy for 2007 to 2013. That strategy aims to diversify the rural economy, protect the rural environment and sustain rural communities. It meets one of the key aims of that document and the Department's strategic plan for 2006 to 2011, which is to strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas. The Department's involvement also fits well with the Programme for Government, which was agreed by the Executive in January 2008. The Programme for Government charges DARD with helping rural communities to improve the physical, economic and social infrastructure of their areas. The development of former military sites and/or abandoned spaces fits squarely within that remit. Forkhill has a population of fewer than 3,000 people, so it is clearly a rural area.

The Forkhill project, and similar projects, also sits comfortably alongside the new rural development programme, which runs from 2007 to 2013. Axis 3 of

that programme aims to improve the quality of life in rural areas and the diversification of the rural economy.

A number of Members referred to the challenges that face the agriculture sector; I am aware of those challenges. Under the rural development programme, a number of opportunities exist to help the beef and sheep sector. It has set aside £20 million for diversification, £65 million for farmers and farm families and over £300 million for agrienvironment schemes. Over 70% of the rural development programme's money will go directly to farmers and farm families, so farmers will do extremely well out of the programme.

The rural development programme clearly identifies the challenges of the agricultural community. From a strategic point of view, it is important that the Department is already involved in some redevelopment of rural areas through the rural development programme. It should also seek to complement those activities when specific unique opportunities are presented. As I said earlier, it is incumbent on all of us to progress the opportunity, utilising my Department's capital grant, which will be a relatively modest, although important, contribution and DSD's provision of housing. Local government is also firmly committed to the scheme and will provide financial support.

The business case that I mentioned earlier was submitted, as requested, to the Department of Finance and Personnel, but, regrettably, it was rejected last week. I am hugely disappointed at that decision, as are the people of Forkhill and their local representatives, all of whom have worked extremely hard to provide solid evidence to demonstrate the benefits that that exciting initiative would bring. I have instructed my officials to continue to explore with DFP ways in which this development opportunity can be exploited, and those discussions are urgent and ongoing.

It remains my clear belief that there is a strong case for the public sector to intervene in an area of deprivation such as Forkhill, which has had a particularly difficult history because of the major military base that was strategically placed in the centre of the village. That has impacted greatly on every aspect of local life in past years, as many of the local elected representatives have said. The proposal that my Department supports would send out a strong signal — not only to the local community, but across the North as a whole and to the private sector — that this Administration are prepared to commit themselves financially to a unique rural-development opportunity that will bring significant benefits to the local people and, I hope, attract some private investment too. It would help to bring back pride to the area, and it would help to create business opportunities and jobs. It would provide leisure facilities for young people, create opportunities for young mothers and fathers, reduce antisocial behaviour and encourage children to participate in healthy outdoor pursuits and

sports. I wish that the Executive had more such projects, which can create real benefits for communities.

If it is allowed to proceed, the Forkhill project will help to create a new revitalised village centre for the people of Forkhill and the surrounding area. Of course, it will be evaluated and the benefits assessed so as to allow consideration of other projects in the future. This is a project on which my Department can take the lead, and I believe that it will be successful and make a genuine difference to the lives of the people in the area.

I am very concerned at the efforts being made to prevent the Executive from supporting robustly the development of specific programmes that will help to achieve our objective of sustaining rural communities. I hope that my response has given Members an assurance about the very positive steps that DARD and DSD have taken in taking forward the redevelopment of the former military site at Forkhill.

It is my belief that the proposed project for Forkhill sits squarely within my Department's remit, and it is my intention that the Department should continue to work to achieve approval for the business case from DFP so that it can move forward with this project with the co-operation of the Department for Social Development. The people of Forkhill deserve the support of the Assembly. I hope that we can bring about the economic and social enhancement for which the area is crying out and for which it has asked. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: Some Members, including the Member of Parliament for Newry and Armagh, an MLA for Newry and Armagh and a Minister of the Executive, have suggested that unionists are somehow opposed to the regeneration of the Forkhill site. I want to make it clear at the outset that nothing could be further from the truth. Through our amendment, my party and I have sought to clarify something that it appears even the SDLP has missed in the debate. In my view, this issue has started a turf war between DARD and DSD. It is not only a battle between two Departments, two political parties and two women; it is also a case of the SDLP having its eye wiped. If its members are not prepared to realise that, that is up to them.

I want to outline my unequivocal support for the future regeneration of the former army base at Forkhill. Its regeneration will be a significant milestone in the normalisation of society in Northern Ireland and will potentially bring great benefits to the people of south Armagh. However, as a local representative, I believe that the current situation — whereby the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is taking the lead on this issue — has the potential to create a less than optimum project. It is clear that DARD is not the correct vehicle through which to deliver this particular project.

Therefore, I strongly support my party's amendment, which lays out a commonsense opinion that for a more

efficient and effective project, more rationalised Government, and the correct use of expertise and resources.

In a recent answer to an Assembly question, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development stated:

"It is intended that the site will be regenerated into a rural economic and social hub. It will provide a range of integrated services such as local enterprise units; light industrial units; community space; and childcare facilities". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p225, col 2*].

The Minister went on to outline:

"Some social housing has also been provided for, and my Department is working with the Housing Executive on that aspect." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p225, col 2*].

Those are all extremely welcome elements. However, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is not the best-placed Minister to deliver them. Nor should the Department for Social Development have to spend £4.5 million of taxpayers' money to allow a maverick Minister to stray from her rural development remit. DARD does not have an overly-impressive record when it comes to leading projects in south Armagh and other places.

The Department for Social Development is responsible for, and has extensive experience and expertise in, social housing, enterprise development, urban regeneration and community development. This project, as outlined, clearly encompasses all of those aspects. Although the Minister's responsibility for rural development is recognised, she will have to admit — and should admit — that that responsibility does not cover those areas in any meaningful way and is geared more towards agricultural diversification and development.

That will mean the potential waste of all the expertise and relationships that have built up between the Department for Social Development, the Housing Executive, developers and communities. At a time when we are asked to encourage the Executive to increase efficiency, rationalise procedures and review public administration, the decision by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to seek the lead role in this project seems contradictory. There is no doubt that what is proposed for the Forkhill site does not fall under the immediate remit of DARD. Yes, DARD will have a role; other Departments will have a role; but the lead role should not be undertaken by DARD. Therefore, to get the best for the people of Forkhill and south Armagh, and to get the best use of taxpayers' money, Government expertise and efficiency, it makes basic common sense for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to step aside on this project, yet to assist, wherever possible, the Department for Social Development in the development of that site. I commend the second amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. One of the main points made during this debate was that the sole responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is that of farming. There is no doubt that farming is one of the main responsibilities of that Department. However, it is not the only one. The Department's very title clearly shows the range of its responsibilities. The project in Forkhill falls clearly into the Department's remit under rural development. The project at the old military site is one that will serve not only the rural village of Forkhill but, in addition, its rural hinterland. If we wish to maintain a rural population, then we must provide the facilities and services needed by rural dwellers in rural hubs such as Forkhill. We have heard, clearly and properly, voices raised in unison from all sides of the House against the closure of rural post offices. We all agree that rural communities require rural services and rural facilities.

1.15 pm

The redevelopment project is about providing services and facilities to a local, rural community. Let me outline those services once again. They include: sporting and recreational facilities; support facilities for rural families; industrial units, which will help provide employment in the local rural and farming community; and social housing, which is greatly needed because, under stringent planning regulations, people in the rural area around Forkhill cannot build much-needed homes.

Forkhill is a small village, not a large town, as some Members on the opposite Benches seem to suggest. It is part of the rural community in which it is located — it is a hub for the surrounding rural community, and it makes good sense to provide much-needed services from such a hub.

As I said earlier, Members from all sides of the House have told the public that devolution is good and that it is better than direct rule or rule by civil servants. However, anyone listening to Members from the Benches opposite would doubt that argument very much. Instead of facilitating the plans of local communities, those Members seem to be hell-bent on frustrating rural development. People will ask themselves where the benefits of devolution are for them. Rural dwellers will wonder why members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, led by its Chairperson, are frustrating a rural development project. The debate may be about Forkhill today, but it could be about their communities tomorrow.

It is clear that the role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is to promote rural development. It is also the role of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to promote such development, not to attempt to frustrate it. Amendment No 1 contains the

sensible approach to the issue, which is that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should continue to co-operate with the Department for Social Development on the project and that the Department of Finance and Personnel should reconsider its position and ensure that the best possible project is delivered for the people of Forkhill and the surrounding district, who are the most important people at the heart of the debate. Go raibh maith agat arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr W McCrea: I have listened to the debate with interest. Some Members raised substantive issues, and others waffled as usual. I suppose that they are allowed to do that in the name of debate. The issue is an important one that deserves debate, and it has been raised on several occasions in my Committee. The Committee made a decision on the matter, and it has reiterated that decision several times. The substance of the motion arose from the general tenor of the Committee's decision and would be accepted, substantially, by members of that Committee.

We have listened to some of the issues that have been raised. Let me make it abundantly clear that many Members have tried to turn the debate into a political football by making it a sectarian issue. The truth is that there was absolutely no issue about the need to regenerate the site of the former Army base. However, there was a clear issue, and a clear challenge to be made, about which Department should be responsible for that regeneration.

Mr Kennedy said that there was a turf war going on between DARD and DSD. I doubt that somehow, because DSD is sitting back and allowing DARD to do all the work. Indeed, DSD is happy that DARD is spending all the money. Why should DSD spend any of its money when DARD believes that it has all that money to offer to the community? DSD is sitting pretty, and Minister Ritchie is rubbing her hands and saying, "we have a fool a day in the midst of the field." Someone just wants to project himself or herself, as it were, and spend the money.

It would be different if the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had plenty of money to spend. However, DARD has a limited budget, and Members must carefully consider the origin of some of the money for the redevelopment.

Speaking in support of the Minister's position, Mr Brady said that the agriculture community makes up only a small part of the rural community. However, I remind Members that the money gained through the modulation of the single farm payment comes out of farmers' pockets. It was acknowledged in Europe that that money should go into farmers' pockets, but voluntary modulation removed it. Although the money belonged to the farmers, the modulation was not voluntary on

their part: the Department is responsible for the voluntary modulation that results in that money going to others.

It is easy and nice to give away other people's money, but it must be acknowledged that Northern Ireland's premier industry is farming. Whether some Members in the House like it or not, over the years farming has been the backbone of Northern Ireland, and we should give the industry credit for what it has achieved under harsh and difficult circumstances and in all types of weather. Even when times were bad for farming, the industry kept going and was the backbone of the Northern Ireland community. During times of economic difficulty and the Troubles, the farming industry held out and was regarded as the backbone of Northern Ireland's prosperity.

Northern Ireland's agriculture industry faces a crisis.

Mr Doherty: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am speaking. When the Member had the opportunity, he spoke for only a few moments, and, therefore, he should sit down.

Mr Doherty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Member clarify whether he is speaking on his own behalf or as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development?

Dr W McCrea: The Member has the opportunity to go to another place, but he does not bother. Therefore, he knows little about democracy, and that must be taken into consideration. However, he knows that had I intended to speak as Chairman, Mr Deputy Speaker would have called me as such. I am not speaking as Chairman of the Committee, but as a proposer of the motion. Let me make it abundantly clear: I will defend the motion because it is right for the people of Forkhill and Northern Ireland.

The Minister wants to be known as more of a rural champion, but she wants to forget about agriculture and does more to destroy than to aid the industry. What is she doing about the crisis in the pig industry? Nothing. What was she willing to do about the crisis in the red meat industry? She wanted to do nothing. All she had to offer was an exodus from the industry: she suggested either diversification or getting out of the industry altogether, instead of keeping the —

Ms Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: No, the Minister muffed her opportunity to speak. Her speech was useless, and, therefore, she will not take up any of my time. Let me make it abundantly clear that the Minister's handling of the crisis in the red meat industry was absolutely useless; she had nothing to offer.

The Minister has forgotten that the fishing industry is part of her remit, and she did little to defend it when she went to Europe. She relied on the Irish Republic,

and it put a knife into the back of the fishing industry. Ageing fleets and rising fuel costs have been mentioned, but the Minister has done nothing. What does she want to do now? She wants to offer money to someone else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please stick to the motion.

Dr W McCrea: With the greatest respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you check the Hansard report, you will find that everyone else who took part, including the Minister, was allowed to cover all the agriculture industries. This is important: in the light of all the issues about which the Minister seems able to do nothing, what did she select to form part of the Programme for Government? She chose the development at Forkhill as an inescapable bid. Why did she do that?

Remember that that was an inescapable bid, which means that the Minister prioritised it above any other matter. Therefore, the red-meat, pig and the fishing industries can just go to the wall — instead, her inescapable bid is for redevelopment of the Forkhill Army base. One must ask why that is the case. I can tell Members that it has nothing to do with saving Forkhill; it has more to do with the Minister's political ideology and party interest than any effort to bring benefits to the community.

Let us test the Minister's claim that redevelopment of the Forkhill Army base will benefit the community through the development of housing and industry. Housing is not the Agriculture Minister's responsibility. Is the Minister suggesting that DSD is no longer necessary because she will take over responsibility for housing? If that is the case, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is not necessary either, because she will also take over responsibility for industry. She is not able to do her own job, never mind that of any other Department. Let her get on with the job for which she is paid — to defend the farming industry and the rural community of Northern Ireland.

The Committee has asked 57 questions, some of which, perhaps, Mr Doherty might be interested. Has he read the answers?

With respect to housing, the Committee has still not received answers to the enquiries that it continues to make on the number of units that are required. The Committee has been told that that is because the Department is unable to provide them. A departmental paper dated 4 April states that the documentary evidence and information required to answer the Committee's query will take a little more time to obtain and that the information will be passed to the Committee.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Dr W McCrea: The Members opposite do not like to hear the truth, because it hurts. The Department's

response on the matter of jobs is that the jobs created and the cost per job have not currently been addressed in the business case. The Minister says that she is surprised that the Department of Finance and Personnel has not agreed with her. She has not even provided DFP with the necessary information. That is a total and absolute disgrace.

The Minister has the idea — which Sinn Féin has held throughout the years — that if she makes demands, we will give her what she wants. However, she has discovered that the unionist Members are not willing to bow to Sinn Féin's every whim and demand. We are prepared to stand up to the Minister and to scrutinise the business case, which has been rejected twice because it does not stand up to scrutiny. That is why I ask the House to turn down the SDLP's amendment. I ask my friends in the Ulster Unionist Party to consider their amendment. I ask the House to give its wholehearted support to the proposal that I have put forward with Lord Morrow and Mr Trevor Clarke.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

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

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr T Clarke and Mr Irwin.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the question on amendment No 2, I remind Members that a valid petition of concern has been received in respect of this amendment and that the Question must be decided on a cross-community basis.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 42.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Kennedy and Mr McCallister.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

OTHER:

Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Ms S Ramsey.

Total votes	88	Total Ayes	46	[52.3%]
Nationalist Votes	38	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	46	Unionist Ayes	46	[100.0%]
Other Votes	4	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 43.

AYES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr T Clarke and Mr Irwin.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Burns and Mr McElduff.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the redevelopment of the Forkhill Military Site, and believes that the Department for Social Development should consider taking the lead role in the matter.

Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of further education courses specifically targeted at young people with learning and physical disabilities; recognises the lack of provision for disabled young people over the age of 19; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide sufficient further educational opportunities to ensure that these young people achieve their full potential.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted that the motion has been selected for debate, and I commend the Business Committee for choosing it. Since the motion was selected last week, I have been contacted by a number of families who relayed personal accounts of their experiences due to the lack of provision of further education for young people with disabilities, and I wish to place on the record my thanks for their support and advice in preparing for the debate. I hope that much-needed changes will take place as a consequence of the debate.

I am proposing the motion because provision throughout the North is piecemeal. Some colleges proactively address the needs of people with a disability; however, others offer only limited or low-quality provision. Vulnerable individuals, such as those with a disability, are already marginalised and face further barriers in their attempts to access further education opportunities.

In October 2007, my colleague proposed a similar motion and, as a consequence, we were promised that there would be a review of the services offered. However, six months on, there has been no response as regards that review. That is why I am concerned about the UUP amendment, which strikes me as being a fudge on the issue. When will we see real changes that affect the lives of young, disabled people? The amendment calls on Members to await the outcome of the review. However, the motion in October called for immediate, urgent action. I am not interested in paying lip service to this matter or in protecting the Minister, which, I suspect, is the UUP's motive in tabling the amendment. Six months for the review's outcome is far too long to wait. Nevertheless, I await with interest the UUP's contributions to the debate.

Although the motion refers only to further education opportunities, I must point out that there is also a requirement for more supported employment opportunities for young, disabled people.

Any provision of supported employment and/or further education must be based on the principles of equality and inclusion. That is because disabled children and adults have the same rights to equality of access to all services, including education, training and employment.

Whenever I meet disabled young people, their families and representative groups, the issue of transition is raised consistently. That is the process by which a young person moves from childhood into young adulthood. It is a time of many changes for all young people and their families, and it involves making many important decisions, including life decisions and life choices on further education, training or employment, citizenship, and independent living. However, research has shown that that period is more difficult for a young disabled person. At the age of 16, young disabled people have the same career hopes and aspirations as their non-disabled peers. However, in early adulthood, the experiences of the disabled and non-disabled young people diverge with regard to education, training and employment. That inequality must be addressed.

Services must be developed for young people that will support their transition into adult life and that will actively promote social inclusion, challenge discrimination, promote personal control and choice, and encourage inter-agency partnership and collaboration. It is important to take a holistic approach to that transition period. Disabled young adults are entitled to the same educational opportunities as their peers. However, that does not seem to be happening at present. I have spoken to many families who have been left without support and direction and who have felt that there were no opportunities for them when their children reached a certain age. Given that several agencies have a remit for dealing with young people in transition, I accept that this is a cross-departmental issue, not one just for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Therefore, a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting young people during the transition period is needed.

Parents are being left in limbo about what is next for their children when those children reach the age of either 16 or 19. Children with a moderate learning disability will be offered compulsory education only up to the age of 16, and those with a severe learning disability will be offered it until the age of 19. After that, the young person and their family face a minefield.

Children who have attended schools in mainstream education, perhaps with the aid of a classroom assistant, are expected to leave school at 16 years of age. No provision is made for those who are unable to participate in further education or cope in the real world by finding

employment. Those attending special-education schools are expected to leave at the age of 19, and no provision is made for suitable follow-up services that promote life skills and independent living. Those young adults are expected to go to day-care facilities that have been established for the elderly, stroke patients and dementia sufferers, even though those facilities are not age appropriate or conducive to an individual's continued development.

Parents have told me that that situation often leads to their children losing their spark for life, forcing them to become old and withdrawn before their time. One parent has told me that most parents of children with disabilities are heartbroken. That lady has battled continually for access to services across the board ever since she had her son, who is 19 years old and who has a severe learning disability. She feels that as the Government have not made the education and training of young disabled people a compulsory provision, they do not value it. She suggested that, if provision were more suitable, were regarded as an automatic follow-up to special education and were considered to be a right, more people would avail themselves of it.

The Department for Employment and Learning wrote to that parent explaining that it was keen to ensure that its colleges play a full role in developing the skills of people with a learning disability but that it is the responsibility of colleges to determine what courses are offered, subject to the level of demand. The Department may state its policy — that it is committed to ensuring access to education — but if that is not followed through by making such access compulsory, I believe that the Department's policy is contradictory. As I said in my opening remarks, young disabled adults must be encouraged into supported employment, as many of them want to move into such employment and become economically active in their own community.

The Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment and several other voluntary agencies do a lot of good work in that field by promoting employment for people with disabilities. In a recent launch in the Long Gallery, the union reported its findings on a cost-benefit analysis of employment for people with disabilities. One of the key findings was that people with disabilities who have engaged with supported-employment programmes have reported that they are not just financially better off, they also have an improved quality of life.

Another key finding was that, for every £1 that is invested in supported employment, there was a return of £6·17 over a five-year period, thus proving that that investment is also economically good.

I am interested to hear the Minister's comments on what his Department is doing, and I expect him to talk about the additional support fund, among other elements. However, I hope that he will take on board my concerns

and those that I hope others will make when contributing to the debate.

2.15 pm

More needs to be done immediately to address those inequalities. On the face of it, it appears that all further education courses are accessible and open to all. However, the Further Education Means Business strategy results in funding being directed towards courses that are pitched at level 2. The majority of young people with disabilities are entering education at pre-entry level or at level 1.

Community education courses would have been a crucial starting place for many young people with disabilities through recreational courses and pre-entry courses. However, the budget for such courses is all but gone, which means that those who are already experiencing difficulty with learning will end up being further marginalised because they need more time and support.

Reasonable adjustment and a greater degree of flexibility is required to allow people with disabilities to access the appropriate provisions. That would provide them with positive outcomes, but it would not necessarily provide them with recognised qualifications in all cases.

I call on all Members to support this important motion. I want to see an improved provision and more support, as of right, for those young people with disabilities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “expresses” and insert

“its continued commitment to securing training and employment opportunities where appropriate for young people with disabilities; and awaits the outcome of the review of such provision undertaken by the Minister for Employment and Learning.”

In proposing the amendment, the Ulster Unionist Party is not in defensive mode. In fact, I ask Members to consider how we can find a responsible way in which to deal with this important issue.

The proposer of the motion outlined her concerns. I will also outline my concerns and make suggestions as to how they can be addressed. I recently had the privilege of meeting people in Aghalee and Dunmurry who have severe learning disabilities. I also attended a fund-raising event at Musgrave Park Hospital for young people with disabilities that raised £70,000 for new equipment. By meeting such people, it is possible to understand the challenges that they face in their everyday lives.

Through the Assembly's excellent Education Service, I have also been fortunate in being able to speak to Mencap and the young people whom its representatives brought to the Assembly. Those young people explained eloquently and in great detail why

they want jobs and what they want to do. Due to the success of that meeting, I invited them back to the Assembly, and they visited again last week. We talked about the difficulties that they face and about employers' attitudes. I said that I am willing to provide an opportunity for someone with learning disabilities to work in my two offices in an attempt to set an example in progressing this issue. Such matters must be addressed, and it is important to understand that there is always more that can be done. It is almost like trying to boil an ocean.

During my meetings, I became aware that people did not appreciate that those with learning disabilities are not a burden; rather, they provide an opportunity. If people with learning disabilities are given the right skills and support, they can contribute not only to the enrichment of their own lives but to society as a whole. I am keen to find out how those skills and that support can be provided.

Why is it necessary to table the motion at this time? Other channels exist through which the issue can be addressed. The Member who proposed the motion, and, I assume, the Member who will make the winding-up speech serve on the Committee for Employment and Learning. That provides ample opportunities to discuss the issue with departmental officials and with the Minister. Regardless of that, it is right that questions are asked.

Mrs O'Neill: For clarification, I am not a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Furthermore, I have taken the opportunity to table a number of questions to the Minister, as have other Members.

Mr B McCrea: I stand corrected. Someone who looks awfully like Mrs O'Neill was a member of that Committee at one stage.

Ms S Ramsey: The Member to whom Mr McCrea is referring is older.

Mr B McCrea: I get confused. Mrs O'Neill serves with me on the Committee for Education.

My point is that it is possible to discuss such issues with the Minister or departmental officials in Committee in order to find out what is going on. Had that happened, the Members would be aware that the position is positive. Although no one is denying that there is a difficulty with the number of people with learning or other disabilities who are in full-time education, the situation is improving.

This Minister for Employment and Learning will be unable to address the issue alone. He will be able to give us the facts. However, to my knowledge, he is fully committed to resolving the issue.

The last time that we held a similar debate, the Minister announced that there would be a review. That

review is ongoing and the Minister will, no doubt, inform us of the details shortly. Rather than pre-empting that review and having the discussion now, it might have been better to wait for its outcome.

There is concern that other Ministers' Departments take a long time to take decisions and get things done. That has been apparent in discussions on the Maze and other matters. The Minister for Employment and Learning cannot be accused of that, and certainly not on this issue. The Minister is producing the goods. I hope that the House will unite on this subject, rather than turn it into a political football. We should gather the relevant information and make progress on implementation. I hope that that is taken in the manner in which it was intended and that we can secure the necessary support.

The range of further education courses that is offered is extensive. More can always be done, but good provision is available. Records for the latest academic year show that there were 1,338 enrolments. Of those, 650 were on discrete courses, an increase on the figure from a couple of years ago. The situation is vibrant, with all the figures heading in the right direction.

Adult day centres account for 11% of further education provision for young people with disabilities. As has been discussed in relation to respite care, etc, we must examine the placing together of people of different ages in adult day centres. That is one of the issues that will the review will address. Funding for the sector has increased, and was a major part of the Programme for Government and the Budget. That financial commitment will be met.

Significantly, the relationship with the voluntary sector is strong. We must all work together. Nobody has all of the answers and it is incumbent on all of us to listen carefully to those who have to care for young people with disabilities for the whole of their life, not just during the working day. We want to help parents, children and young people, and ensure that those people have access to gainful employment.

Helping young people with disabilities is not restricted to the provision of further education. The Department can also help by providing vocational training and supported employment. Along with other Members, I witnessed the making of bedspreads, and was very encouraged to see how people dealt with that.

It is important to recognise that one size does not fit all — a range of challenges and a range of support can be provided. We must try to offer all of the right support to all of the right people, in the most appropriate way possible. The most important measure that the Department can take is to engender a positive attitude. The Department has an advisory service and an action plan to help to do that.

After talking to my friends and colleagues in Mencap, I have been struck by their feeling that the biggest issue that they face is that many people do not properly understand the position. One side of Mencap is the fundraising and campaigning that they do so well. Another side to their work is the quest to find companies to take young people with disabilities on board. Some of the bigger companies, such as Tesco, have taken people on board. However, there are many opportunities in other areas, and often people are simply unaware of the very positive role that people with a learning disability can play.

There is a danger of appearing trite in respect of young people with disabilities. However, I was completely bowled over by the young people who told me about what they wanted to do. The challenge for us all is to get those young people into the appropriate level of training or education. Surely, that is one of the useful things that the House can achieve.

I intend to bring those young people back to the Long Gallery and I hope that other Members will join me in talking to them.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. He will get an extra minute, so he is using my intervention strategically.

One group of people has not been mentioned and has almost been silent. It is the people who leave school — sometimes special-needs schools — and have no further education provision made for them. Does the Member agree that the needs of that group of young people should be addressed urgently? Further education colleges wash their hands of them, and no provision is made for them in the special needs sector.

Mr B McCrea: The Deputy Speaker will, no doubt, clarify that I do not have an extra minute. However, it was still worth Mr Wilson putting his point forward. I am coming to the conclusion of my speech. I look forward to the Member's contribution, and he will have my support. I urge all Members to take a holistic view of the issue. The Minister is delivering results, and we will see a proper review, be able to scrutinise it and ensure that it is right. I thank the Members on the Benches opposite for tabling the motion. However, I ask them to consider accepting the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Jimmy Spratt.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues throughout the United Kingdom on the impact of the Internet in the area of suicide prevention, and whether he plans to meet with Internet providers again. (AQO 2734/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): In July 2007, I met Home Office Minister Vernon Coker and key Internet providers to outline my concerns regarding the damaging impact that harmful Internet content can have on vulnerable people. I have also raised the issue at North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council meetings, and, more recently, with my ministerial colleagues in Scotland and Wales.

In addition, I met Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Ivan Lewis to discuss the impact that the Internet can have on health-related issues such as suicide and self-harm. We agreed to host a further joint meeting with key Internet providers following the publication of the Byron Report on harmful material on the Internet and in video games.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and encouraging response. I commend him for the work that he has done in this area and his proactive approach to this very serious problem.

Does the Minister agree that the social networking and chat room providers need to take this issue much more seriously than they have done up to now? That industry is potentially profitable, but its social responsibility must be looked at seriously. To that end, does the Minister agree that the Byron Report is a useful publication? Will the Minister take all steps to ensure that the measures contained in the report are implemented in Northern Ireland as soon as possible?

Mr McGimpsey: I met Dr Byron while she was preparing her report. It was specially commissioned by the Prime Minister, and I agree with much of what I have seen of the report. Certain websites and chat rooms undoubtedly encourage people to take their own

lives. Those websites can have undue influence over vulnerable people, particularly the young. It is not sufficient for Internet providers to say that they are merely conduits and that the content of those websites is not their responsibility.

This issue is a reserved matter because of the law. Therefore, more robust legislation is needed to ensure that Internet providers take responsibility for the information that is provided.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's remarks. In January, he wrote to me about these issues, and I thank him for his letter.

Will the Minister propose that suicide prevention become an area of priority under the tutelage of the North/South Ministerial Council? What arrangements have been made to provide dedicated resources for west Belfast, particularly the Shankill area? The Reaching Across to Reduce your Risk of Suicide and Self-Harm (RAYS) project is in considerable financial difficulty, and I raised that with the Minister some time ago. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: Suicide prevention is an area of priority. I have had discussions with my counterpart in the Republic, Mary Harney, and I have raised it at North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council meetings. Other Health Ministers agreed that the issue was important. That was the tenor of my discussion in Edinburgh last week with Ministers from Scotland and Wales.

Funding streams have been set aside for this issue. Provision has been made for community groups and others who are active in this area. I cannot be specific regarding the breakdown of funding in west Belfast, nor can I be specific as far as the RAYS project is concerned. The Member knows well that north and west Belfast are areas of great pressure regarding the incidence of suicide. They, therefore, receive support and funding.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his reply to the various questions, and I welcome what he said. Does he agree that it is essential that Internet providers should be made to restrict access to potentially harmful websites, especially social-networking sites, which are a great source of potential harm, particularly to young people? Will the Minister make progress on restricting access to those sites?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree wholeheartedly with Mr Maginness on the need for restricted access to social-networking websites, and robust legislation is needed. The responsibility for that legislation lies, in the first instance, with the Home Office. I have had discussions with the Home Office, and I will have further discussions.

The substance of the Byron Report is about harmful content on the Internet and in video games. I anticipate that it will produce a response from the Government, and I look forward to seeing that response.

One of the responses will be to set up a council for the UK. I anticipate that all the regions will be represented on that council to take the matter forward. Internet providers are international, multi-billion-dollar organisations that are mostly based outside the UK, and the ability to reach them from regional Administrations in Belfast, Wales, Dublin or Scotland is limited because of our critical mass. Working together, particularly given the interest that the Prime Minister has shown, will give us the critical mass to allow us to influence Internet providers to ensure that they take their responsibilities seriously. However, robust legislation is needed.

Regional Public Health Authority

2. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the role a future regional public health authority will have as part of the review of public administration. (AQO 2730/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The new multi-professional regional public health agency will give renewed and enhanced focus to achieving public health goals and will ensure better co-ordination and delivery of interventions to protect and improve health. It will also ensure public health input to the commissioning and design of services. In addition, it will offer support to, and work in partnership with, local government, the education sector and others in achieving improved health and well-being across Northern Ireland.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he outline his plans regarding the location of the original public health authority and the various other health bodies that are to be established under the review of public administration? Does he intend to locate any of those bodies in the west of the Province?

Mr McGimpsey: Although it is early days for me to start to give assurances, I can tell Mr Bresland and other Members that there is potential to locate bodies throughout the Province. There is a need for strong local representation and influence in public health, particularly around commissioning. Therefore, it follows that there is a need for locations across Northern Ireland. That will also apply to the common services organisation, which will create an organisation to deal with the back office jobs that are not necessarily particular to health but without which the Health Service could not function. The Bain Report, which is due in July, has been especially commissioned on the location of Government jobs, and the Department will also bear that in mind.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his insistence that public health is at the centre of reform — that is much appreciated. Will he tell me whether the public health authority will work closely with local government in the future? If so, will local government be represented on the authority?

Mr McGimpsey: I see a very strong correlation between the work that local government does and the work that the regional public health agency will do. I plan for the agency to have representation from local government. I plan for the commissioning groups in the regional health and social care boards to have such representation, too.

The agency will play a key role in the provision of healthcare in Northern Ireland, and it will be involved in public-health matters, health improvement, health protection and service development. It will deal with health inequalities, promote positive health and well-being and provide the local population with the ability to take responsibility for its own health. Local government will play a vital role in all that delivery.

Dr Deeny: I would like the Minister to provide some more detail about the regional public health agency. How many people will it employ, and what will be the ratio of health professionals to civil servants? Will GPs be involved? Finally, will the new regional public health agency work along the same lines as the Health Promotion Agency?

Mr McGimpsey: Dr Deeny is aware that, under the old direct rule model of a single health authority, the Health Promotion Agency was to be abolished and its functions were to disappear into that giant body. I saw that as being a retrograde step; it would have moved the service in exactly the opposite direction to which I wanted it to go. I have, therefore, proposed the creation of a regional public health agency, which will have much greater powers than the current Health Promotion Agency. I envisage it not only taking on the functions of the Health Promotion Agency, but those public-health functions that are held by boards and trusts. I anticipate that around 300 staff will be employed in the new agency, and that they will have expertise in public-health medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, infectious disease specialisms, health promotion, partnership working, community development and health education. Thus, a whole range of expertise will come together in that key area.

As Members are aware, I have said that the future of the Health Service depends on three elements: it requires investment, it must be efficient and it must engage with the local population. Each one of those elements is of equal value and importance. The Health Promotion Agency will deal with the third element.

Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital

3. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the new mental-health facility at Craigavon Area Hospital will cater for the entire Southern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQO 2698/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The new psychiatric unit at Craigavon Area Hospital, which is scheduled to open in May, will provide 74 inpatient beds, an outpatient unit and a day hospital. Of those 74 beds, 20 will accommodate patients from across the Southern Trust area and will cater for older people experiencing functional mental illness. The remaining 54 beds will be for general adult psychiatry, providing for the Newry and Mourne, Banbridge and Craigavon districts.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answer. I emphasise the importance of maintaining and properly resourcing the service. The disruption in mental-health services in the Southern Trust area over the past years has caused tremendous trauma for patients at different times, and they need some certainty about the future of the service. We do not want patients to arrive at Craigavon Area Hospital only to find that the services are not available, like the patients who arrived at the accident and emergency department of the Mid Ulster Hospital on Friday. Will the Minister give an assurance that services will be maintained and resourced properly?

Mr McGimpsey: That is exactly the type of assurance that I am happy to give. I have just mentioned the new psychiatric unit that will open in Craigavon, and a similar facility will play a key role in the new enhanced hospital in Omagh. In addition, a new day centre will open in Dungannon, and St Luke's Hospital in Armagh will continue to provide general adult psychiatric beds, intensive care beds, dementia assessment beds and addiction unit beds.

2.45 pm

We are aware that, as far as mental health is concerned, the direction of travel is very much in accordance with the recommendations of the Bamford Review. The key principle of the review was for treatment to be carried out, as far as possible, in the community, rather than in institutions. Such an approach leads to enhanced quality of care, shorter hospital admission times, more rapid discharge and access to home treatment packages. We are taking that direction, and, as a result of the final Budget settlement, extra moneys have been earmarked and ring-fenced for mental health.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister may be aware that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety visited Craigavon and Altnagelvin hospitals to look at the new facilities. One of those is open, and the other is due to open in May 2008. The Committee felt

that the facilities were excellent, and that much thought had gone into their layout and user-friendly design. Will the Minister, therefore, agree that it is an equality issue of much importance that we should see those models replicated at all acute hospital sites? I speak especially of the Ulster Hospital, given the dire conditions that exist at Ards psychiatric nursing unit, which we both visited some time ago, and certainly not the planned model of beds located in the main hospital? Does the Minister agree that that is not the best use of money or the best location and the beds should be on site?

Mr McGimpsey: As far as provision is concerned, I repeat that we are moving in the direction of the Bamford Review, whose recommendations will take 10 to 15 years to roll out and will require considerable investment. The basic principle of the Bamford Review is that community placement is preferable to hospital placement; nevertheless, we will never get away from the need for hospitals.

Mrs Robinson illustrated an issue in Newtownards, and I agree with her on the matter of provision. However, the difficulty surrounding the Ulster Hospital rests with the capital provision. For example, Ulster phase B of the hospital's redevelopment programme requires about £340 million. That money is not in the capital budget at present. However, I am looking hard to find that money because, as an equality issue, people in north Down who attend the Ulster Hospital are entitled to the same provision as they would receive were they visiting Omagh or Craigavon.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, took the opportunity to visit the new hospital in Craigavon; it is exciting and of the future. The Minister spoke of the need to keep patients at home as much as possible and not to have admissions to hospitals. What additional resources will, therefore, be put into community care? The Minister spoke of a day centre but preventative treatment and care require much more than that.

Mr McGimpsey: The Bamford Review estimated that the level of additional investment needed over the next 10 to 15 years will be £300-£400 million. We have made a good start as far as the Budget is concerned with a 12.5% increase. Over the next three years, the allocation will be £12.3 million, £14.2 million and £26.6 million. That provides us with a good start and allows us to move the recommendations of the Bamford Review, particularly in and around community placement, and treatment and away from institutionalising those who have mental-health needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

Reallocation of Finance Staff

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the implications of

the reallocation of finance staff of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust from Ballymoney to Ballymena. (AQO 2704/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The establishment of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, under the review of public administration, replaced three former legacy trusts, namely Causeway, Homefirst and United Hospitals health and social services trusts. The rationalisation of common-service functions, such as finance, is an essential element of the review of public administration process to maximise the potential for efficiency savings for redeployment in the front-line services.

In relation to certain finance functions, I understand that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust is consulting local staff representatives and that no decision has been taken on the relocation of those staff.

Mr Storey: There is grave concern in my constituency, particularly among staff employed in Ballymoney, that, despite what the Minister has said, advanced discussions have taken place. In fact, decisions on the relocation of staff took effect on 1 April 2008. Therefore, will the Minister assure the House that there will be no relocation of jobs from Ballymoney to any other location until the Bain Report, to which he referred previously, is published in July?

Will the Minister meet me and other representatives to deal with the issue and to ensure that a Health Service presence will remain in Ballymoney, which has suffered greatly over recent years with job losses?

Mr McGimpsey: I never refuse any Member a meeting. However, in the first instance, that matter is a local trust management issue, and the Member should direct his concerns to the local trust.

As far as that matter is concerned, everyone is aware of the need to be efficient in the Health Service and to provide the required savings under the review of public administration. I have said over and over again that I would find those savings, and the reduction of 1,700 administrative jobs, which will save £54 million a year and which was planned before the amalgamation of the 19 trusts into six, is part of that. That work is progressing, and I understand that reducing the finance jobs from 185 to 161 will eliminate duplication, and so on. However, I can assure the Member that those reductions will not result in any permanent member of staff losing his or her job. Staff will be properly supported throughout the whole process of change. I have said repeatedly that most of the savings have been earmarked through the rationalisation of the trusts and that I will aim at a target of no compulsory redundancies, and I repeat that aim today.

Mr Beggs: It is strange that a DUP Member should complain about efficiency savings, given that his Minister required them.

Will the Minister guarantee that staff will be fully consulted to ensure that their views are fully known and considered by the trusts' senior management? Furthermore, will he accept that it is preferable that front-line health staff, rather than administrative staff, remain in locations that are easily accessible to the public?

Mr McGimpsey: The 1,700 jobs in question are all administrative jobs. The £54 million that will be saved will be reinvested in front-line services. As far as the reduction process is concerned, we undertake to do that through the human-resources framework. Discussions with staff and trade union side are continuing, and, by using a variety of measures, such as vacancy control, voluntary early retirement and voluntary redundancies, we anticipate that no permanent member of staff will lose his or her job.

Mr O'Loan: I was going to ask the Minister to confirm that there will be no compulsory redundancies and no reduction in permanent staff — because vacancies already exist — and that the savings that will be made will be directed into enhancing the number and quality of front-line medical services, however, as he has already done so, I welcome his statements.

As he moves to the next stage of shared services, will the Minister assure the House that his decisions on locations will be made in a context that recognises the distribution of all public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland and ensures fair and equitable distribution throughout the region?

Mr McGimpsey: I welcome Mr O'Loan's clear understanding of the RPA process. The next stage will be the creation of common services organisations, which will generate opportunities to spread jobs around the Province. My Department will be governed in that by the Bain Report and by the DFP framework. The need for strong local representation on, and input to, commissioning, the public health agency and shared and common services organisations will be the guiding principle that will impel my Department to ensure that the jobs are properly distributed.

Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff

7. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures being taken to recruit midwives and maternity staff for Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQO 2766/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Although recruitment is a matter for the trusts, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised me that all possible steps, including placing additional advertisements in the relevant press and exploring potential return-to-practice initiatives are being taken to fill the vacancies in Craigavon Area

Hospital. The trust has also initiated a review of maternity services.

For the academic year 2008-09, my Department is commissioning an additional midwifery cohort of 12 places at Queen's University, specifically for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. On successful completion of an 18-month training programme, those trainee midwives will be eligible to apply for posts in the trust.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I am aware that the trusts are responsible for recruiting midwives, but anyone who has recently been in the maternity wards at Craigavon Area Hospital, will be acutely aware of how much pressure the staff are under. It is only through their professionalism and dedication to their jobs that those wards are surviving.

I am concerned by the proposals to increase the number of births at Craigavon Area Hospital by transferring patients from Lagan Valley Hospital. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to address that situation. Has he considered offering employment packages or financial incentives to midwives who have retired early, or increasing the funding to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to allow it to recruit midwives from whatever source?

Mr McGimpsey: There are six vacancies for midwives in Craigavon Area Hospital and 20 vacancies regionally. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has undertaken a review of maternity services with the aim of devising a plan to manage capacity, demand, and staffing issues.

The Member made a point about retired midwives. The trust has placed adverts in the relevant press, and it has written to midwives who have retired or who are on maternity leave to offer them the opportunity to return to work.

No expectant mother has been referred elsewhere due to pressures at Craigavon Area Hospital, and the number of mothers who request to be transferred there from the other three board areas is increasing. Therefore, there is confidence in the maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital, and as the trust and management look to the future, they are taking on board the points that the Member has made.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister tell the House whether a final decision has been taken to close the maternity unit at Lagan Valley Hospital? Its closure would put additional pressure on the maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital. Is he prepared to consider increasing the number of training places for midwives in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: There are no proposals on my desk to close the maternity unit at Lagan Valley

Hospital. I am aware of press reports on the subject, but I am not dealing with any such proposal. I anticipate that I will have to do so; at which point, I will be in a position to make a decision.

As part of its review, the trust is considering how changes to services at Lagan Valley Hospital might increase the pressure on the maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital. The trust is basing its plans on a birth rate of between 6,000 and 6,500 per annum in its area.

That is the result of a large increase in the number of births in the trust area, which has risen from 2,691 births in 2002-03 to 3,588 births in 2006-07. Therefore, although the birth rate has risen throughout Northern Ireland, it has risen faster in Craigavon. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has taken that on board. The Department is offering extra training places and will continue to do so to deal with the demand.

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Dualling of the A26

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the proposed dualling of the A26 to the Drones Road.

(AQO 2759/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The Department's Roads Service is progressing plans for the provision of a 7 km stretch of dual carriageway on the A26 between Glarryford crossroads and the junction with the A44 Drones Road at the Ballycastle fork. Detailed assessment of the five route corridors that are under consideration is ongoing. After a number of popular consultation days, the second stage of the three-stage assessment process is expected to be completed by June 2008. The process will conclude with the selection of a preferred route, which I hope to announce publicly around mid-2008.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is an understatement to say that the choice of route for the new dualling between those two points could have a massive impact on people who live on, and close to, Frosses Road. If the Department chooses one of the two eastern routes that have been proposed, that will have a massive social and economic impact, particularly for agriculture. Does the Minister agree that any decision in favour of one of the two eastern routes will have a serious detrimental impact on existing farm businesses?

Mr Murphy: The Member has highlighted the process that must be undertaken when decisions are

made on major road schemes. Sometimes, Members get frustrated that the statutory processes take so long. However, when a major road project is planned to be built on farmland or any other type of land, that will affect farmers and the environment. Therefore, time must be taken to consider the options and to carry out proper consultation to examine all the effects.

With regard to the eastern routes to which the Member refers, the Department has employed an agricultural consultant to assess the expected impact of all five route corridors on affected farm businesses. The impact of each of the route options on land use will form part of the stage-two assessment and will inform the decision-making process.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister indicate what criteria his Department has used to establish a Province-wide prioritised list for road improvements? What mechanisms exist for introducing flexibility into the system?

Mr Murphy: The criteria for prioritisation of projects are well established and are available. I will ensure that the Department sends a copy of that information to the Member. There are projects that are of key strategic importance; there are projects that are important to economic development; and there are projects, such as the one under discussion, where the road has an unfortunate history of accidents, and there is strong local demand for road improvements in the area. Sometimes, priorities compete. Nonetheless, there are established criteria to assess roads and options, and, in doing so for route corridors, to determine the best options. That is in line with my previous answer.

A detailed manual for assessing such matters is available, and I will ensure that a copy is sent to the Member.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware of the enormous disappointment of people who live on the other main route to the north-west, the Glenshane Pass — in particular, the people of Dungiven. Will he assure the House that a bypass for the most polluted town on these islands is now, without a shadow of doubt, his number one priority?

Mr Murphy: Last week, I visited Limavady Borough Council, and I took the opportunity to meet people in Dungiven.

I have no doubt that there is congestion and that those who live along Main Street in Dungiven suffer also from the pollution caused by the congestion. I have assured them that that road, and the Dungiven portion of it in particular, is of the highest priority for me, and they seemed reasonably satisfied with the meeting. I intend to deliver on that.

Development Control Section, Roads Service

2. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average response time by the development control section of the Roads Service to requests from the Planning Service. (AQO 2691/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service does not maintain records that will enable calculation of an overall average response time by its development control sections to consultation requests from Planning Service. In addition, the range, scale and complexity of planning applications mean that the calculation of an average response time across all application types would not give a meaningful indication of performance.

However, I confirm that Roads Service meets its target of returning 70% of planning consultations to the relevant divisional planning office within 15 working days from date of receipt. In the period from 1 April 2007 to the end of February 2008, Roads Service received 30,694 planning consultations, of which 76% were responded to within the 15-working-day target. Bearing in mind the significant number of applications received, I believe that to be a very good performance.

Each year, Roads Service and Planning Service sign up to a service-level agreement, which sets out the basis on which each delivers services to the other. It defines the nature and quality of the required outputs to be delivered by each agency, along with associated performance targets. Although the service-level agreement is not legally binding, both services act in accordance with it.

Members are aware that Roads Service's role as a consultee in the planning process is to provide advice to the Planning Service on applications that may affect the public-road network. Typically, Roads Service's assessment will examine road safety and traffic-progression issues. However, applications related to larger developments may also require consideration in the context of relevant development plans, and transport assessments may be required from the developer to demonstrate the impact of the development on the roads network. In general, each application is assessed against the relevant policies, design standards and guidance documents.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Perhaps it is as well that no detailed records are kept by the Roads Service as to the length of time that it takes to respond to some planning applications. The Minister indicated that 25% of applications are not responded to within the 15-day period that he mentioned. Many of those are major planning applications and have economic significance for local areas and for Northern Ireland in general. There is great frustration

that Roads Service does not deliver that well. Will the Minister tell us what steps he will take to remedy that?

Mr Murphy: I understand where the Member is coming from. We want to ensure that there is no undue delay. Many of the larger applications, which take a longer time, have significant economic benefits riding on the decision. It is the Executive's intention to streamline the planning system as far as possible, and the Minister of the Environment shares that goal. We must bear in mind, however, that projects must be developed correctly and have no detrimental impact on the roads network, or any other facet of public life.

The scale and complexity of some projects mean that decisions on them take longer. I am keen that the process is as smooth as possible; however, Roads Service advises me that much of the delay is caused by the need to refer back to applicants to seek further information. Not all the information is provided in the first instance. Developers, architects and planning consultants should be able to anticipate what is required for a major application and ensure that all the information is delivered to Roads Service at the start. Much delay is caused by the toing and froing between the Planning Service, and the developers and their consultants in seeking further information.

Nonetheless, I share the Member's interest in ensuring that these projects are dealt with as quickly as possible.

Mr Burnside: The Member for East Antrim raises the issue of the effectiveness and efficiency of the planning system. Does the Minister agree that an unreal distinction is made between the regional planning function in his Department and the local planning function in the Department of the Environment (DOE)? That is a major problem. Will he initiate discussions with the Minister of the Environment? The two Departments should merge as soon as possible. Prior to that, those two planning functions, regional and local, should be put together in a single, new, efficient department. That would speed up the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process.

Mr Murphy: My Department is responsible for the regional development strategy, and planning issues, *per se*, rest with the Department of the Environment. As a consequence of the court case on draft PPS 14, many planning policy issues have been transferred from my Department to the Department of the Environment in the past six months — that might have the streamlining effect that the Member mentioned.

The Minister of the Environment is considering ways to speed up the planning process. Roads Service is a consultee to the planning process, and we want to ensure that it plays its part as efficiently as it can. However, my Department is responsible for setting the overarching policy for the regional development strategy, which will affect various Departments, not

just DOE. That remains the responsibility of my Department, but planning policy statement issues have been transferred to DOE in the past six months.

Mrs Long: I want to return to development control. The Minister of the Environment recently circulated advice to her Department on the cumulative effects of development. Does Roads Service also consider the cumulative effects of road traffic and parking when examining applications, particularly if they are one of a series in a neighbourhood?

Mr Murphy: When dealing with a series of applications in the same neighbourhood, there is an immediate question on how the developments would affect the road on which they are being built. Roads Service is conscious of the development potential that has been unleashed in the past 10 years, and there is quite a bit of cumulative development.

I had a discussion with Roads Service officials, among others, in west Belfast where a great deal of development is planned for the Glenmona area. Roads Service told the planners that it wants transport infrastructure built across planning developments in the area instead of in a piecemeal fashion. Roads Service is conscious of the cumulative effects of development.

Planning approvals are a matter for DOE, but Roads Service wants to assert that proper transport provision is increasingly a feature of planning applications. The cumulative effects of planning applications transcends the number of applications.

Public Transport: Student Use

3. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to encourage students to use public transport when travelling to and from college or university. (AQO 2745/08)

Mr Murphy: Students will benefit from the full range of steps that are being taken to improve public transport. In addition, Translink has advised me that it offers a student discount card that provides access to reduced fares on bus and rail services. Translink also organises an annual series of roadshows at universities to distribute promotional material and information on services, fares and promotions.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. I am keen to get more detail. What discounts can students expect?

Mr Murphy: Students in full-time education can obtain up to 13 months' discounted travel with a Translink student discount card, which costs £7; reductions are also available on cross-border services. Discounts include special student single and return fares on many Ulsterbus routes; a discount of up to 15% on standard adult fares of £2 or more; a discount of up to 33% on

Northern Ireland Railways adult single fares; and student day-return tickets that cost twice the student single fare.

Mr Shannon: The Minister mentioned the 15% discount as one of the proposals that he is considering. However, he will be aware, as are many Members, that students spend up to £500 on books — I am aware of one book that costs £38. Since students are under financial pressure, will the Minister consider increasing the discounts that are available to them? Increasing discounts would go a long way to help students through their courses at university.

Mr Murphy: There is an issue of the student discounts that are provided by the Translink promotions, and there is also an issue of concessionary fares. The Department bid for money for concessionary fares in the budgetary process. The Member is aware that some people with disabilities do not qualify for full concessionary fares. The Department bid for money so that children between 16 and 18 years old who stay in school would qualify for more than the half fare, but we were not successful.

I appreciate the Member's concern about the financial problems that students face. However, various interest groups have made a strong case for receiving concessionary fares, and the Department is trying to accommodate them as best it can. One of those groups represents students, but I cannot guarantee that it will have any more advantage.

3.15 pm

Mrs M Bradley: Is the Minister concerned that students who travel by rail to the University of Ulster's Magee campus in Derry cannot get there in time for morning lectures? Derry must be the only city in Europe in which that happens. What has the Minister done, or what does he intend to do, to improve the situation?

Mr Murphy: I was not aware that students there were arriving late for lectures. I am happy to raise the issue with Translink, and if there is a problem with the Translink timetable, it can be altered to ensure that students arrive on time. I know that Derry students are conscientious and will want to be at their lectures in time. I am more than happy to raise the issue with Translink to try to get a result.

European Funding: Scotland

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the discussions he has had with his counterpart in Scotland, in relation to the £220 million of European funding given to Scotland to boost links with Northern Ireland. (AQO 2676/08)

Mr Murphy: I am delighted that the territorial co-operation programme for Northern Ireland, the

border region of Ireland and western Scotland, which aims to promote greater territorial cohesion, has been approved by the European Commission. The programme will bring a welcome €192 million EU investment from the total budget of around €256 million. I have not had any discussions with my counterpart in Scotland about the European funding that is available.

Mr Beggs: Considering that Northern Ireland is taking the lead on transport in the British-Irish Council, does the Minister agree that it is important that he has discussions about how that money might be spent? Does he accept that improved and upgraded transport links at Larne harbour and Cairnryan would enhance travel between Northern Ireland and Scotland and encourage tourism? Furthermore, does he accept that improvements to the road from Stranraer to Carlisle and to the road northwards from Cairnryan to Ayr would improve road safety and encourage more people to travel and stay in Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: There are two issues in the Member's question. He mentioned transport links between the North and Scotland and some of the links beyond. Following a discussion with some of the East Antrim MLAs, I have arranged a meeting with Scotland's Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change to discuss some of those issues, and I think that that meeting is due to take place at the end of this month.

The funding that has been made available from the European Union, to which the Member referred, is funding between member states. It will, therefore, involve Scotland, here and the South; it is a three-way arrangement. We are looking at themes and areas that are available for funding under that arrangement, and I will be happy to discuss those with my Irish counterpart, Noel Dempsey, and the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in Scotland, when the propositions are ready to be advanced.

Mr O'Loan: The Minister will be aware of current active discussions in relation to the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry. Will the European funding contribute to that project? If it does, in what way will it contribute? Subject to the outcome of the study on the ferry route, will the Minister state whether he is supportive, in principle, of the reinstatement of the ferry?

Mr Murphy: The Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service is not my responsibility; it is the responsibility of DETI. I am supportive of the reinstatement of the ferry. However, the projects and the availability of finance to which the Member referred must involve not only a linkage between Scotland and the North, but with the border region of the Twenty-six Counties. It is a three-way arrangement; it is between member states. I would that we were a separate member state from

Scotland and the rest of Britain, but that is another day's work. As things stand, that funding will only be available if a project involves the border counties region on the southern side of the border. We are examining what opportunities might lie in that. The Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry is an issue for DETI, and I am sure that the Member will raise it with the relevant Minister.

Mr Neeson: I endorse the reopening of the Campbeltown to Ballycastle ferry route. Will the Minister assure me that he and his counterpart in Scotland will consider the high ferry fares between Scotland and Northern Ireland? They are 50% per mile higher than those on ferry routes between England and France and internal Scandinavian ferry routes.

Mr Murphy: The Member will be aware that a private company runs the ferry service between here and Scotland. Road difficulties on the other side — in Scotland — were brought to my attention by East Antrim MLAs as well as by that company, which is in talks with the Scottish Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. I am not sure what influence the Assembly can have on the company's prices, but we are nonetheless committed to improving access to and from the ports here and in Britain. I will discuss that matter with the Scottish Minister at the end of the month.

Hillhall Road

5. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to (i) reduce tailbacks on the Hillhall Road between Lisburn and Purdysburn; and (ii) investigate the causes of flooding during heavy rains, which results in closure of this road and subsequent long delays. (AQO 2701/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service has made several improvements to address tailbacks on the Hillhall Road, Ballylesson Road and Purdysburn Hill; the most recent, which was completed in November 2006, being at the junction of Glen Road and Hillhall Road. A recent review of the previous route study identified areas for further improvement. Those schemes will include realigning the bend between 218 and 224 Hillhall Road, and they will be considered for inclusion in Roads Service's minor works programme for the Lisburn area.

However, those route studies are for feasibility purposes only, and no proposal is guaranteed to be implemented, as they depend on the availability of land and funding and must compete against all other minor roadworks proposals in Roads Service's eastern division area.

I am sure that Members are aware that the Hillhall Road is used as an alternative diversionary route during the ongoing works on the M1 motorway and the

Westlink. The underpass at Broadway is due to be opened to traffic this summer, and full completion of the Westlink works is due by spring 2009. Therefore, traffic volumes on the Hillhall Road are expected to reduce as that work progresses.

On average, the Hillhall Road closes completely due to flooding once a year. However, after heavy rain, it is liable to pond in places. Roads Service endeavours to limit the problem and, on receipt of severe weather warnings, takes proactive steps such as checking road-gully gratings and removing any debris that may cause flooding. Roads Service carries out regular maintenance activities such as gully cleaning and road sweeping. All planned maintenance operations on the Hillhall Road are undertaken outside morning and evening peak traffic periods. However, Roads Service has no proposals to renew or provide additional drainage systems on the road between Lisburn and Purdysburn.

Mr Craig: Given that the Hillhall Road has already been closed once this year, perhaps the Department should revise its figures on flooding incidents. That aside, I welcome what the Minister has said about the new works on that road.

However, given that the road is being used as an alternative route due to work on the Westlink, reassurances were given that no major works would be carried out on the road —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is well aware that this is Question Time, not Members' statement time, so will he please ask a question.

Mr Craig: Certainly. Does the Minister agree that such an agreement was made? Does he also agree that the heavy traffic on that road cannot be tolerated for much longer?

Mr Murphy: I hope that the heavy traffic on that road will not have to be tolerated for much longer. We expect the Broadway underpass to be open by the summertime. That will, hopefully, remove a substantial amount of traffic.

I use the Hillhall Road regularly to get here, and I know that it can be difficult. Roads Service is trying to keep any substantial work to a minimum but, in instances such as flooding, it will have to take remedial action.

I hope that the Westlink scheme will be substantially advanced by the summertime and fully opened by this time next year. That will reduce the traffic on the Hillhall Road. Some minor works will be submitted to Lisburn City Council as part of the minor works programme for that area.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat. Given that Roads Service's maintenance of gullies has been criticised in

the past, does the Minister have plans to increase the frequency of the clearance of gullies on rural roads?

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Where necessary, Roads Service aims to inspect and clean all gullies in urban areas twice a year and gullies in rural areas once a year. That is line with the road-maintenance guidelines that apply across all council areas. That policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance to drainage systems is carried out, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

In addition to the scheduled operation, further cleaning is carried out to deal with blocked gullies, especially at locations where fallen leaves create an ongoing problem at certain times of the year, or where gullies have a history of blockage for other reasons. Where an area has a history of flooding, Roads Service will pay particular attention to that, particularly in advance of severe weather warnings.

Mr K Robinson: Unfortunately, the problem of flooding on the Hillhall Road is not unique. Will the Minister provide the House with details of any assessment that he has made of the state of storm drainage across the Province? What impact does the ever-increasing area under tarmac in housing and commercial developments have on reducing the capacity of surface water to drain away, thereby increasing the frequency and intensity of flooding incidents?

Mr Murphy: It appears from anecdotal evidence — although I would like to see a scientific study — that we have experienced more flooding in recent years. Some people will attribute that to more tarmac-surfaced areas, which create a greater run-off of water. Others attribute it to more severe weather patterns, and I am aware that serious problems have been created by heavy flash-flooding incidents. It is difficult to create the type of service that will accommodate those types of storms, which are rare, even though they appear to have been more frequent in recent years.

The type of drainage system that would be required to deal with heavy flash-flooding would be above and beyond the means of this institution, or perhaps any institution. Under the current standards and guidance that have been adopted, Roads Service endeavours to clear urban gullies twice a year, and rural gullies once a year. However, Roads Service will pay particular attention to areas in which there are likelihoods of flooding or other instances that would cause the blockage of gullies.

Cycling Trips

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the number of cycling trips are

on target to be quadrupled between levels in 2000 and 2015. (AQO 2678/08)

Mr Murphy: The targets that are set out in the regional transportation strategy 2000-2012 are to double cycling trips between 2000 and 2005, and to quadruple them between 2005 and 2015. To date, cycle usage has not met those challenging targets.

Roads Service measures cycle usage with a series of fixed cycle counters across the North. Cycle usage increased by 57% in Belfast between 2000 and 2006, and the average increase across all locations was 26.3%. Although cycling infrastructure has been provided, persuading the public to abandon the car in substantial numbers has yet to be achieved. Based on the current trend, it is unlikely that the number of cycle trips will be quadrupled between 2000 and 2015.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answer. What plans does he have to increase the cycle-track network so that more people can avail themselves of such an environmentally acceptable mode of transport?

Mr Murphy: There are several ways to promote sustainable transport, one of which is to expand the cycle network, and Roads Service has been involved in doing just that. The targets that were set were challenging; nonetheless, it is disappointing that they are unlikely to be met by 2015.

The cycle network has been expanded, particularly in and around Belfast. The Department has made it a requirement that cycling infrastructure be included in roads networks around major developments. The Department also promotes a range of activities such as the Bike 2 Work scheme, the Safer Routes to School initiative and the walking maps networks. The Department launched a walking map of Belfast, and walking maps are also available for routes in various towns across the North. Although cyclists have had several opportunities to meet some of the relevant organisations since I came into office, I am keen to see much more being done. We are trying to do as much as we can to promote cycling and other forms of sustainable transport.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has addressed ways of promoting sustainable transport. I ask the Minister to take seriously the need for footpath provision in many villages and towns where there are established evening and weekend walking routes. Will the Minister provide details of any current thinking in that regard?

Mr Murphy: It is interesting that we had trouble in securing support during an earlier debate for walking provision in a community project. Nevertheless, we are keen to establish safer places for people to walk. The issue of footpaths in rural areas is difficult to solve. It is a matter of targeting resources towards making walking routes as safe as possible. Matching the level

of expectation that exists across rural communities for footpaths and other amenities is an ongoing struggle.

Nonetheless, we are trying, within our resources, to work out the most beneficial scheme for rural areas, and we are liaising closely with councils and elected representatives to ensure that we target the areas that have the greatest footfall and that present the greatest danger to pedestrians.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister for Regional Development.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Housing Projects: Foyle

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the additional social housing projects she has planned for the Foyle constituency given her enhanced budget and the acute need for social housing in the area. (AQO 2699/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank the Member for recognising that I negotiated a considerable increase in the draft Budget. However, it gives me nothing more than the realistic budget that I sought in the first place, so there is not much scope for many new projects over and above the level being planned by the Housing Executive. However, I am committed to achieving or bettering the Government's target of 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new social housing starts. That represents a steady increase over recent years, and I will ensure that the Foyle constituency receives its fair share.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I remind the Minister that she told the House on 26 February:

"I have been given the money, and I am building the houses."
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p61, col 1].

Now we are being told that she did not get enough money.

In the context of the acute need for social housing in Derry, will the Minister confirm whether all privately-rented properties in the Derry area and beyond, where the tenant is in receipt of housing benefits, are inspected to ensure that they are fit for habitation?

Ms Ritchie: Obviously the Member did not listen to what I said. In October 2007, I clearly indicated that the budget that was allocated for my Department was inadequate. Even though some Members to my right said that I should stop whingeing and get on with it, I decided to continue the analysis and negotiation until I achieved a much enhanced budget. In fact, in my

original answer to the Member, I thanked her for recognising that fact.

There is a requirement for 1,081 units of accommodation in Foyle over the next five financial years. The social housing development programme, which I have approved, provides for 1,136 dwellings to be built. I have taken on board what the Member said about privately-rented properties, and I will ensure that inspections take place.

Mr Burnside: I know that the Minister has a problem in getting a decent budget from the DUP and Sinn Féin, and I have sympathy for her. I realise that she is trying to meet social housing targets for new houses, but will she consider initiating a scheme to refurbish disused properties? The cost would be lower, and she could produce more social housing for the marketplace by implementing a strategy for refurbishing disused, empty houses, rather than simply opting for new housing.

Ms Ritchie: In May 2007, I instructed the Housing Executive to carry out an empty homes survey. The research indicated that there are 39,000 empty homes in the public and private sectors. Of those, approximately 5,000 houses could be refurbished, which would not cost a great deal of money. Research into the ownership of those houses is ongoing, and I will receive a report on those findings shortly. I hope that I can bring some of those houses back into the allocation category, so that they will be available for people to live in, thereby easing the housing crisis.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Minister's indication that the north-west will receive its fair share of the housing allocation that has been made available in the Budget. However, does the Minister recognise that Derry bears an unfair share of acute housing need and that the fair response has to be proportionate to that? In making progress on those matters, the key issue will be delivery. Will the Minister use her influence with the Environment Minister to ensure that land that would be available to provide new housing developments alongside existing developments will be brought into the planning zone?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Durkan for his question. I will be happy to talk to my ministerial colleague the Minister of the Environment about planning issues in order to ensure that land is properly zoned to reflect housing need in the Foyle constituency. The current social-housing development programme that I have approved contains enough new builds to meet the current assessed need. However, as I said to Ms Anderson, I want to see whether those plans can be surpassed. One idea that has been suggested by the Member of Parliament for Foyle was to convene a special housing seminar involving all stakeholders in the Foyle constituency, with a view to identifying

priorities for action. I wish to assure the House that I shall proceed with such a move in the very near future.

Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much was budgeted for the warm homes scheme in (i) 2005-2006; and (ii) 2006-2007, and how much has been allocated under this scheme for 2007-2008. (AQO 2700/08)

15. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans to take forward the warm homes scheme. (AQO 2789/08)

Ms Ritchie: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer question 2 and question 15 together. The warm homes scheme has been very successful, and it will continue. I have increased my Department's allocation to the scheme from £16.85 million in 2007-08 to £21.4 million in 2008-09, and I will be looking for additional funding in-year. I will also examine the delivery of the scheme, and look at introducing prioritisation of applications to ensure that people in greatest need get help first.

It may be helpful to provide some statistics about the scheme. My Department's warm homes scheme budget for the last three years was as follows: £11.85 million in 2005-06; £15.85 million in 2006-07; and £16.85 million in 2007-08. Funding for the scheme has remained relatively constant over the past two years, due to funding from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, through the environment and energy fund. That fund came to an end at the end of the fiscal year last week, but, in order to offset that loss of funding, I have increased my Department's budget for the warm homes scheme to £21.4 million for the current financial year. I will also be looking to the in-year monitoring process to provide additional resources for that important work.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that answer, and for her commitment to that element of social deprivation. However, given the fact that there will be an almost 10% increase in the number of people who are eligible for the fuel-poverty scheme, is the Minister happy that the additional budgetary increase will be enough?

Ms Ritchie: I have heard those expressions of concern about the warm homes scheme, so I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight. Funding for the scheme has increased from £3 million in 2001 to £16.25 million in 2007-08 — the fiscal year that has just ended. That represents a major percentage increase on last year's DSD funding, which in itself was a record for any one year. I remain totally committed to the warm homes scheme, which, since it commenced, has impacted on the lives of 60,000 people throughout Northern Ireland. I have instructed my officials to

ensure that the warm homes scheme is prioritised and targeted at those who are most in need to ensure that it has the best possible impact, and provides the best deal for the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those who are at disadvantage.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's answer and her commitment to the warm homes scheme. Will she also acknowledge the positive contribution that that scheme has made not only in improving the quality of life of our constituents but its unexpected role in helping the benefit uptake campaign by successfully identifying people who were missing out on other benefits?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with Mr Hilditch's analysis, and, at the end of the month, I intend to announce the benefit uptake campaign for older people and those who suffer from mental ill health or disability, for this financial year.

Mr Cobain: Further to that point, the Minister has contact details for all individuals who receive pension credits or attendance allowance. Will she assure the House that those people will be contacted directly to ensure that they are apprised of their entitlement under the warm homes scheme?

Ms Ritchie: I can assure Mr Cobain that I will instruct my officials to ensure that that happens. It has always been my intention to ensure that benefits are targeted towards those who are in need of, and entitled to, them.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answers, and I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the work by those who administer the warm homes scheme through Eaga plc. My questions have been answered, and the Minister clearly stated her intentions for future years; however, one important fact is that the people most in need of the warm homes scheme must be targeted —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not here to get facts from you; we are here to ask questions. Given that the Minister has already answered the question, we will move on.

Housing Contracts

3. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of housing contracts that were started in 2007/2008; and (ii) the number of those contracts that were signed on 31 March 2008. (AQO 2692/08)

Ms Ritchie: In the last financial year, the social-housing development programme faced a funding shortfall; however, I made successful bids in the October and December monitoring rounds, and that enabled the budget to be restored to the full amount

required to deliver in excess of the target of 1,500 new-housing starts.

As of 31 March 2008, 189 social-housing development programme contracts had been started in 2007-08. Those schemes comprise 1,595 accommodation units and, as of 31 March 2008, 22 contracts had been signed.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister's answer illustrates one of the failures of the social-housing programme. Many contracts that should be signed throughout the year are not signed until the last minute, which delays the availability of houses for the incoming year. Will the Minister indicate what steps she is taking to up the game, and improve the performance, of housing associations, which consistently wait until the last day of the financial year before signing contracts?

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that Mr Wilson is well aware of the fact that, in the last financial year, when I took up ministerial office, only 600 new-housing starts were planned. As a result of successful negotiations with the Finance Minister in the October and December monitoring rounds, I was able to secure additional funding that enabled me to increase that figure to 1,595. That happened near the end of the year, which explains the late signing of contracts. Nevertheless, I take on board what the Member said, and I hope that, with greater planning, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive — which is the strategic housing authority for Northern Ireland — my Department and others that are involved in delivery, such as the Strategic Investment Board, can ensure that better targets are put in place and that houses are built. We want delivery in order to offset the disadvantage felt by many people throughout Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail any discussions that her Department has had with other Departments about joining-up the promotion of household energy efficiency measures with the promotion of the adoption of sustainable energy appliances, which will make homes warmer and more cost-efficient for households in the long run? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: Until recently, my Department was in contact with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment constantly, because that Department part-funded the warm homes scheme. Obviously, I have also written to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about some grants that have now ended, asking if it is possible to restore them.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her previous replies. Given the importance of tackling the housing backlog in Northern Ireland, will the Minister assure the House that her social and affordable housing programme will attempt to deliver more starts than

have been achieved in previous years and that it will result in significantly reduced waiting lists?

Ms Ritchie: I assure the Member and the House that I intend to deliver the house starts that were set out in the Programme for Government; that is, to provide 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new homes over the next three years. That represents a steady increase on the level of new social-house building in recent years. In the fiscal year just completed, we pushed up the level of house starts from a target of 600, when I took up ministerial responsibility, to 1,595 new house starts as of 31 March 2008. Therefore, I assure the House that we are always trying to raise the bar.

I am hopeful that the new housing agenda will have a positive impact on waiting lists, but I am pragmatic enough to know that the number of people on those lists is determined by factors outside my control and outside the control of my Department, such as demographic change, immigration, household formation and other social trends.

Mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to introduce a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme for shorthold tenancy agreements, similar to provisions in England and Wales. (AQO 2711/08)

Ms Ritchie: I have no immediate plans to introduce a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme. However, such a scheme will be considered in my assessment of the impact of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and in a new strategy for the private rented sector in Northern Ireland. If legislation is required for such a scheme then provisions could be included in a future housing Bill. The strategy will include the positive consideration of measures that give added protection to landlords and tenants, which is an issue that I understand the Member is particularly concerned about.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's initial answer. Does she agree that we need improvements in standards in Northern Ireland and increased confidence in our private rented sector, and that the introduction of a scheme, such as that which exists in England and Wales, would be a good first step in protecting tenants from rogue landlords while promoting confidence in the sector?

Ms Ritchie: First, I assure the Member that I will be considering the issue in the new housing Bill, which I hope to bring to the Assembly. I also advise the Member and the House that I recently met with representatives of the Landlords' Association of Northern Ireland and gave them a commitment that my housing officials will engage with them on my behalf and, if possible, attend

future meetings. That will enable landlords to present their views on issue relating to the private rented sector.

I am conscious that the private-rented sector provides a proportion of houses in the social-rented sector and that some measure of protection for tenants and landlords is required. Therefore, I shall be taking those measures and what the Member has said into account.

Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to review the criteria used to assess disability living allowance claims in respect of people suffering from epilepsy. (AQO 2671/08)

Ms Ritchie: People with epilepsy are entitled to disability living allowance (DLA) on the same basis as anyone else with a severe disability. They qualify if they meet the entitlement conditions for the benefit, which depend on the effects that a severe physical or mental disability has on a person's need for personal care and/or their ability to walk. People do not qualify for the benefit based on particular disabilities or diagnoses. That ensures that all claims from people with disabilities are treated equitably. To consider separate criteria for specific disabilities would make the decision-making process unnecessarily complicated and possibly unfair.

I know that the Member and one of his colleagues tabled questions for written answer about disability living allowance in the recent past, which were no doubt precipitated by many cases that they have become aware of through their constituency work.

Mr G Robinson: The Minister has already answered my supplementary question. I thank her for doing so.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Decisions assessing a person's medical condition and, as a result, their entitlement to DLA, are currently made by decision-makers who are not medically trained. Does the Minister think that that provides the best method for ensuring that people who are entitled to that benefit actually receive it?

Ms Ritchie: I recall that Mr Brady raised that concern in June 2007 during the debates on the Second Stage and Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. I said at that time that the people who assess the information do so based on the best possible medical information that is available to them. If he has any details concerning particular cases that he is not content with, perhaps he will write to me or have a word with me about them.

It is important to remember that the rules that govern entitlement to disability living allowance are complex. Eligibility is based not on a person's particular illness or medical condition, but on the impact that the illness has on a person's daily living.

Decisions on entitlement involve a high degree of judgement and interpretation of detailed medical evidence. I have no doubt that the people employed in the Social Security Agency are qualified to do that job.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened to the Minister's convoluted explanation of various entitlements. Will she look into the simplification of the bureaucratic processes for those suffering from epilepsy who are seeking travel concessions? Will she examine the cost of providing free public transport, as happens in other parts of the UK, as opposed to the half-priced fares that are currently available in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Robinson has strayed into the responsibilities of another Minister. I am content to write to the Minister for Regional Development about that issue, and I encourage Mr Robinson to do likewise.

The Member referred to the convoluted arrangements for social security benefits. I listened to one of my officials discussing the particular circumstances of disability living allowance and the complex arrangements on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' this morning. I have regular contact with my ministerial counterpart in the Department for Work and Pensions — the governing body for the issue — about that benefit and about the complex arrangements of other benefits. In light of the comments made here today, I am happy to discuss the simplification of the process the next time I meet the Minister for Work and Pensions.

Environmental Improvement

6. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the funding available for environmental improvement schemes in older housing estates. (AQO 2810/08)

Ms Ritchie: Some £2.6 million was spent on such environmental improvement work in 2007-08. Environmental-improvement works are undertaken as part of renewal work in older Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates.

In addition to the funding that is provided by the Housing Executive, my Department is carrying out a range of environmental-improvement works in our cities and towns, in neighbourhood renewal areas, and along arterial routes. Much of that investment will benefit those who live in older housing estates.

Mr Brolly: Does the Minister agree that the design of most of those older estates — with their dark alleyways and communal backyards and car parks — encourages so-called antisocial behaviour? Does she accept that a progressive and comprehensive programme of alley-gating would contribute to the establishment of better order and peace for the residents of those estates; and of the general neighbourhood in which

those estates are located? Will she seek to initiate such a programme? Alley-gating is strongly favoured by Housing Executive officers in my constituency.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Brolly for his supplementary question. All of the relevant offices are already actively pursuing alley-gating on my behalf. That it is the case whether it is done through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the regional-development offices — as an element of urban regeneration — the Belfast Regeneration Office, or the North-West Development Office in Derry.

Alley-gating has already been undertaken in areas of West Belfast and — and as the Member suggested — that has contributed, in no small measure, to a reduction in antisocial behaviour.

Alley-gating is a programme that I will continue to encourage and it is one in which we are already directly involved, whether through the Department's urban regeneration, or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. It is important that environmental schemes are in place for sufficient parking, planting and traffic management. We also need a better plan for homes to provide not just concrete, but greenery, in the true sense of the word.

In my constituency of Strangford, the Minister has ensured that the excellent West Winds scheme has gone ahead. However, there are three other estates in the Newtownards which have not yet benefited from any such schemes.

When does the Minister hope to implement schemes for the Glen, Bowtown and Scrabo estates? Improvements to those estates have been delayed many times and it is therefore important that they are dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Shannon for his question. I am happy to examine those issues and respond to him in writing.

On 13 November 2007, I announced that the Scrabo area had been designated as an area at risk. That means that it was viewed to have a considerable level of disadvantage and that funding would be provided for projects in that area. Therefore, measures have already been taken to help the Scrabo area.

I was pleased to visit Newtownards at Mr Shannon's invitation, and to see the estates that he mentioned. I saw for myself the need for neighbourhood renewal, urban regeneration and revitalisation in those areas. I take on board what the Member has said and will respond to him in writing.

All-Island Policy: Disadvantaged Areas

7. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she has given to an

all-island policy dimension to community development and Government support for disadvantaged areas.

(AQO 2797/08)

Ms Ritchie: I have visited Dublin several times to meet a number of Ministers who hold responsibility for policy areas that are similar to those of my Department: Batt O'Keeffe, Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government with special responsibility for housing, urban renewal and developing areas; Éamon Ó Cuív, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; and Pat Carey, Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs with special responsibility for drug strategy and community affairs.

We share common interests in the issues of tackling disadvantage and promoting the social and physical regeneration of communities, while operating in different policy and legislative contexts. I will be working closely with my Southern counterparts to examine how we achieve best practice in housing and regeneration of communities North and South, and we can learn much from each other. I will be addressing the all-island housing conference in Cork in two weeks' time, along with Mr Ó Cuív.

4.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTIONS

Post Office Closures

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, in light of the announced six-week consultation period on proposed post office closures and the impact on rural and urban communities and disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, to detail what representations it will make to the Post Office and to the Secretary of State.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I thank the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood for tabling the question. As a constituency MLA, I had a meeting last week with the National Federation of SubPostmasters in Northern Ireland to hear directly about its concerns on the recent announcement by the Post Office, which reflects the position of the UK Government and is not a devolved matter.

The Post Office has issued those proposals for consultation, and the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will consider, with other interested Departments, what representations or action would be appropriate on what is now a matter of implementation rather than of policy development. In the meantime, we urge all Members to consider carefully the proposals with the communities that they represent and to make their views known to the Post Office.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Speaker for accepting the emergency question, and I thank the junior Minister for his attendance.

Will the junior Minister ask the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to put the matter on the agenda for Thursday's Executive meeting as a matter of emergency? Will he concur, given that the matter was decided by the British Government and the Post Office before restoration, that it would be reasonable to have a long period of consultation — certainly more than six weeks — to determine the right approach for post office provision in the North? Will he agree, given the higher social, economic, and community disadvantage in the North compared to other parts of these islands, that there is a need to ensure that services are locally provided so that vulnerable people have access to them? Will the junior Minister also consider the model adopted by Essex County Council, where a local council provider is getting involved in the provision of post office services? Is there not something in that model that could be usefully adopted in the North and in any

future conversations that OFMDFM has with the British Government and the Post Office?

Mr Donaldson: Mr Attwood asked whether OFMDFM could put the matter on the agenda as an urgent issue to be discussed at the Executive's meeting this Thursday, and I will consult with colleagues in OFMDFM to see whether that can be done at this stage.

The Member also mentioned the issue of a longer consultation period. It is true that the six-week consultation period has met with some criticism with regard to the Post Office's proposals. Under the code of practice on post office closures and relocations agreed in November 2005 between Post Office Ltd and Postwatch, six weeks is the standard consultation period and was announced by the UK Government last year in their response to the public consultation on the future of the network.

The UK Government have indicated that it is important to minimise further uncertainty for customers and sub-postmasters. The purpose of the area consultation is not about the principle of network change, but how best to implement closures and new outreach operations. Nevertheless, the Member made a valid point, which has been echoed by others publicly. It is a matter that OFMDFM can consider with its departmental colleagues as it prepares a response to the Post Office. I will ensure that that is included in the context of his request for the Executive to consider the matter on Thursday.

The Member also raised issues concerning access, social disadvantage and vulnerable groups in Northern Ireland. The Department of Trade and Industry, which initiated this review of the post office network, was advised of the requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 when it was developing its change strategy. At that stage, individual closures were not specified.

The UK Government have accepted that there is a need to support the network beyond 2011, and they claim that the new access criteria provide a framework to ensure that vulnerable consumers in deprived urban, rural and remote areas are protected. Post Office Ltd stated that steps are being taken to modernise the network, and it is examining innovative ways to deliver cost-effective services. However, the points that the Member made on access and vulnerable groups can be considered and responded to in the consultation process.

The Member mentioned the model used by Essex County Council, where services have been developed through a local provider. That is a model that can be considered, but I stress that those are not issues for the devolved Administration; they are issues for the Westminster Department and Post Office Ltd. However, suggestions concerning Northern Ireland can

be made in the context of any responses that Departments make to the consultation.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful to Mr Attwood for bringing this important issue to the Assembly and for the attendance of the junior Minister. In the junior Minister's initial answers, he appears to accept that those who will be most affected by the changes and closures are elderly people.

In light of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's cross-cutting responsibilities for older people, and for tackling poverty and social exclusion, will the junior Minister advise the House whether he has received any information from the Post Office or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that gives him confidence that the interests of elderly and vulnerable people have been adequately taken into account?

Given that many older people entrust the Post Office with their savings and are reluctant to place them with any other institution, does the junior Minister agree that it is important that the Post Office assures the public that it continues to be committed to providing safe, accessible, local opportunities for older people to save and manage their finances?

Mr Donaldson: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his comments and questions. In the Member's constituency of Newry and Armagh, there are eight urban branches and 38 rural branches. It is proposed that two will close, and eight will be replaced by outreach services. In Mr Attwood's constituency of West Belfast, two branches are proposed for closure. The closure of the Blacks Road branch is perhaps the most controversial, and the Member has spoken about that publicly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister raised pertinent points about the impact that those proposals will have on older people. The Department has a responsibility to work with that sector, and it has been developing a strategy with many of the groups and organisations that represent older citizens.

There are concerns about the impact that those closures will have on elderly people, particularly those who live in rural communities, where the greatest impact could be felt. Older citizens rely on the Post Office for their savings, the payment of utility bills, and so on. Beyond the proposals that have been published, no further proposals or assurances have been given that address the impact of the closures on elderly people or a commitment to safe and accessible Post Office services.

I accept that it is a generalisation, but over 99% of people who live in the UK will still live within one

mile of a post office. However, that does not offer much comfort to people in rural communities who are losing their local sub-post office. In response to the request from the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood for the Executive to consider the issue, we will take on board what the Member has said.

Any discussions that take place between the Department and the other Departments will consider the impact on elderly people with regard to safety and accessibility. Our response to the Post Office will ensure that those issues are highlighted and that the concerns that both Members have raised are brought to its attention. As I said earlier, I encourage all Members to take up the invitation to respond to the consultation. It is important that communities have a voice in the process; Members are well placed to ensure that that voice is exercised.

Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how the decision to reduce healthcare in the Mid-Ulster Hospital from 11.00 pm to 5.00 pm was equality impact assessed and (ii) the measures he will implement to ensure that staff shortages are addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Over the weekend, services at the accident and emergency department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital were reduced. The department closed at 5.00 pm on Friday, Saturday and Sunday due to a lack of appropriate medical cover. I understand the views of Members and the local community that that is an unacceptable position. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has apologised and has advised me that it was an exceptional circumstance and one that left the trust with no alternative but to reduce the opening hours of the accident and emergency department. Later today, I will meet the trust's chief executive, and I will seek her assurance that such an unacceptable situation will not arise again.

I understand that the decision that was taken at the weekend was an operational decision, and an equality impact assessment was not appropriate in those circumstances. The trust's measures were to address an immediate issue of patient safety, and they do not signal a change in the normal opening hours of the accident and emergency department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. To address staff shortages, the trust has recently completed a recruitment exercise for staff-grade doctors in accident and emergency. It expects one additional doctor to commence work in April, with a further two commencing work in August.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The situation is disgraceful. The Minister

said that it was an “exceptional circumstance” and that he intends to meet the Northern Trust to seek assurances that it will not happen again. This morning, I spoke to the Northern Trust, and it cannot guarantee that it will not happen again. It cannot guarantee that it will have doctors this evening, tomorrow evening or for the rest of the week. That is totally unacceptable, and I ask the Minister for assurances about what he can do, and to outline to the House what work he will undertake to ensure that this does not happen again.

Does the Minister agree that it is a management problem, and not a staff problem? The staff at the Mid-Ulster Hospital continue to do very good work daily, but this is a problem of poor management. No doctors were on call to serve a rural population; that could have led to a death in mid Ulster at the weekend. That cannot possibly be allowed to happen again. It is not good enough, and Members should not accept that there is no guarantee that it will not happen again.

Will the Minister confirm whether that action is an indirect attempt to run down services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, as was the case when the South Tyrone Hospital was closed? For a number of years, a direct attempt was made to run down services at that hospital. I want assurances that that will not happen again and that the people of mid Ulster will not be put at such risk this weekend or any time in the future.

Mr McGimpsey: The accident and emergency department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital is a type-2 department, with attendances of just over 20,000 per annum. It operates from 9.00 am until 11.00 pm, seven days a week. It was forced to shut last Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 5.00 pm, but that was an exceptional circumstance, and it will not happen again. I will seek those assurances, and I will report back to Mrs O'Neill in due course.

4.15 pm

As I said, this does not signal a plan to change the services that are currently provided at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. The decision taken at the weekend does not reflect any intention to do that. Normal accident and emergency hours have resumed, and the accident and emergency department will continue to provide services.

Mrs O'Neill says that the problem is one of management. In fact, the accident and emergency department requires four doctors, and it has a complement of two doctors at the moment. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, the department did not have the staff to cover the accident and emergency hours. It needs staff-grade doctors with the appropriate skills who are capable of dealing the responsibilities involved, but those doctors were not available.

As I said, I will raise the issue in my discussions with the trust's chief executive, and when I meet the

trust's board tomorrow night. It is disgraceful that an accident and emergency unit was shut at such short notice, and I would not want a repeat of that situation. I assure the Member that this event does not signal any attempt to change the normal opening hours at the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

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

I agree wholeheartedly with my Deputy Chairperson on this matter. It beggars belief that such an unacceptable and appalling situation could arise in the twenty-first century. I also agree that the blame falls fairly and squarely on management. If management knows that four doctors are needed to cover accident and emergency services over a weekend, then surely it should know that those doctors should be in attendance.

What contingency plans are in place to deal with the situation in the two hospitals that were primarily used, the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine and the Antrim Area Hospital? Does the Minister understand the frustration and the potential fallout for those patients who had to bypass the Mid-Ulster hospital and travel to the other hospitals? I am just thankful that there were no fatalities. I too would like a firm reassurance that, in future, the Mid-Ulster Hospital will have four doctors in place to provide the service that is needed for that widespread rural area.

Mr McGimpsey: I am advised that the Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital were able to manage the extra patients as part of their normal business, and that the reports that 20 or 30 people had to wait on trolleys at Antrim Area Hospital are not true.

As far as recruitment is concerned, we need staff-grade doctors. Some 20 accident and emergency departments operate in Northern Ireland, and recruitment is difficult in the smaller accident and emergency departments. That is a fact; I am in no way using that as an excuse for what happened at the Mid-Ulster Hospital this weekend. The Royal College of Surgeons has advised that an accident and emergency department that has less than 40,000 attendances cannot be sustained. That is the advice that we have received. However, a number of accident and emergency departments operate with well below 40,000 attendances, and that requires the recruitment of staff — and persuading them to stay in post — when they would do much better in a busy accident and emergency that could offer them the challenges that they expect in their career. Staff who have to sit around, as it were, and who are not fully employed rapidly deskill. However, those who work in a busy accident and emergency department — such as those at the Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, which have over 70,000 visits a year — experience the full range of challenges that they expect from their job.

As I said, I will meet the trust's chief executive, and I will explore that issue with her and with the trust's board. If an accident and emergency department is in operation and the opening hours appear on the door, then we expect those hours to be maintained.

The accident and emergency department provides a valuable service, but not the full service: it does not have emergency medicine; it does not have emergency surgical services; it does not deal with adult trauma; it does not deal with head injuries; it does not deal with paediatric emergencies, nor does the hospital have in-patient paediatric services.

Nevertheless, the department provides an important service to the area and it is a service that people in the area expect to be available at a particular time. They understand that it closes at 11.00 pm and, therefore, do not attempt to visit after those hours. What I find difficult to comprehend fully is the particularly short notice of the closure that was given and that is a matter that I will be exploring with the management of the trust in due course.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of further education courses specifically targeted at young people with learning and physical disabilities; recognises the lack of provision for disabled young people over the age of 19; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide sufficient further educational opportunities to ensure that these young people achieve their full potential. — [Mrs O'Neill.]

Which amendment was: Leave out all after "expresses" and insert

"its continued commitment to securing training and employment opportunities where appropriate for young people with disabilities; and awaits the outcome of the review of such provision undertaken by the Minister for Employment and Learning." — [Mr B McCrea.]

Mr Spratt: I thank the proposer of the motion. I also know that a review is in place. I hope that, given what Mr Basil McCrea said earlier, there will not be any division in the House at the end of the debate because this issue is too important for those with disabilities for that to happen. I hope that people will reflect and be able to accept the motion and not divide the House.

When the motion is dissected, there is nothing in it that anyone could oppose. It is about opportunity and young people being afforded the opportunity to fulfil their potential. It is up to the House to ensure that the right opportunities are in place for young people with disabilities in order that their potential is reached.

Disability should not be a hindrance to education, and I admire anyone who wants to further their education in order to maximise their potential. If Northern Ireland is to become an area of economic prosperity, we must ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

About 100 young people with learning difficulties or a disability leave special schools in Northern Ireland each year. That is a significant number with significant potential. Unfortunately, there is a perception — indeed, perhaps more than a perception — that there is little opportunity for that group and no accessible route to further education.

Article 13(1) of the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 requires governing bodies of further education institutions to have regard to the needs of students who are over compulsory school age and who have a disability. Furthermore, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 requires colleges to make their premises and curriculum accessible to those with disabilities. An additional support fund ensures that financial resources

are in place for colleges and students. Those are positive moves, but are they enough? At times I fear that the approach of Government is to throw money at areas such as this without any real consideration of how that money is best spent.

Colleges have raised various issues as problems: have colleges got the capacity to provide for students with learning difficulties and disabilities; are college staff appropriately trained to provide the level of service that students need; are the progressive routes that are required and suitable accreditations in place? Those issues still have to be addressed adequately by the Department for Employment and Learning. The issue is not about just money: it is about targeting resources; providing the necessary environment; giving the right opportunities, and targeting spending in those areas where it is most needed. The needs of students must always be at the forefront of the decision-making process and the strategy adopted.

I understand that the Department for Employment and Learning is reviewing the nature and extent of the provision of further education opportunities for those with special needs. The Department must act in light of the fact that 10% of people aged 18 to 30 have a disability, yet no more than 5% of students in further education have a disability. That disparity must be redressed, but it can be redressed only when the obstacles that prevent young people who have disabilities from entering further education are removed.

I am glad that the Minister has been present in the House throughout the entire debate, and I urge him to take the issues that I have raised into consideration as part of the review. We want to provide the opportunities that young people with disabilities are crying out for. I hope that the Minister will assure the House that the amendment takes nothing away from the wording of the original motion. I reiterate the hope from this side of the House that there will be no Division on the matter, because it is too important.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the second opportunity in recent months to debate this matter. It is worth debating for two reasons. First, there are the reasons that Members have outlined — namely that the group of young people that we are discussing is under stress and is particularly vulnerable. If the Assembly is to measure up to expectations, it must demonstrate the benefits of devolution to those individuals and their families in the way in which it addresses this matter.

However, this matter has returned to the House because of a structural flaw. It is not necessarily a comment on the Minister for Employment and Learning, but in the six months since the matter was first aired in the House, the Department has made no substantive report to the Committee on the progress of the review. Departments must provide stocktaking

reports to their Committees on the progress that they make in implementing the will of the Assembly, as expressed in its resolutions. I hope that, in that respect, we can learn something from this matter.

Secondly, we must know precisely what stage the review is at; what issues it is addressing; and what the time frame is for its completion. I invite the Minister to confirm whether the following matters will be addressed during the review. In opening the debate, Mrs O'Neill referred to transition provision. Probably no need is more acute than that for transition provision, given that the young person is moving from a situation in which he or she has been surrounded for many years by the architecture of schooling, social services and health provision to a new situation with a different architecture. We need to hear more about whether that transition can be better managed so that the young person has all the support and provision that he or she needs in order to move successfully from childhood to adulthood.

Will the Minister comment on the issue that was referred to by his colleague Mr Basil McCrea, namely day care, or daily care and support? As Mr McCrea said, not only are young people in day care with a wide range of other age groups, but there will be greater demand on day-care services as our population ages. Consequently, some families are beginning to discover that their young people are receiving fewer hours of day care than they might have received previously. Given that we have an increasing older population, we must know whether there will be increased day-care provision to ensure that those young people receive the daily care and support that they require throughout their lives.

4.30 pm

Thirdly, I want to talk about supported learning, which has also been mentioned. I acknowledge that the Minister was in correspondence recently on how Invest NI may or may not, for example, support Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL). The project, based in the upper Shankill, has been highly successful and requires a great deal of support. The SDLP needs to know how such initiatives will obtain additional resources, from bodies that include Invest NI, to ensure their continued provision of dedicated training for people, whether young or old, with particular needs.

The fourth matter that I want to flag up is the Minister's ongoing review of the Training for Success programme. The Minister said that any aspect of Training for Success that is not working must be fixed. That applies to the part of the programme that caters for students with particular needs, whether they are part time, over 25 years old or young people.

I invite the Minister to respond to those four points, because they will all influence how the SDLP votes on the motion and thereby whether the House supports it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Lo: I thank Mrs O'Neill for proposing the motion.

There is a legislative framework for the protection of young people who wish to exercise their right to be educated. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 aims to protect disabled people from all forms of discrimination and to integrate them in the life of the community. However, as the Act requires major changes to employment practices and the provision of services, including education, it is being phased in over several years. The Act ensures that the needs of disabled people who wish to study are recognised and that comprehensive information on disability issues is provided to students and their parents or guardians.

In addition, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 developed the right of children with special educational needs to attend mainstream schools. It made discrimination on the grounds of disability unlawful in schools, further and higher education institutions and qualifications bodies.

Official statistics show that approximately 100 young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties leave special schools in Northern Ireland every year. Of those, about 20% are classed as having complex and multiple disabilities and those young people have no option other than day-care provision. Disabled people are twice as likely to have no qualifications as their non-disabled peers.

The solution is not to set up courses specifically for disabled people for which existing legislation mandates, because that would remove them from mainstream society. The solution is to improve access to existing courses. Disability Action's stance is that, where possible, disabled people should be part of mainstream education but with the necessary support to ensure their full participation.

In general, the voluntary and community sector is extremely concerned at the economic focus of the FE Means Business strategy. Non-NVQ provisions receive only 5% of the budget for further education, and colleges tend to prioritise level-2 and level-3 courses, which attract weighted funding. Although it is important for colleges to meet employers' needs to upskill the workforce, a balance must be struck to ensure that that is not done to the detriment of disadvantaged communities that need education to give them a second chance.

Often, level-1 provision is not considered a priority. However, the vast majority of disabled people who have learning disabilities access provision at level 1 or below. Disability Action is concerned about the Department's systematic reduction of the amount of provision that is available at level 1 and below. The option to participate in further education will be reduced dramatically for that group of people, thus marginalising them further in society.

The Programme for Government advocates a shared and better future for all. Therefore, economic development cannot be the Assembly's only concern. Building a fair and inclusive society must be the basis for a future in which people are not prevented from reaching their full potential simply because of their disability.

I support the amendment and look forward to the Department's review and to a holistic approach being taken towards employment, training and education opportunities for all.

Mr Newton: I agree with my colleague Jimmy Spratt's remarks on the matter. I hope that all Members agree that the matter is of such serious concern that the House must not divide on the issue. There is no need for it to divide. I concur with the remarks of Alex Attwood, who has just left the Chamber, on the transition from school to further education and, particularly, on USEL. When the organisation attended the Committee for Employment and Learning, members were impressed by the work that it does for disabled people.

All local politicians have a responsibility to support the personal development of the most vulnerable people in society, regardless of their background, physical or mental needs, age or gender. A society that cannot accept the basic principle to support the people who are in greatest need does not deserve to be described as progressive.

Some Members have quoted statistics and figures; no doubt others who speak after me will do the same. I do not want to discuss statistics, specifics and essentials. It would not be possible for me to cover the whole story in the time that I have been allocated. However, I want to address the supporting principles that the Assembly must adopt — guidelines that should underpin all that it does if it is to improve the circumstances and well-being, not only of the group of people that we are discussing, but of everyone.

There is a great need for the Assembly to listen to people who have learning difficulties. To some extent, the Assembly has engaged, through pilot studies, with school pupils who have disabilities and has attempted to deal with their identified needs. However, that must be extended and expanded in order to take note of needs in further education areas. The Assembly must speak up for people who have needs, not just when an opportunity, such as this debate, arises, but through an ongoing and unrelenting campaign that articulates the specific needs of those young people, who often have complex and multiple disabilities.

There is a need to provide support and to ensure that the necessary infrastructure that Alex Attwood talked about is available during the transition in order to help teachers, lecturers and students and to guarantee the best learning experience. Young disabled people need to feel safe. Their learning experience must be satisfying

and rewarding and must provide them with increased confidence as part of their holistic development.

However, that cannot be a one-way process, nor should we expect it to be. We need to challenge the students to make choices about their lives and careers. We need to provide all the support that we can, but we also need students to make choices and decisions. We should help to stretch them to achieve their dreams and aspirations. We need to help them take their rightful places in society, ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute to the community in a positive manner, and fully value their contributions.

Moving from school — we have been talking mainly about special schools — to further education can be a traumatic experience for those with learning difficulties and disabilities. They need support at that challenging time, as they make the transition, but they also need encouragement and assistance to empower them to make their own choices about post-school provision and to allow them the opportunity to avoid care centres or intensive-support units. As many as possible should enjoy a fully empowered and comprehensive life, and the opportunity to make a full contribution to society.

This matter is important. A society that ignores people is not progressive. I hope that the House will not divide on this issue, and that those who seek support from us will receive it from a united Assembly.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and broadly support what other Members, particularly the members of the Employment and Learning Committee, have said. After 12 years of primary and post-primary education, many young people who suffer disabilities and learning difficulties are denied the opportunity to enter further education — an opportunity given to so many others.

Research shows that in Northern Ireland, a lower percentage of young people with disabilities or learning difficulties than in Britain participate in further education programmes and courses. Statistics also show that approximately 100 of them leave special schools in the North every year. Of those, 20% are classified as having complex or multiple disabilities. Most of those kids have no choice but to go into day care. They have no opportunity to access further education courses. The debate needs to reflect that, and we must do something about it.

We should also acknowledge the good work that goes on in further education colleges. In Belfast Metropolitan College, many courses are provided for young people with disabilities and learning difficulties. Many young people have been enabled by that college to progress into employment or to acquire skills.

The motion is aimed at offering educational opportunities to young people with disabilities. Further education colleges are at the heart of lifelong learning

in our communities; they enhance social cohesion and advance the skills and learning of individuals. For many years, further education colleges have provided a second opportunity for people to gain qualifications and, consequently, employment opportunities. The vast majority of full-time students in further education are drawn from the 16-to-18 age group. The sector has close historical links with our secondary schools. Further education colleges attract 27% of all school leavers, and almost one in three of all 16- and 17-year-old school leavers. Some 170,000 students attend such colleges every year.

Further education colleges are at the heart of our community; there are roughly 400 out centres, 47 campuses and, in 2007, our 16 colleges merged to form six super colleges.

In accordance with equality legislation, the Department for Employment and Learning has produced a disability action plan to address existing problems, and £1.5 million has been put into an additional support fund. I know, from my experience with Belfast Metropolitan College, that capital funding has been allocated to make buildings more accessible for people with disabilities.

4.45 pm

One area that has not been covered in the debate are the universities, because the motion focuses on further education colleges. We must examine the concerns about the ability of people with disabilities to access university courses.

Anna Lo mentioned the FE Means Business strategy, which was raised in the Committee for Employment and Learning. The Committee accepts the main thrust of the strategy that there should be more focus on young people gaining qualifications. However, that undermines the community dimension at many colleges, where people with learning difficulties —

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

Mr Butler: The requirements of people with learning difficulties have not been addressed by the strategy, which I ask the Minister to examine. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ross: The DUP has stated that it is content with the thrust of the motion, but that it will not unnecessarily divide the House.

Education is the building block of life and should be available to all, irrespective of social background, age or disability. As the Member for Lagan Valley Paul Butler said, the problem of education provision for young people with disabilities exists in further education colleges and in universities. We must ensure that young people with disabilities can not only receive education and training, but get a good job afterwards.

As some Members stated, the Committee for Employment and Learning visited the factory of Ulster

Supported Employment Ltd, which employs disabled people in their competitive commercial premises and receives support from the Department. USEL is a good example of disabled people getting jobs — in that factory and in the wider community. Therefore, when debating this subject, Members must bear in mind that there are wider issues involved, particularly in employment, which has been referred to by the proposer of the motion and other Members who spoke.

Specific mention is made in the motion about courses that are exclusively for disabled people, which are necessary for those who are severely disabled. In an intervention earlier, my colleague Sammy Wilson highlighted the lack of options in further education for those students who leave special schools. In that sense, I disagree with what Ms Lo said, although we should aim to help disabled people progress to, and gain qualifications from, mainstream accredited courses where that is suitable.

A disability should not be an obstacle to learning; unfortunately, however, many people who live with a disability do not feel that they have the same access to educational courses as able-bodied people. Unfortunately, having a disability has proved to be a hurdle in life — fewer people with disabilities have good qualifications, and a higher percentage face poverty in later life.

Along with many Members, I have asked questions on widening access to courses and was informed that, in 2006, students at further education colleges included 488 blind or partially sighted people and 839 who were deaf or had hearing impediments. Those are people who can go into mainstream courses if certain provisions are made. Therefore, it is imperative that access to mainstream courses is made easier and that the requirements of disabled people are met. Some measures are simple, such as making physical access easier, much of which is already covered in legislation. My colleague Mr Spratt referred to a range of legislation that exists in that field.

There are practical difficulties for people with disabilities who, on entering further- or higher-education courses, should perhaps be individually assessed to evaluate their specific learning requirements. It is also important that the tools for learning are available, such as DAISY — digital accessible information system — technology or Braille, scribes or note takers, or the provision of individual assistants for some students.

One of the most important elements of that — and it has been mentioned by a number of Members — is ensuring that further education lecturers and support staff have the relevant training to deal with and teach people who have different needs than the average able-bodied learner. That may be particularly relevant to part-time staff.

It is also important that people with disabilities receive careers advice. I have mentioned USEL; some other companies have the right support mechanisms in place for those with disabilities. The further education colleges should be working to build up relationships with employers in that area.

Additional funding has been made available to help colleges with the extra costs associated with specialised courses that mainstream education cannot deliver. Money has been given to colleges to widen access, and legislation has been passed to ensure that college premises are more suitable for people with disabilities. The Department has taken a number of steps to widen participation in recent years, and that is to be commended.

A review of the provision of further education opportunities for those with special needs is under way. Mr Attwood said that the Committee has not been kept up to date on how that review is progressing. It would be useful if Members could hear how the review is progressing and be informed of when that review will be complete. I hope that support for the amendment will not mean that Members will allow the Department to take its eye off the ball, and that it will continue to work to deliver choices and opportunities for those with disabilities.

Mrs M Bradley: Members are aware of the problems that families and young people with learning and physical disabilities face. Although I welcome the debate, the responsibility for solving the problems of these young people is on more than one Department. It is important that the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning are involved and that they plan for the needs of the young people. That planning should start when children are 14 years old so that their individual needs can be met. Individual needs are crucial to the motion; only if an individual is considered on his or her own circumstances will his or her needs be resolved. A one-size response will not fit all.

The last action plan, which, I think, was published in 2006 or 2005, was weak, so we must get this one right. If all Departments play their part, and if a time frame and budget are imposed in which to address individual needs, we can do that.

I ask the Minister for Employment and Learning to table the issue at the ministerial subcommittee on children. I also support Mr Ross's comments about the importance of including young people with disabilities in mainstream education.

I support the amendment. I hope that all Departments get involved and that we receive a report on this as soon as possible.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment. This issue has come to my attention through

my constituency office and the people with whom I have engaged, as is the case, I am sure, with other Members. There are many levels of disability, ranging from one scale to another, and the broad spectrum makes it difficult to cater to all. I understand that. However, that is no excuse for a system that appears to be failing some of those who need the most help to reach their potential.

Members are not alone in that concern. The Education and Training Inspectorate report of 2003-04 published the results of a survey carried out over five further education college campuses. It found that there was a marked improvement in the provision of education for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. However, three of those five colleges were concerned that the demand for community classes was greater than their ability to supply. The colleges were also concerned that there were no suitable accreditation and progression routes for students with severe learning disabilities.

It is not just the public's concerns that are being aired by its representatives in the Chamber today — the colleges are acknowledging that something must be done to help students, because there is a gap in the provision. That is why the motion and the amendment are before the House.

The Education and Training Inspectorate report also stated that colleges considered that there was a limited availability of courses with appropriate and nationally recognised accreditation for students with more severe learning disabilities. The need is outlined in the report, and it is based on the opinions of the colleges. The Minister must acknowledge that.

I am aware that the Minister for Employment and Learning has set aside a further £1.5 million to further entice colleges to cater for more students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This is good and necessary.

However, it does not go far enough. Much of the funding is for support and not for the establishment of courses that would improve the lives of young people with disabilities. It would be prudent to set aside a dedicated fund to ensure that colleges can offer a full prospectus to students with disabilities rather than a couple of courses of little practical help.

Although funding is crucial, a strategy must be devised to train teachers and to ensure that resources are used for the benefit of students. Statistics released by the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities show that about 100 young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties leave special schools in Northern Ireland each year. About 20% of those are classed as having complex and multiple disabilities, and for those young people, there is often no option other than day-care provision. There are few opportunities and too few support systems to enable them to enter further education.

The £1.5 million additional funding should be distributed equally across all colleges. However, the South Eastern Regional College, which is represented in Strangford, includes the former North Down, Lisburn and East Down campuses, and yet its share of the pot is only £138,861 — less than one tenth of what it should be. How can the South Eastern Regional College provide education for those young people when the budget is too small for practical support, never mind the administration of courses?

I visited the South Eastern Regional College campus in Newtownards last week and met some of the people who participated in the excellent Prince's Trust scheme, in which colleges should increase participation. Those people are educationally disadvantaged and, as elected representatives, we must ensure that they have the opportunity to get a foot on the ladder, find work, have ambition and move forward.

I know a 16-year-old girl with slight Down's syndrome problems, yet no provision is made for people with that disability who want to stay at school and learn.

It is difficult for any child to make his or her way in the world and find success and happiness, but that task is much more difficult when no provision addresses the needs of those with disabilities, despite their needing extra help. I implore the Minister to devise a dedicated strategy to address the issues raised by Members and to begin a process that will change the future for many vulnerable people in the Province. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mrs I Robinson: It is difficult, at this late stage in the debate, to raise an issue that has not already been mentioned; nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I share the concern that young people with physical or learning disabilities do not benefit from further educational opportunities, and I share my colleague's concern that the available funding does not appear to be spread equally across the boards, particularly for the South Eastern Regional College in the heart of our constituency. Will the Minister clarify why there appears to be an inequality in funding prospects for constituents in Strangford? Of course, I realise that this is a cross-cutting issue that involves the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as well as the Department for Employment and Learning.

Strangford has a high rate of young people with special needs, and I would like to pay tribute to a charity-based project at Daisies Café in Ards Community Hospital, which trains young people with learning disabilities, particularly Down's syndrome.

It is an absolute delight to see those young people feeling valued and looking forward to going to work, and to see the buzz that they get from feeling that they

are in control. Even if they are only cleaning tables, they can feel that they have some value and some contribution to make to society. Anyone who wants a very good lunch with good-quality food at a very good price should go there.

5.00 pm

Mr Shannon: I ate all their meringue pie.
[Laughter.]

Mrs I Robinson: It is a killer, but it is lovely. The food is excellent, and I pay tribute to those who are involved in that wonderful work. However, it should not always be down to the voluntary sector alone. Everyone has a part to play.

The challenges faced by an individual should not spell the end of his or her further education or a promising career. As local representatives, we cannot stand by and let any sort of discrimination occur. Thankfully, much has been done to provide more opportunities for young people with disabilities. DEL has played an important role, and I do not wish to take away from that; however, we must encourage the Minister to have more input into funding.

It is always easy to blame the lack of funding, and other options could be considered. Although it is important to secure funding to provide long-term resources, equipment and qualified teaching staff, other options must be made available to further education colleges. For example, colleges should co-operate and collaborate, share best practice and offer teacher training. Nevertheless, it is important that not all of the emphasis is put on the colleges alone to come up with all of the answers. They, too, need our support.

Students with learning or physical disabilities should be encouraged, without differentiation from their peers, to pursue their further education and career plans. First, however, the colleges must be prepared for the intake of students with particular needs. Extra staff and resources must be accounted for so that the demand for classes is met in colleges that are accessible to young adults with disabilities.

The transfer to further education should be made as fluid as possible, with the appropriate carers advice having been offered alongside a broad range of suitable courses. Work experience and placement should also be considered as viable options, and, where possible, young people with disabilities should be afforded exactly the same opportunities as their peers. They should be able to enjoy learning in the same mixed classes.

More can always be done to ensure, first, that further education is marketed effectively, regardless of the student's individual needs.

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

Mrs I Robinson: Secondly, applications for places on courses must be considered without bias or discrimination.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): It is in debates such as this that the Assembly is at its best, Mr Speaker. Although we have already discussed this subject in the past six months, the fact that it is on the agenda again so soon indicates the clear commitment and concern of many Members from all sides of the House. I welcome the opportunity to speak on these issues, and I will address as many of them as I can in the time available.

I assure the House that my Department is committed to the provision of educational training and employment opportunities for all disabled young people and adults. It is, however, important to note that further education is only one of a number of options for young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. In addition to further education courses, training places are provided under my Department's Training for Success programme. Furthermore, the Department's disability advisory service provides a range of vocational and pre-vocational programmes to meet needs of disabled people whatever their age.

The motion refers to:

"the lack of further education courses specifically targeted at young people with learning and physical disabilities".

In the academic year 2006-07, some 16,856 students who enrolled in further education colleges declared a disability. That represents 8.2% of total further education college enrolments; the Member for West Belfast Mr Butler raised the issue of the percentages. That is an increase from 2005-06, when the percentage was 6.6%, and from 2004-05, when it was 5.9%. Clearly, it is a growing issue. I suspect that more people are declaring that they have a disability, which covers all sorts of difficulties, including dyslexia.

In addition, colleges are obliged to have regard to the needs of students who are over the compulsory school age and who have learning difficulties. All colleges offer discrete provision for students who cannot access mainstream courses. Through the college development plan process, colleges regularly examine and improve the provision for students with special needs.

Over the next year, the Department will work with colleges to introduce an individual learner programme for every young person entering further education. It will be a personalised programme of learning, which will be agreed with every young person, and it will take account of their aspirations and potential. It will be particularly valuable to young people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

To support the enrolment of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, the Department provides funding through the further education funding mechanism.

It ensures that colleges can meet the costs of students with a disability who may require specific help or assistance. As part of the Further Education Means Business review of funding, the Department, after consultation with the sector, has agreed to ring-fence funds to ensure the continued provision of discrete courses for students with learning disabilities. Some £1.5 million has been set aside for that purpose for the current academic year. An additional support fund is also available, and that will provide £1.5 million this year.

The motion refers to the lack of provision for young people over the age of 19, and there is a particular concern about that. Members on all sides raised that issue, so I will come back to it.

Further education colleges cannot always provide the attention, nursing or other personal care that some young people with disabilities require. However, colleges fully collaborate with Health Service day centres to provide training and development opportunities for people over 19 years of age who have left special schools or who might benefit from targeted further educational provision in a suitable setting.

In 2006-07, some 1,338 students between the ages of 19 and 25 who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities enrolled in further education colleges. It is important to concentrate on some of the specific points that were made, because it is obvious that many people are concerned.

During a debate in October 2007, I indicated that the Department was going to conduct a review, and Mr Attwood was keen to know the timeline for it. We will go through that stage by stage. We engaged with the Education and Training Inspectorate and invited it to carry out a review, which has already taken place. In the past few weeks, the inspectorate presented an early draft to the Department, and we are now going through it. We are also engaging with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges.

The final phase of the review will involve engagement with third parties — that is, the community and voluntary sector, many of whom have already engaged. The review will be completed by June. I wish to make the timescale absolutely clear — it is not open-ended. We are now in the final phase of the review, which involves engagement with third parties. We did not employ outside consultants to conduct the review; it was carried out internally. Having said that, I think that there is much expertise in the Chamber, on the Committee, in the Department for Employment and Learning and other Departments, and if outside consultants had conducted the review, it would probably have taken even longer.

We all know our own local areas as well as anybody else, and we all know the experiences of individual constituents who bring their cases to us. I see no

reason why we cannot carry out some of those tasks ourselves. I am confident that the Education and Training Inspectorate is highly regarded throughout the public service, and I have no doubt that Members will, when they are acquainted with the detail of the issue, be at least able to make their own judgements.

Something that is worrying many people is the interface between those students who have significant learning disabilities and the statutory sector, that is, further education institutions or DHSSPS-run day-centres. In proposing the motion, Mrs O'Neill asked whether it was appropriate for people of different ages to be grouped together, because young people were mixing with people suffering from dementia and other difficulties. She used a phrase that caught me when she said that such young people were:

“old and withdrawn before their time.”

We can all understand that. The further education sector is urged, and, indeed legally required, by the Department to provide facilities for people with physical difficulties. That requirement is laid down in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 — the SENDO legislation — which has been mentioned. Something between £16 million and £18 million has been spent on that provision in recent years, and more is available.

At that interface stage each student has to be assessed individually; one cannot paint on a broad canvas. Each individual has their own requirements, and two are rarely the same. I understand fully that it is difficult to put a young person in a day centre with a group of older clients, many of whom may be suffering from dementia and other problems. However, people need to understand that it is not always possible for a further education college to cope with a young person who perhaps requires significant nursing facilities all day.

We face a dilemma. It is not a pass-the-parcel situation, because the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of that transitional issue; indeed, I have spoken to the Minister about it. The fact is that individual students have such needs and face such barriers to learning that in some cases the only thing a college may be able to do is provide some form of intellectual stimulation. Some students perhaps have needs that are so profound that a further education college setting is not always the most appropriate solution for them.

Given that, I think that my Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have to examine that particular issue. That interface is the one matter that is causing a great deal of concern and, in some cases, distress to different families who are desperately anxious to ensure that the young person involved is given every possible hope of

learning and of being able to have a life as best as can be arranged, given their particular learning difficulties.

Therefore, my Department is conscious that we should not get into a situation of claiming that the problem is for another Department and not ours. It is a collective responsibility for everybody and for the Assembly; otherwise, there is no point in having an Assembly. If we cannot discuss those issues and do something about them to make a difference, we would all be better out of here. I make the point clearly that we take the issue seriously, but I must say that it is a huge matter. We can push the statutory sector as far as we can where further education colleges are concerned. We do that already, and we have put a lot of money into dealing with the issue. All the funds that I have considered are increasing in every single category. For example, we have already discussed the additional support fund of £1.5 million and the discrete provision of £1.5 million.

For 2007-08, we have a further support fund of £2.8 million, which will enable colleges to help students to participate in further education. The fact that colleges may be inhibited by financial considerations has not been mentioned in the debate.

5.15 pm

Since April 2001, DEL has spent £18 million on capital funding; and, in the four years from 2003-04 to 2006-07, a further £16.7 million has been allocated to further education colleges so that they can provide additional auxiliary aids and services for students with disabilities. Money is going into the system, but, sometimes, problems are above and beyond money.

Parents — many of whom are in deep distress — have written, lobbied and spoken to Members, and we all want to offer solutions; however, all I can say is that the review is being completed as quickly as possible, and its findings will be available by June 2008. The Assembly and the Committee will then be able to progress to the decision stage. The problem is not just a matter of money, and I get no sense from the Department that there is a shortage of money; the problem is in knowing exactly what to do.

Mr Shannon and Mrs Robinson asked about funding for the South Eastern Regional College. Unfortunately, I cannot answer their questions — I do not know why the division is as it is — but I will deal with those points by writing to them. Nevertheless, the Department is concerned to ensure that it does everything in its power.

Mr Ross and Mr Attwood raised the matter of Ulster Supported Employment Ltd, which I have supported. I wrote to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Dodds, and I await a reply in order to ascertain how we can deal with that matter.

Earlier, Mr Spratt mentioned the percentage of disabled students who are in further education; however, the figure is higher than he realises.

We must progress together on this subject. We have a background of divisions about a range of issues, but this is an area in which we can show the community real leadership. We have the ability to do something about the problem; but, inevitably, there are some difficult cases, and the only way to tackle them is through individual, personal assessments.

I do not dispute that there are instances in which young people have been unable to arrange off-campus teaching at a third-party location, such as a day centre. However, such arrangements can be provided and would at least provide those young people with an opportunity for specific teaching, which would allow them some separation from those who are suffering from other concerns. That is possible: it happens, and colleges are prepared to help teachers with their training, which can be done off-site.

I assure Members that the Department will pursue the inquiry and the review as quickly as possible, and I will report back in due course.

Mr McClarty: I thank all Members who took part in the debate, and I thank the Minister for his encouraging response. I echo Mr Spratt's appeal that there should not be division on this issue. Whether Members spoke about the motion or the amendment, we are all working towards the same goal.

People with learning or physical disabilities face many difficulties in today's society, and we should not underestimate the hurdles that they and their families face. Although I again thank the Members who took part in the debate, I share the concerns expressed by my colleague who proposed the amendment. As always, more can, and should, be done. Statistics show that throughout the UK there are a significant number of disabled young people who are neither in full-time employment nor in further education.

However, there appears to be something slightly dubious about the motion. At the moment, the situation is improving with regard to the provision of access to further education for young people with disabilities and helping young people with disabilities into employment. On top of that, the Minister is clearly committed to achieving better outcomes for those young people. The Minister has undertaken a review into his Department's provision of further education opportunities for people with special needs in co-operation with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges and the Education and Training Inspectorate. I agree with my colleague that it may have been better to wait until that report had been published before tabling the motion.

The Ulster Unionist Party is by no means opposed to the principle of the original motion, but I am concerned that the pre-empting of any departmental report with critical motions could set a dangerous precedent in the Assembly. When the review is published, we will be in a position to scrutinise its findings and to make recommendations and suggestions to the Minister. As the Minister outlined in his response, the Department for Employment and Learning has already taken numerous steps in the right direction towards improving the services and opportunities that are available to young people with disabilities, both in further education and in helping them to gain access to employment opportunities.

I particularly welcome the news that, in recent years, there has been increased funding to support young people with special needs who go through further education, and I hope that the Minister will pursue additional funds for that in the future. The figures showing an increase of 8.2% in total enrolment highlight that the extra money and support is beginning to work. I hope that the ongoing review will ensure further improvements in that provision.

I am also encouraged by the services that the Department currently provides to help young people with special needs to get into employment. The work of the Disablement Advisory Service should be commended, and I welcome the role of Training for Success, because it provides flexible training to facilitate personal and social needs, as well as providing essential skills training.

In tabling our amendment, the Ulster Unionist Party is not suggesting that the Minister should not be held to account. The Assembly should drive him to achieve the best possible outcomes. However, we are concerned that a dangerous precedent is being set in the House — of picking fights where there is no fight to be had. There is also a danger of dividing the Assembly, even though it is evident that all parties, and the Minister, seek the same outcome. As my colleague Basil McCrea has suggested, there are plenty of examples of intransigence in this Executive, but I do not believe that, with regard to this issue, the Minister is guilty of that. Instead of seeking confrontation, we should be seeking collective results. Of course we should scrutinise the Minister's work and make recommendations, and the publication of the Department's review will provide a basis for doing exactly that. I urge all Members to support the amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who took part in the debate and I also thank the Minister for attending. I am happy to wind up the debate on behalf of my party, because the motion — in my view, and as others have stated — is a worthy one, which recognises the inequality

in further education provision and supported-employment opportunities.

As the Member who proposed the motion stated earlier, I brought a similar motion to the Assembly six months ago that raised issues, concerns and stories that were similar to those that have been highlighted by the majority of Members who spoke in today's debate. During that previous debate, the Ulster Unionist Party tabled an amendment calling for a review of services. I accepted that amendment because I did not want to divide the Assembly on such an important issue, and I wanted to give the Minister the opportunity — and the Department time — to make a difference on this important issue.

At that time, the Minister told us that the Department agreed to ring-fence funds as part of the Further Education Means Business review of funding. We welcome that, because we have been fighting for a long time for funds to be ring-fenced, to ensure that those funds benefit the most vulnerable people in our society.

However, in correspondence with Sinn Féin, a Mencap representative said that the Further Education Means Business strategy:

“does not recognise the need to develop targeted initiatives to address the exclusion and disadvantage experienced by people with a learning disability when accessing FE provision. The priorities set by the government in the Programme for Government and the criteria in place to provide financial assistance for students can disadvantage young people with a learning disability.”

The Mencap representative went on to highlight other issues, including the:

“failure, at strategic and operational levels, to take account of the distinct needs and interests of young people with a learning disability.”

David McClarty said that there was something “dubious” about the motion. The motion was tabled for one purpose only, which was to scrutinise the Minister and the Department. As an MLA, that is my job. Most Members who contributed to the debate, with the exception of those from the Ulster Unionist Party, welcomed the fact that the motion was brought to the House. Six months have passed since the issue was discussed, and I am glad that the Minister has been given the opportunity to outline what stage the review is at.

During the debate on the motion on 16 October 2007, the Minister told us:

“The Department, in co-operation with the...Colleges, is currently undertaking a review of the nature and extent of special-needs provision throughout the further education network to determine how provision might best be improved”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p381, col 2*].

The Minister highlighted that again today. There is a concern about the issue of colleges deciding on the courses that they offer. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Jimmy Spratt, outlined some of those concerns, and I will not

go over all of them again. Given the recent mergers, industrial disputes and the issue of early retirement, one of the main concerns is whether the colleges are up to the challenge of delivering such important courses to young people with disabilities. We are entitled to ask questions about such issues, and we are entitled to get answers to those questions.

When proposing the amendment, my colleague from the Committee for Employment and Learning Basil McCrea informed us that the Minister is fully committed to addressing this issue. I have no problem in accepting that; I know that the Minister is committed to many issues. However, it is six months since the issue was last debated, it affects vulnerable people in our society, and we have a duty to send them and their families the clear message that we are trying to make a difference.

Basil went on to tell us that there are ways of addressing the issue without bringing it to the Floor of the House, and he appealed to us not to turn the issue into a political football, which is fair enough. Had there been any progress on the issue, we would not have felt the need to bring it back to the Floor of the House. Basil's party leader commended us for doing so; therefore, I think that Basil has an issue. The purpose of the Assembly is to enable us to table motions in the Chamber. We have a duty to debate issues that affect our community. Basil, being Basil, tabled a motion about the classroom assistants' dispute. Was he simply point-scoring on that issue? It is a case of swings and roundabouts.

Research undertaken by Barnardo's in 2007 with the further education colleges, training providers and disabled young people found that disadvantage and discrimination was multilayered, as was mentioned during various contributions. Mary Bradley said that this is a cross-departmental issue. I do not dispute that, but the Department for Employment and Learning has a duty to take the lead. If that results in the Minister for Employment and Learning encouraging the involvement of other Departments on the issue, it is up to us to support him.

Some of the young people who were surveyed by Barnardo's indicated that, at age 20, they found themselves spending their time in a day centre, even though they would have been capable of attending further education colleges. Others simply found themselves sitting at home all day. A number of young people described the experience as feeling as though they had been left in a corner and ignored. We cannot get away from the fact that that is what the young people are telling us.

As I said earlier, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning outlined some of the key issues facing young people with

disabilities, and he called on the Department to act. I support that call.

I agree with Alex Attwood — I am sorry that he is not in the Chamber as it is not that often that we agree on anything — that the Assembly should be seen to be making a difference to people's lives, especially the most vulnerable in our community.

I will touch on some of the issues that the Minister mentioned. It is important that he took the opportunity to outline to us what stage the review has reached, and he said that it will be completed by June, which leads me to ask some other questions. I am conscious that I will not be provided with the answers today, but I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide the answers at some point.

5.30 pm

I look forward to the outcome of that review. I ask the Minister whether there is an associated action plan that will be implemented in the aftermath. Will he indicate a time frame for the review's completion? Perhaps June would be a good time, since it is before the September intake of some of colleges.

Will the Minister give me a list of the community and voluntary groups that provide such training and employment and outline their involvement in the review?

I am not being critical. However, it is important that Members have an idea of the nature of community and voluntary sector involvement.

Sir Reg Empey: I assure the Member on both those issues. There would be little point in having a review if there was no plan to follow it up. That is unless, of course, the review found everything to be perfect — which I am sure it will not.

The community groups will be dealt with in the third phase of the review. We are happy to identify those groups — some of which are already engaged — to the Member. Indeed, we are happy to talk to any group that can bring some value to the table. I will provide the Member and the Committee with details of the groups that we will engage with.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister. It is important that we get as much information as possible. All Members who spoke recognised — and indeed expressed concern about — the lack of provision. That is not necessarily a criticism of the Minister, but it is a genuine concern that must be addressed.

In order not to divide the House on such an important issue — and having heard the Minister's speech and the assurances that he has just given me — Sinn Féin accepts the amendment. We do so with the caveat — and this is not a threat — that our party will monitor the Department and the Minister to ensure

that we get the outcomes that we have been promised; I am sure other Members will do the same.

Mr Shannon: We will be back.

Ms S Ramsey: Yes, we will be back. Hasta la vista.

Our disabled young people deserve no less. I support the amendment.

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

Main question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its continued commitment to securing training and employment opportunities where appropriate for young people with disabilities; and awaits the outcome of the review of such provision undertaken by the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 8 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The Consideration Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill — I call the junior Minister Mr Donaldson.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): The Consideration Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill will not be moved today.

Mr Speaker: I confirm that the Consideration Stage of the Bill will not be moved today.

Order, order.

Mr Ford: I appreciate the fact that the junior Minister has not moved the Consideration Stage of the Bill. Mr Speaker, will you explain, particularly in the context of the Bill's having received accelerated passage, the timetabling implications for the remaining stages?

Mr Speaker: The junior Minister and the Executive will determine the subsequent stages of the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the junior Minister detail the new timetabling arrangements?

Mr Speaker: Maybe the junior Minister is prepared to clarify the position for Mr Kennedy.

Mr Donaldson: The matter will be brought before the Business Committee at 12.30 pm.

Mr Kennedy: May I ask — and this is probably not a point of order — whether there are any plans to consult my Committee on the matter?

Mr Speaker: I have given some latitude to points of order, but that is not an issue for the Chamber. It is for the junior Minister, the Executive and the Business Committee to deal with.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is an extraordinary event. I know that the timetable that Members have before them is indicative, but the decision not to debate the Committee Stage means that we move straight on to the next item of business. What latitude can you give to other Members of the House who are due to speak on today's other motions?

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member is saying, but we must move on to the next item of business. The debate on the Committee Stage has been withdrawn, and we should move on.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been the victim of such a move in the past. *[Laughter.]*

Would it not be proper to adjourn for half an hour so that Members can be contacted? It is unfair for Members to have these things sprung on them.

Mr Speaker: I suggest that the House suspends for 10 minutes to allow Members to gather. We will reconvene at around 10.45 am.

Sitting suspended at 10.37 am.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Taxis Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Taxis Bill (NIA 4/07) do now pass.

Today, I want to draw attention to the purpose, aims and objectives of the Taxis Bill; thank the Environment Committee and other Members for their contribution to the Bill's passage; and say something about looking forward to working with the Committee in developing the regulations that will be needed to give the Bill full effect.

To open, I will introduce Members to a short poem that was written in 1961 by the Northern Ireland-born writer Louis MacNeice, whose centenary we celebrated last year. The poem is simply called 'The Taxis', and it has a surreal little verse with an odd "tra-la" refrain. I hope that the House will find it interesting. Bear with me while I read it.

"In the first taxi he was alone tra-la,
No extras on the clock. He tipped ninepence
But the cabby, while he thanked him, looked askance
As though to suggest someone had bummed a ride.

In the second taxi he was alone tra-la
But the clock showed sixpence extra; he tipped according
And the cabby from out of his muffler said: 'Make sure
You have left nothing behind tra-la between you'.

In the third taxi he was alone tra-la
But the tip-up seats were down and there was an extra
Charge of one-and-sixpence and an odd
Scent that reminded him of a trip to Cannes.

As for the fourth taxi, he was alone
Tra-la when he hailed it but the cabby looked
Through him and said: 'I can't tra-la well take
So many people, not to speak of the dog.'"

Although nearly 50 years have passed since that poem was written, somehow it all seems strangely familiar: shared taxis; extra charges; and refusing to carry a dog. Sadly, we must leave high culture to one side and return to the real business of today's debate.

First, I remind Members of the purpose, aims and objectives of the Bill. It is enabling legislation, creating a new legal framework for taxi licensing. It is true that the Bill began life as an Order in Council, but, in every other sense of the word, this is home-grown legislation; the outcome of a comprehensive review of taxi regulation called for by a previous Assembly, drafted with skill by our Office of the Legislative Counsel and tailored to meet Northern Ireland's particular circumstances.

The aims of the Bill are to improve the standard of taxi services, reduce illegal taxiing, and improve

compliance. Its objectives are to promote road safety, improve accessibility for older people and people with a disability, and facilitate fairer competition for taxi services.

The Taxis Bill is the first Bill that I have introduced to the Assembly — I expect that it will be the first of many. I am proud that my first Bill deals with bread-and-butter issues such as taxis, which, every year, greet many of the one million-plus visitors who come to Northern Ireland; every week, make tens of thousands of trips to bring people to work or to their homes after a night out; and every day, take thousands of children with special needs to and from school. Taxis matter to people through making a small but important difference to their lives. Taxis make a rather greater difference to the lives of the licensed drivers and depot owners who rely on them for their living.

Remember also that for some people with a disability, being able to rely on a safe, affordable and accessible taxi service can be the difference between having, or not having, a good quality of life.

Those are the reasons why the Taxis Bill is needed and why I am proud to be asking Members to support it today.

Secondly, I take this opportunity to thank Members for their attention to the Taxis Bill, not least during the lengthy, but very worthwhile, Consideration Stage debate on the 73, mostly minor, amendments. I have been very pleased to see the level of consensus that the Bill has enjoyed in all parts of the House. I thank the Chairperson and members of the Environment Committee, in particular, for their considered evidence-taking and detailed scrutiny of the Bill, their useful suggestions for amendments, and their comprehensive report, which was published in November 2007.

Thirdly, and finally, this Bill as it stands to be voted on by the Assembly, shows how a Minister and a Committee, working together on legislation, can achieve very positive outcomes. I very much look forward to continuing that relationship as I consult with the Committee for the Environment on proposals for the Bill's implementation and the consequent regulations.

I commend the Taxis Bill to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I came in, I heard the Minister speaking poetically. Having spent well over an hour sitting in traffic at Sandyknowes, I confess that poetry was the last thing on my mind. Nor were taxis uppermost — a bicycle might have been more beneficial.

Nevertheless, I thank the Minister for moving the Final Stage of the Taxis Bill, which comprises 58 clauses and three schedules and sets out a new legal

framework for the regulation of taxis and taxi services. It covers the licensing of taxi operators, drivers and vehicles; taxi fares; taximeters; the hiring of taxis at separate fares; and enforcement of penalties. Furthermore, the Bill introduces enabling powers to make regulations in areas such as taxis, taxi operators' licences, and the hiring of taxis at separate fares. The Committee looks forward to receiving the policy proposals for regulations that may, in due course, result from the Bill, and that will be subject to scrutiny by the Committee.

The Committee's consideration of the Taxis Bill commenced on 28 June 2007, following briefings in May, and continued over 17 meetings until November 2007. Evidence was taken from departmental officials on the purposes of the Bill and the need to enact it. I put on record the Committee's thanks to those officials whose expertise was extremely beneficial and informative throughout the process, which worked well.

Moreover, the Committee took oral evidence from 14 taxi organisations and individuals. All interested parties who had provided the Committee with written submissions were given an opportunity to speak, and members welcomed their views.

Thereafter, the Committee conducted a detailed scrutiny of the Bill, and members were committed to proposing appropriate amendments and to engaging with officials of the Department of the Environment (DOE) to persuade them of the merits of those amendments. Our full and frank scrutiny resulted in many amendments being agreed by the Department, thereby contributing to the highest number of proposed amendments to a Bill — 73 — ever considered by this Assembly. The amendments covered areas such as the role of the General Consumer Council, the introduction of an informal appeal system, and enforcement.

In addition to amendments, the Committee, in its report, made four recommendations and seeks reassurance from the Minister that those will be addressed.

One recommendation was an increase in the enforcement officer numbers that were reported during the Bill's Committee Stage. The Minister reported previously on that; perhaps she could now comment on the current levels.

Furthermore, the Committee took evidence on the experience of those with disabilities in the use of taxis, and learned of their particular problems and issues, some of which were traumatic. The Committee recommended that the Department engage with the major organisations for the disabled and the taxi industry to address those problems.

A recommendation was made to review and extend criminal record checks on licence applicants from the Republic of Ireland and other countries.

Lastly, the Committee took evidence from taxi drivers about the delay in the issuing of taxi licence plates when a driver changes his or her vehicle, which means that a driver cannot work, and can, therefore, lose income. The Committee recommended that a fast-track system be introduced for the issue of taxi licence plates.

Will the Minister provide a reassurance that those recommendations will be considered, and acted upon, by the Department?

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for agreeing to table its amendments. Once again, I put on record my thanks and appreciation to all the Committee staff, and to the officials from the Department, for their hard work in assisting the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. The result is improved legislation.

Mr Ford: It is appropriate that, as the Chairperson of the Committee has done, I thank the Minister from these Benches for her work on the Bill, both in introducing it as the first substantive Bill to be brought to the Assembly, and — with her advisers — in promoting it through that rather lengthy Committee Stage. I agree with the Minister and the Committee Chairperson that it shows the benefit of the Minister, her officials, the Committee and its staff and the stakeholders engaging together to produce a better Bill.

11.00 am

In light of this morning's debacle over another Bill, I was pleased to hear the Minister praise the value of Committee engagement. Members have seen what happens when a Bill is rushed through under the accelerated passage procedure. Perhaps the Minister should have turned her irony indicator on a little sharper this morning. However, she is right in what she says about the Taxis Bill.

The Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment have referred to the work that remains to be done, particularly on issues such as enforcement and on the needs of people with disabilities being properly served by the taxi industry. I have no doubt that disability organisations will keep us up to the mark if we fail to do that work. The Minister has given us the pleasant threat of secondary legislation in the future, which, no doubt, will ensure many happy Committee meetings over the coming weeks and months. I thank her for her work so far.

Mrs Foster: I thank both Members for their contributions to the debate, particularly the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment for his comments on the issues that the Committee has raised with the Department: enforcement, disability issues, criminal record checks, taxi licence plates and the delay in dealing with them. Those matters are being addressed by the Department. I mentioned the increase in numbers

to our enforcement teams at Consideration Stage, and I will keep that issue to the forefront of my mind.

The Taxis Bill is, primarily, an enabling Bill, and, therefore, the sons and daughters of the Bill will, as Mr Ford said, come before the Committee in due course — not to trouble the Committee but to allow it to scrutinise the regulations to ensure that they are as fit for purpose as the Bill.

The Chairperson set out the scrutiny that the Committee undertook — 17 meetings that took evidence from 14 taxi organisations and individuals. I join him in thanking the Committee staff and Adele Watters and her officials in the Department for the tremendous work that they did with the Committee. The Department will act on the issues that have been raised by the Committee. The Committee will want to raise those issues again when it examines the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Taxis Bill (NIA 4/07) do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Northern Corridor Railway Development

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 will have five minutes in which to speak.

Mr Dallat: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with interest the report 'Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance' from the Northern Corridor Railways Group; welcomes its focus on embedding the development of the line in the wider development of the area it will serve; recognises the need for long-term thinking about rail services in the context of broader strategic plans for Northern Ireland and for local areas involved; accepts its arguments for the close involvement of the private sector; and endorses the need for the Railway Corridor Development Study which it proposes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue. The 'Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance' report is exactly what it says: a renaissance — a new beginning, a reawakening and a revival of a railway service that refused to die. It is the blueprint for the regeneration and recovery of a service that can contribute so much to the social and economic well-being of the north-west, all the areas that it serves and well beyond.

The fact that the Northern Corridor Railways Group that published the report comprises the seven councils through which the railway runs is an indication that Antrim Borough Council, Ballymena Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council, Derry City Council, Limavady Borough Council and Moyle Borough Council all expect their areas to benefit from a modern intercity service that has the potential to link the remainder of the island's railway network when the last missing link between Derry and Sligo is filled in.

It is eight years since the Northern Corridor Railways Group was set up to facilitate wider strategic thinking on the role and vision for the railway network in Northern Ireland. The group represents approximately 400,000 people who will benefit from investment and long-term planning for the service. From the beginning, the group argued that the Belfast to Derry railway had a key strategic role to play in the region for balanced and sustainable regional development, the integration of land use and transportation, social inclusion, tourism, economic development and regeneration.

December 2000 marked a significant date in the calendar of events: the Assembly announced that £102 million would be provided to buy new trains in the Budget period covering the next three years. One condition of the deal was that the new trains would operate on the Belfast to Derry line — an indication of the Assembly's commitment to the north-west. That

would prove that the public would use the railway network more frequently if that network was invested in; something that was argued in the Booz Allen Hamilton report.

Passenger numbers, which have been in decline for many years, have been reversed, and for the first time in decades, more than one million passengers use the service each year. That is highly significant, and it is sufficient to dispel any notion that that line is non-core, or lesser-used — two phrases offensively used by the Department in the past to earmark the line for closure.

Various reports in the interim period have been useful in developing a new approach to the future of the railways. For that reason, the group believed that it was appropriate to publish the report being debated today. Today's debate is highly significant, and, hopefully, marks a new beginning in accepting that the railways make a huge contribution to the future social and economic development of the areas that they serve.

It is clear that the Northern Corridor Railways Group fully endorsed the context for railways set out in the terms of reference for the Railways Review Group, which stated:

"the shared understanding of the review group is that the future of railways cannot be examined in isolation from the strategic policy context pertaining to the future form and function of transportation in Northern Ireland, or solely in the context of short-term financial considerations. Rail should not be assessed as an isolated form of transport, but rather as a key component of a broader framework including integrated transport, land-use planning, economic development and tourism, and other related areas of social policy."

It would, therefore, be crazy to close any section of the railway, as suggested by some departmental officials in the past. They lacked the vision to understand the above principles, never mind implement them.

Having accepted the contribution that the railways can make to the development and regeneration of the region, it is necessary to begin long-term planning over the next twenty years or more. That is critical to avoid falling back into the dreadful situation that existed at the beginning of this decade, when the Dr Beechings of this world advocated closure. For those who are too young to remember, he influenced the closure of many railways in England in the 1960s. It is interesting to note that several of those lines have re-opened in recent years, and there are vibrant campaigns to re-open others — the most recent that I am aware of is the Corby to London line.

Developing a long-term strategy does not mean putting everything on the long finger. That is a concern for this Assembly. Trains do not reach Derry before 9.00 am, a situation that must be put right sooner rather than later. If commuters, students and other travellers are to be attracted away from the roads, a service that gets people to their respective destinations before 9.00

am at least must be in place. Translink is having discussions with the Ministry of Defence about land for a passing loop at Ballykelly, and I welcome that. The outcomes must be successful if new timetables relevant to the needs of passengers are to be developed.

At Ballykelly, 423 former army homes will shortly become available. It would be clever if a new halt was built to allow the new residents to take advantage of a clean, modern rail service that would take them to their destinations in any of the council areas that supported the report.

It is also necessary to improve access to airports, and it seems strange that, although the railway runs through the grounds of City of Derry Airport, there is no halt. A railway also runs past Belfast International Airport, and, recently, when the Committee for Regional Development met the management of that airport, the big question was to do with the lack of infrastructure.

The long-term future of the railways must be planned. The Northern Corridor Railways Group proposes that a railway corridor development study be commissioned for the northern rail corridor and that the guiding principles should, as always, be the function of the railway within current and future land use and transport systems and its role in supporting economic and wider development objectives. If that is done, I have every confidence that future generations will have a comprehensive rail network in the north-west that is appropriate to the needs of all rail users. By then, those users will be joined by thousands of others who are currently sitting in traffic jams on overcrowded roads.

It was rather interesting that the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment had that experience this morning. *[Interruption.]*

My advice to those who were sitting at the Sandyknowes roundabout is that they should have been on a train.

Let today be the beginning of a renaissance, when the Assembly says yes to the railways and means it; the day when our people get the message loud and clear that the railways are here to stay and to play a strategic role in the future development of the social and economic infrastructure. Let the renaissance begin.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I welcome this debate. It is the view of the Committee that the final Budget allocations to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) remain insufficient to meet the infrastructural needs of Northern Ireland. Of the £426.5 million of capital funding that was bid for, only £196 million was allocated in the draft Budget, including £137 million for rail and £45 million for buses. The investment in buses and trains in recent years has made public transport a more attractive option and has helped to generate increased passenger journeys.

Investment in public transport does not have to mean a choice between bus and rail; recent investment has resulted in increased passenger numbers on both modes of transport. However, research has indicated that Northern Ireland has a poor record of investment in railways. In the five years from 2001-06, Northern Ireland's total expenditure on rail was the lowest per capita in the United Kingdom. Wales spent approximately £463 per head of population; Northern Ireland spent a paltry £16 per head.

The Belfast to Derry/Londonderry rail line is a cause of significant concern to the Committee. The Committee has met a number of groups to discuss the issue. On 24 October 2007, it met the Northern Corridor Railways Group and heard evidence on public safety issues and on speed restrictions of as low as 10 mph on the track. Despite that, the number of passenger journeys on the line has reached the one million mark. The Committee is concerned that those issues have remained unaddressed in the past and is pleased to note that although there is no provision for capital works in the budget, there is provision for preparatory work. The Committee was concerned to note that the application for funding from EU sources could not proceed until the project was in place.

I will now speak as an MLA. Elements of the motion are important and timely. I refer specifically to the need for long-term thinking about the rail service in the context of a broader strategic plan for Northern Ireland. We should focus on the wider infrastructure issues that confront us, rather than confine the motion to the north-west. The lack of infrastructural investment in Northern Ireland, which stretches back over decades, is a serious blight on economic development and will be a serious inhibitor on the search for inward investment and job creation.

Infrastructural investment is not an add-on or an optional extra; it is essential and is intrinsic to the economic success of the Province. Modern logistics require that businesses have access to fast, efficient travel, and we especially need to mitigate our relative geographical isolation.

11.15 am

Nowhere is the truth about infrastructural planning more self-evident than in the railway system in Northern Ireland. In the Thatcherite drive for the great car culture — and, before that, in the Beeching era — railways were progressively abandoned and entire tracks disappeared, and with them, key economic networks. Freight took to the roads, adding to mounting congestion. That deconstruction of the railway network was not only short-sighted, it was deeply at odds with the growing awareness of the need to reduce carbon footprints and emissions. Rather than design and provide a truly integrated road and rail network, we have sacrificed

rail on the altar of road transport. That was a needless sacrifice that will no doubt have long-term economic consequences.

Lack of planning has always been a particular problem for this country. The muddle-through-and-mend approach that underpins the thinking behind the lack of investment in infrastructure is no longer adequate in contemporary economic circumstances. Somehow, official thinking has come to equate lack of planning with economic freedom.

There is little point in saying that the rail network has suffered at the expense of the roads. Has anyone seen the state of our roads lately? The Assembly must revisit the entire infrastructure of the Province as a first-line priority. We need a rail system that is capable of carrying freight and easing the strain on the roads. We need new trains, a more comprehensive rail system and better integrated road and rail transport. We need more park-and-ride provision, not just one park-and-ride facility for Belfast that is situated south of Lisburn. We need trains that stop at, and connect with, destinations at which people actually live. We must have proper motorways that underpin a modern industrial framework rather than rely on an endless patch-up job of dualling. Although such dual carriageways are an improvement on single-track roads, they nonetheless fall short of what a modern economy needs.

I know that Translink has made a start by improving rolling stock and buying new trains.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up. I ask him to conclude his remarks.

Mr Cobain: Translink hopes to provide a faster Enterprise train service to Dublin. The problem is that that is only the beginning. I fear that the First Minister's failure to extract a peace dividend that is sufficient to address the infrastructural underinvestment of 40 years of direct rule neglect means that the recipe before the Assembly is short on the basic ingredients —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who brought this issue to the Assembly. We all greatly value such an important rail link, particularly those of us who live in areas in which the line is prevalent and in the council areas to which reference is made in the 'Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance' report. Although a number of years ago, there were doubts and concerns about the future of the railway, we now welcome the fact that we are looking to that future. As Mr Dallat said in his concluding remarks, let the renaissance begin. We must build on that.

We all remember the time when we visited Cookstown a number of years ago. I trust that the former direct rule Minister Mr Spellar, who has long since gone, will be forgotten because his contribution to the railway

network was absolutely nil. I am glad that he took the slow boat out of Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to my party colleague Mr Robinson for securing the funding for the new trains when he was the Minister for Regional Development. Any of us who has used the rail network appreciates the fact that those trains were brought on board. Therefore, the proposals for additional trains are to be welcomed.

Indeed, some very influential and important individuals have commented on the importance of the line. For example, in the past, the well-travelled expert Michael Palin has supported the retention of the network. The 66-mile stretch of railway line in question brings passengers through the most spectacular scenery in Northern Ireland. Anyone who leaves the city of Belfast to travel to the city of Londonderry will be impressed by what he or she sees on the journey.

The Ballymena to Londonderry line was opened in 1852, and included the two oldest rail tunnels on the island, bored through the basalt cliffs overlooking the beach at Downhill on the northwest tip of Northern Ireland, in the East Londonderry constituency of my colleagues to my right: Mr Adrian McQuillan and Mr George Robinson. I am sure that it will be of interest to them that it was there, in July 1953, that Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, travelling by train to Londonderry, were so overwhelmed by the view of the windswept Magilligan Point and the dreamy mountains of County Donegal that they decided to pause for lunch to prolong their enjoyment. We again extend to Her Gracious Majesty the invitation to undertake such a journey in the not-too-distant future.

Mention has been made of investment. If an average was taken over the past number of years, some commentators estimate that we have invested about £16,363 per mile compared to £100,000 per mile in the rest of the UK. Therefore, there is, obviously, a huge amount of work to be done on investment in the line.

I also want to raise an issue that causes me grave concern and which I have raised on a number of occasions with the Minister. Although we welcome the works that have been carried out at the halt at Cullybackey, and additional works in Ballymena and Coleraine, I remain gravely concerned about the state of the railway station at Ballymoney. One travel commentator — and I sought this morning to get the precise quote but could not find it in my wonderful filing system — took the train from Belfast to Londonderry some years ago. When he came to Ballymoney station, he said that it should have been called “Bally-no-money” because it was clear from the state of the station that it was still in the Elizabethan age.

I call on the Minister, as a matter of urgency, to look at the state of the railway station at Ballymoney; it is not fit for purpose. I appreciate the effort that has been

made to secure additional funding; however, we always have tension between two elements of the public transport system, namely the bus system and the railway system —

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

Mr Storey: Will the Minister consider an urgent upgrading of Ballymoney railway station?

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and, in particular, the need for a railway corridor development study, which the Northern Corridor Railways Group proposes in its report. There is, however, one aspect of the motion that needs clarity: the close involvement of the private sector. I listened to Mr John Dallat when he proposed the motion and he did not provide any detail about what he or the report mean by private sector involvement. Perhaps other supporters of the motion will enlighten us as to what they mean by private sector involvement.

There is no doubt that there is a need for long-term thinking on rail services, and where they fit into public transport provision. More people need to be got out of their cars and onto public transport. The wider issues of sustainable development and environmental impact also need to be considered. I welcome the presence of the Minister for Regional Development at this debate, and I hope that he will take this opportunity to spell out once more his vision for the rail network.

Obviously, we in the north-west place a particular focus on, and pay particular attention to, the Derry line. Too often the prevailing attitude was that the Derry line was being run down. Phrases such as “non-core” and “lesser-used” dominated Government thinking and, in turn, the public consciousness, which created an air of negativity about the whole project. One has only to look at the moneys sought and provided for that part of the rail network — statistics which, in themselves, are revealing. They confirm why an air of negativity always surrounded that section of the line. It is now a matter of public record that decisions were taken that prevented and restricted investment in the line. We all have to work to ensure that such thinking never again prevails.

The ‘Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance’ report is well presented and provides an excellent analysis of the needs of the northern corridor. It is framed in the context:

“Rail should not be assessed as an isolated form of transport, but rather as a key component of a broader framework including integrated transport”.

Mr K Robinson: I am a little disappointed that all the discussion seems to focus on Londonderry and the northern section of the line. Members have totally omitted to mention the role played by Newtownabbey

Borough Council in the fight to reinstate the Bleach Green line. When I took public office in 1985, I was involved in pushing and pushing for that section of line to be reopened. If it were not for that section of line, this debate would not be taking place. I ask Members who speak in the debate from now on to remember that there is a vital section of line from Bleach Green to Mossley West, which has shown that rail travel can be turned around. There is a park-and-ride facility there, and there is the potential to open another one at Templepatrick. Unless we look at the line in totality, we will miss a great opportunity.

Mr McCartney: I welcome that intervention. Members from other constituencies will focus on particular aspects, but it is difficult to talk about every section of the line in five minutes.

To return to the report, it states clearly that the northern corridor — from Derry right through to Belfast — has considerable potential and requires investment. The report says:

“The first requirement, however, is for confirmation of the long term future of the line.”

When the report was being written, the long-term future of the line had not been confirmed. That gives us an excellent insight into the inherent failures of past investment. Therefore, I welcome and support the Minister's taking immediate action to overturn the decision to make no investment and to provide a strategic plan that not only guarantees the future of the Derry line — by which I mean the line from Derry all the way to Belfast — but creates the potential for the further devolvement that was suggested in the ‘Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance’ report.

I agree with Mr Ken Robinson's point, and the report looks at the entire line. However, opening particular sections will create the potential for opening other sections. I look forward to hearing the Minister outline his plan to realise that potential, which is necessary for the growth of rail use throughout the island of Ireland.

I cannot overstate the importance of ensuring that regional imbalance is addressed, and addressing infrastructure needs will play a major role in tackling other areas of social and economic imbalance. The Minister's decisions will provide evidence that the Assembly can have an impact on people's lives, create new opportunities, and bring about change in people's social and economic circumstances.

Proper provision of public transport, with a modern, efficient rail network throughout the Six Counties and across the island, is a proven route to dismantling regional disparity and peripherality. Therefore, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: First, I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council and its occasional represent-

ative on the Northern Corridor Railways Group. I congratulate John Dallat and his colleagues on securing this debate, which is of significant interest to people who live along the line from Belfast to Derry. Naturally, I will concentrate on the southern end of the line.

I agree with a point made by Mervyn Storey — if that does not embarrass him — because it is right that we should reflect on the fact that had we not had a working Assembly seven and eight years ago, there would be no railway by now; there would certainly be no new trains and probably no old ones either. Mervyn will probably expect me to acknowledge that that was down to the DUP Minister at the time, although, no doubt, others would say that the SDLP Finance Minister provided the money for it.

If we had not had that Assembly, we would not have a railway system, and we should be grateful for that. However, that illustrates the need to keep the focus on the railway and not continually get caught up in short-term ideas, such as looking to roads to provide a fix to the sort of transport problems that I see most in South Antrim, which are issues about commuting into Belfast, rather than the long-term strategic future of the line.

Fred Cobain talked about the lack of investment over many years. One might suggest that that has been the case since the Ulster Transport Authority favoured buses over railways as far back as 40 or 50 years ago.

11.30 am

Now, the unfortunate situation is that although new, high-quality rolling stock was secured a few years ago, it is restricted to travelling at 20 mph, particularly in and around Ballymoney. Translink staff have told me that the rolling stock has been damaged due to the poor quality of some sections of track. Suitable track must be provided to meet the needs of modern rolling stock.

Significant action is still required on the infrastructure of the line. Stations must be improved so that people will want to wait in them — the idea of a heated waiting room will be quite novel to some passengers. Improvements to the quality of the track are required along almost all its length, certainly north of Antrim, and passing loops that could facilitate improvements to timetables are required.

Further work must be done to increase the provision of rolling stock. Some of the new trains are being allocated to improve the frequency of the service on the Portadown to Bangor line, which is the route most used by commuters, and others will be allocated to meet the incredible need on the Larne line, which uses stock that is years out of date and verges on being unsafe. Few trains will be left to make the drastically needed changes to the Belfast to Derry line.

The commuting problem to Belfast requires a significant increase in the frequency of the timetable

from Antrim and Mossley into the city, and possibly from as far as Ballymena. That is the key commuter range, although no doubt Members whose constituencies are further up the line will make the case for their areas.

Anyone who tries to travel to work in Northern Ireland's second city cannot get to Londonderry before 9.00 am. I cannot work out how that kind of timetable is supposed to encourage commuters to use trains.

For people who travel from Antrim and points further north to Whiteabbey, either because they want to go to the Whiteabbey area or because they are students who should be encouraged to use trains to commute to Jordanstown, there is only one train a day in each direction that stops at Whiteabbey. My daughter uses that line to commute to Whiteabbey, and it is great when it works. However, if she happens to leave work 10 minutes late, the only way that she can travel north from Whiteabbey is by going to Belfast Central and changing trains. That is not a sensible way to run a railway, but such problems are due to the inadequate supply of rolling stock, and that must be addressed. With adequate rolling stock, Translink could be expected to improve the timetable.

As Ken Robinson said, there are issues about how to use the railway to reduce the number of people who commute by car. Specifically, why is the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, despite being in possession of a site at Ballymartin beside the M2 at Templepatrick, unable to attract the necessary finance to progress the building of a park-and-ride facility there? The Airbus, some of the Goldline services and the railway could remove many commuters from the M2. That would be of considerable benefit to people in the area, who suffer from the poor air quality created by too many cars travelling through Sandyknowes roundabout to the city.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way? He will get an extra minute to speak.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for that.

Mr Storey: To follow on from what Mr Ford said, a key element in any new integrated service, and one that is missing from the current provision of public transport, is an integrated ticketing system. The current antiquated system prohibits passengers from buying a ticket in Ballymoney to travel by train and then bus, even to this Building.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute to speak.

Mr Ford: The Member makes a valid point, and one that I raised with Translink at a meeting of Antrim Borough Council only last week. Why are people from north Down particularly privileged in having a dual ticketing system for bus and rail when the rest of us cannot travel one way by bus and return by train? Ideally,

there should be a system similar to London's Oyster card that could be used on all forms of public transport across Northern Ireland. That is the way to make real progress and to encourage people to use public transport.

The report sets out a strong and positive way forward, and I hope to hear from the Minister that its recommendations will be fully implemented at an early date.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to be able to speak today in support of the motion. The development of the Ballymena to Londonderry railway line is an essential part of the regional development and strategic plans for the area. Thanks to two past Regional Development Ministers, my colleagues Gregory Campbell and Peter Robinson, free travel for pensioners was introduced and the decision to purchase new rolling stock taken. The Assembly must not overlook the importance of those two factors in increasing the number of passengers on the route.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson has ensured that money has been made available to the Department for Regional Development to extend the provision of free transport to people who are 60 years of age and over, to purchase new rolling stock, and to undertake the long overdue and desperately needed relaying of the line between Ballymena and Londonderry.

Dr W McCrea: Although all the lines that are provided are welcome, a line from Belfast International Airport into the centre of Belfast is essential.

Mr G Robinson: I will touch on that matter later in my contribution.

The very fact that passenger numbers have already increased by 87% since 2003-04 is proof that measures that were implemented by previous Ministers have been beneficial. The Assembly must not, however, overlook the importance of investment in the rail network in the development of the tourist industry.

Northern Ireland has enjoyed a global goodwill dividend, on which it must capitalise on every occasion and in every way. The journey along the coast from Coleraine to Londonderry is one of the most scenic railway journeys in the world. Therefore, it has great potential for exploitation as a tourist attraction. Reinstatement of a halt at Limavady, or provision of a new one at Ballykelly, would give commuters from the town of Limavady and its hinterland more choice.

With new trains and higher costs in running private vehicles, there must also be the potential for utilisation of the intercity link for commuters. A great benefit of that would be less congestion and pollution in towns and city centres. One commuter to whom I have spoken told me that it is great to have a wee rest on her way to and from work, which she could not do if she were driving. She is also delivered right into the heart

of Belfast and does not have to bother to find a parking space. Perhaps there is potential for early morning and evening services to run specifically for commuters with stops only at hub stations. The increase in passenger numbers shows that, so far, the railway's renaissance has had tangible results. After all, trains are run for passengers.

Tourists and commuters are only two of the many complicated reasons that the rail network must be supported. Derry City Airport and Belfast International Airport should be serviced with direct rail links. Trains run right past Derry City Airport, although, as yet, no provision has been made for a stop there. That is a preposterous situation. If the Assembly truly wants to develop further tourist and business traffic, surely it is as important to provide a railway stop at Derry City Airport as it is to extend its runway. There is also potential for an easily accessible halt at Belfast International Airport, as my honourable friend the Rev McCrea has pointed out.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the Member's concern. I also support the call for a halt at Belfast International Airport. The Member also referred to Derry City Airport. Does he agree that it is unfortunate that there is no halt at the Causeway Hospital, which serves my constituency as well as his? Members will be aware of discussions about the provision of a new regional college at Watt's Town, which is in the same locality as the Causeway Hospital. I urge the Minister to ensure that, in any proposed plan for a new regional college in the area, provision must be made for a halt that would facilitate the college and also take into consideration the needs of people who use the hospital.

Mr G Robinson: I accept the Member's point.

The Antrim to Lisburn railway line remains closed. However, when track renewal was being carried out on the Antrim to Belfast section of the track, the Lisburn line was utilised. Yet again, it would cost a vast amount of money to provide new halts. Perhaps the private sector might like to build the halts, and Northern Ireland Railways could supply the trains.

In the case of Belfast International Airport, the airport's management had offered to assist the development of that facility. Many small measures could be taken to improve the services that are available to locals and tourists alike. They should be undertaken as priorities, so that the statutory authorities can have plans ready for implementation as soon as possible. Those small developments could pay huge dividends for everyone and could play an essential part in the development of the railway's role in Northern Ireland's prosperity.

Such developments would enable people to get to and from their destinations with ease and in comfort. Perhaps, most importantly, they would ensure that

railways continue to be a credit to Northern Ireland and an impressive first sight for visitors to our wee country. They would also benefit the economies of towns and cities with easy commuter and shopping journeys.

To get there will take vision, money, hard work and, most of all, time. Let us steam ahead now, on a track that will enhance our wee country.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The northern railway corridor is a vital arterial route for public transport, serving not only Derry and Belfast, but large rural parts of Counties Derry and Antrim, where, compared to more urbanised areas of the North, the standard of public transport has traditionally fallen short.

Sinn Féin agrees fully that the future of the northern railway corridor cannot be examined in isolation, but only as part of a broader framework, including integrated transport, economic development and tourism. Much damage has been done by direct rule Ministers through underinvestment in the line; that is being addressed and the benefits of sustained investment are being recognised.

The railway is an undervalued and underused asset; however, that is in no way the fault of the public. It has been shown that more investment equals more passengers. The Minister for Regional Development has announced an investment of £12 million for track-life extension works north of Ballymena, and the start of a £64 million major track-relay project between Coleraine and Derry. The Minister's decision, last year, to lift restriction on investment in the Derry line north of Ballymena was correct. The more that is done to develop the railway network across the North, the more demand on the road network will reduce, and hence emissions of carbon, the reduction of which is crucial in meeting climate-change targets set by the Executive.

As highlighted by the Into the West rail lobby, trains are cleaner and greener. Upgrading that railway will cut the amount of carbon dioxide produced by road vehicles annually by 20,000 tonnes. The northern railway's development must be matched by development of an integrated transport system, which maximises the use of public transport and minimises commuters' need to use private vehicles. We must also market the northern railway to attract tourists and to ensure that it is used as a gateway to the wealth of tourist attractions on the north coast and in Derry.

It is vital that regional disparities in public transport, which were established by local government in the North many years ago, are addressed. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I thank and congratulate the Members who secured this important debate.

Northern Ireland has a long history of railway infrastructure, and it is regrettable that what was once considered the second-most developed railway network in the world is now a shadow of its former self.

Improvements and further developments in our railways will benefit Northern Ireland in many ways. Increasing commuter timetables and frequency of trains will boost our economy. The increased number of trains, and their speed and quality of services, will facilitate more tourists and improve our economy, as they will provide better links between our attractions and economic hubs. Equally, the more people who travel by railway, the fewer will travel by road, which means less congestion. Rail travel is much better for the environment.

For those reasons, I welcome the debate and the 'Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance' report. Historically, the northern corridor between Belfast and Londonderry — our two biggest cities — has suffered underinvestment by comparison with the eastern lines. However, the investment that has taken place, namely the introduction of new trains, has seen great success. Passenger numbers on this line have reached record numbers; over one million passengers used it in 2007. Yet, as the report shows, future development is hampered by lack of line capacity, and will be improved only by increasing investment in both infrastructure and rolling stock.

I am very pleased that the Minister for Regional Development was able to secure an extra £12 million for track-life extension works north of Ballymena and £64 million for the major track relay project between Coleraine and Londonderry. However, I take the opportunity to press him for more detail on what the schemes entail, and on what improvements they will bring to the service. For example, will the £64 million, set aside for track improvements between Londonderry and Coleraine include provision of crossing points? They are sorely needed to improve the frequency and speed of journeys and, without them, there is little room for major improvement to the commuter services.

The Northern Corridor Railways Group report highlights the many difficulties that are faced in attempts to improve and enhance services on the line. Rather than a lack of interest and desire from the public, it is the capacity of the trains and the limited infrastructure that are hindering the development of the line. I agree with one of the report's conclusions:

"Further growth will require timetable changes to produce a more regular and faster service and this, in turn, will require investment in both infrastructure and rolling stock."

Although I welcome the money that the Minister secured, it is obvious that further investment is required to get the service that we need.

11.45 pm

I also welcome the call from the Northern Corridor Railways Group for a northern corridor development study. To ensure that there is the correct level of investment, it is important to work to a strategy — the more comprehensive the strategy, the better any investment will be and the more likely it will be that we reach our targets.

Development planning is changing, and we must begin to integrate our transport infrastructure with our economic and sustainability goals as well as our land use and social strategies.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that, as the public mood favours sustainable transport and the protection of the environment, there will never be a better time to create a sustainable transport network? Does he also agree that if we do not invest in our rail infrastructure now, we will miss a golden opportunity that will never come round again?

Northern Ireland will not attract many tourists if, after getting off a boat at Larne, they get onto a 30-year-old train that may — or may not — reach Belfast. Modern rolling stock is required throughout the system.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute to speak.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I agree wholeheartedly with my honourable friend. I mentioned development and planning, and our system, network and rolling stock all require large investment. It is only when such investment is planned that we can link our ports and airports — as other Members have mentioned — so that when people want to use the transport system, they can buy a ticket and move from bus to train or vice versa. The Minister for Regional Development has an important role in developing that strategy.

There should be two additions to the debate. First, any long-term study should incorporate the entire railway network in Northern Ireland. Although it is accepted that the northern corridor requires increased investment, it would be counterproductive to concentrate so much effort on one section of the line.

Secondly, we must remember that Northern Ireland is not comprehensively covered by the railway system and that large parts of Northern Ireland rely on the road network infrastructure. Any investment in the railway infrastructure must be matched by equal investment in —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Durkan: The motion refers to the report by the Northern Corridor Railways Group, and it is important that Members do justice to the findings of that report. Many important and valid points have been made in

the debate — as in other debates — about the need for improvement in timetables; the need for better integration among the different modes of public transport; the need to service our airports directly, particularly when railway lines pass close to the airports; and there has been a major emphasis on the importance placed by passengers on having a well-organised and well-run railway service.

However, it is important to examine wider issues as well as the questions on passenger services. For example, the role that freight can — and should — play if the railway network is properly utilised. If our railway network was used more extensively for freight, there would be implications for the locations of businesses and industries that are close to our railway lines.

When we start to think in those terms, the concept of the development of the railway corridor will begin to add up.

With regard to the report, the motion states that the Assembly:

“welcomes its focus on embedding the development of the line in the wider development of the area it will serve; recognises the need for long-term thinking about rail services in the context of broader strategic plans for Northern Ireland and for local areas involved;”

That is why the motion states that there is also a need to have proper engagement of the private sector. The motion does not relate solely to the line as it lies. We are talking about how to get better and healthier development along it and in the areas that it serves and about how to create appropriate clusters of development on the line so that real multipliers are created from the desired investment in infrastructure.

If eco-villages are to be developed in the context of sustainable housing, it would be appropriate to locate them in areas that are well served by a railway line, thus reducing the need for car ownership and use. Such a consideration should also be built in to the case for the development of the railway corridor. That is the sort of area that we must think about; we should think holistically rather than engage in the usual run-ins with Translink and DRD about what they are doing about the line.

Reference has been made to some past investment. In the previous period of devolution, I, as Finance Minister, received in the Budget bids a bid for new train sets. DRD and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials made it clear that if I was going to recommend to the Executive that such money be spent, it should be done so on the basis that the network be reduced to a core network, as they described it. I refused to do that, and the Executive endorsed my thinking when they agreed the allocation of £80 million for new train sets. That allocation was granted on the basis that there would be no reduction

to a core network and that those trains would serve the entire existing network.

That was not merely an understanding between myself and civil servants, or the Executive; it was understood and expressed in the Chamber, contrary to what the Minister and others said when they stated that the investment in the trains was linked to reduction in the core network. That allocation was not. It is what was requested by DRD officials and recommended by DFP officials, but it was not what was decided in the Chamber.

Gregory Campbell, who became Minister for Regional Development after Peter Robinson — who was Minister when the allocation was made — has stated that there was a hankering in the Department for the reduction to a core network when he took up office. Considering that devolution was in place at that time, we thankfully avoided that situation.

It has been said that investment was denied at other times. A small token bid was made at one time that would have achieved little, and other moneys had not been spent — in fact, moneys that were bid for and allocated since were not spent on the line, as promised. At that time, the Executive decided to wait for the Strategic Investment Board, in the context of the reinvestment and reform initiative, to present proposals for significant investment along the whole of the railway network. That is the history of the matter.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

As many Members will be aware, the development of quality transport infrastructure for the north-west is one of the key demands in the Stand up for Derry campaign. For too long, the north-west has been treated as the poor sister when it comes to investment. It has been marginalised and ignored. An entire region was allowed to stagnate when investment was skewed to already affluent areas. Therefore, I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to debate it in the Chamber.

The report rightly recognises the need to view rail services in a long-term, strategic manner. We will never achieve the goals of the Programme for Government if, for example, infrastructure development is carried out in a piecemeal manner — as has been the case in the past — without any recognition of the needs of areas such as Derry.

I welcome the support of my colleague and fellow MLA Mark Durkan. Despite the version of history that he outlined, we all know what actually happened and, in particular, how that impacted on Derry. During Mr Durkan's period as deputy First Minister and as Minister of Finance and Personnel, restrictions were imposed that prevented the development of —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, I will not give way.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Durkan: The Member will —

Ms Anderson: I will not give way. Suigh síos. I will not give way. Mr Durkan talked about a Sinn Féin Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will decide whether she wishes to give way, and other Members should not persist.

Ms Anderson: During Mr Durkan's period as deputy First Minister and as Minister of Finance and Personnel, restrictions were imposed that prevented the development of any stretch of the Derry to Belfast line, north of Ballymena —

Mr Durkan: The Member is deliberately making statements that are not true. There is absolutely no factual basis for that statement.

Mr Speaker: Order. I assume that the Member has not given way?

Ms Anderson: No, I have not.

Mr Speaker: The SDLP — specifically Mr O'Loan — will have an opportunity to wind on the debate.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. People were protesting, rightly, but without any knowledge of the restrictions on the line. Mark, and others, were aware of those restrictions and should have made the people aware of them. Those restrictions ruled out —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, the Member is —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, I cannot sit here and listen to those falsehoods being repeated under the cover of —

Mr Speaker: Order. Martina Anderson has the Floor. I have already told the Member that Mr O'Loan will have an opportunity to address the issues during the winding-up speech.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. The Member is a bit touchy — the truth obviously hurts.

Those restrictions ruled out the possibility of accessing EU funding for the line. Indeed, between 1999 and 2002, only £1.5 million was invested in the line. Thankfully, the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, has now lifted those restrictions and has paved the way for a complete and substantial upgrade of the line from Belfast to Derry. He is committed to finding £64 million for development of that line.

Provision has been made for two additional trains to facilitate the delivery of an enhanced service level that will substantially reduce journey times from Derry to Belfast and ensure that commuter services, for the first

time ever, will arrive before 9.00 am — almost revolutionary in Derry.

Mr Brolly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: She does not give way. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. As I stated previously; it is up to each Member to decide whether to give way.

Mr Brolly: I appreciate that the Member is giving way given that she has already lost speaking time. Perhaps the Speaker will consider that point.

Although the railway has a functional use, anyone who lives in the area — such as George Robinson and me — appreciates the beauty of the scenery along the track from Lough Foyle to Coleraine. I look forward to it becoming a very important part of the tourism industry, which I hope will expand in the next few years. The area is neglected, and will be dependent on its beauty and the resulting tourism possibilities.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute to speak.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I agree with the Member.

There should be a Derry to Coleraine commuter line linking the two universities, with an appropriate stop, perhaps, at Ballykelly, to cover the East Derry constituency.

Of course, all the developments will cost millions of pounds, but the Minister is committed to securing the necessary resources, and we should applaud him for demonstrating the political will and leadership that the people deserve; it has often been lacking in the past.

The people of Derry want the first-class services to which they are entitled. They do not want to hear Ministers bleat about a lack of money. Although he could have done that, too, Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development, chose not to do so. He recognises that there is a fundamental need for investment in Derry's infrastructure. He knows that if the north-west is to prosper, and if it is to compete for inward investment and exploit the huge tourism potential on our doorstep, a proper railway network is essential.

12.00 noon

The Minister is committed to turning those aspirations into reality. I have absolutely no doubt that he will deliver on that. If he does not, he will be challenged by MLAs such as Raymond McCartney and me, because we are committed to the Stand Up for Derry campaign, a key element of which is the development of a quality transport infrastructure. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the debate and congratulate the Members who were responsible for securing it. I also wish to acknowledge the excellent work done over the years by the Northern Corridor

Railways Group. It has successfully endeavoured to draw the attention of public representatives and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to the development of the railway network, and this motion is in keeping with those sentiments.

The general issue of transport in Northern Ireland over the next decade will be absolutely crucial to economic development in the Province. It is estimated that, year on year, car ownership is increasing by about 4%. That will mean that in 10 years' time, the delays at Sandyknowes mentioned this morning by the Chairman of the Environment Committee, in which I was also caught up, will be 50% worse than they are currently. That is the case no matter where we refer to.

The honourable Member for East Antrim Mr Ken Robinson made the relevant point — often lost in debates such as this one — that this is not just an issue about one small geographical part of Northern Ireland, despite the worst efforts of some people to make it so. The issue is comparable to that of the gas pipeline, which runs along a similar route to the northern corridor. The railway line along that northern corridor benefits communities in Antrim, Moyle, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Londonderry. The Bleach Green line is a relevant point in that geographical spread.

This is not just a matter of trying to develop and assist transport links for 105,000 people who live in Londonderry. It is about trying to develop a key transport link for 350,000 people who live along the northern corridor line. The fact that it would serve 20% of the entire population of the country means that it is a key infrastructural necessity.

The thing that annoys me about the whole transport debate is this: we have seen that when investment is made in rail links — on the Enterprise, for example — the numbers of people using that service go up. The numbers of people using the Belfast to Londonderry line go up when investment is made in that part of the network. The upgrading of the roads network at the Westlink is a necessary development, as is the work being done at Sandyknowes. Let no one be under any illusion: if a third lane is provided at either of those locations we will need a fourth lane in three or four years' time; and if we provide a fourth lane, we will need a fifth lane. We must encourage people to make the switch from private transport to public transport.

Many people will argue that it is a chicken-and-egg situation. Most people will concede to my argument that, given a cost-effective and reliable public-transport system that meets the needs of the community, there will be a switch away from private transport. However, it will not happen if motorists are penalised or are faced with the prospect of moving to an ineffective and second-class public-transport system. We must have an

effective public-transport system, and the rail network is an essential part of that.

In the minute that I have left, I wish to draw attention to a couple of points that the Minister should address. Several basic necessities are lacking on the Londonderry to Belfast line, one of which is a catering facility.

It is bad enough having no catering facilities on a train when the journey takes an hour and a half, which is the length of time that it is supposed to take. However, the journey takes three hours; therefore, the lack of catering facilities is ludicrous, and the issue must be addressed.

The other issue that I have raised several times with the Minister and the Department is the requirement for a passing loop at Ballykelly. It would be expensive, but, in any case, there should be a stop at Eglinton for Londonderry airport.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: I will give way if I am given an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: When the Member was Minister for Regional Development, did he work under a restriction from the Executive banning any proposed investment on the stretch of line from Derry to Coleraine?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for the intervention. I can confirm that I did not work under any such restriction. Anyone who declares that I did is blatantly telling lies, but that would not be the first time, nor would it be the first crime that they had committed.

To get back to a more relevant point, there is a requirement for a passing loop. It would not take a massive leap of imagination to suggest that a passing loop could be installed near Eglinton airport. A stop could also be installed there, as it is required anyway, to facilitate passengers using the airport. That could potentially double the number of patrons using the lines, but I would expect that it would take more than a year for that to happen. Only one train can operate on the line between Coleraine and Londonderry because there is no passing loop. I hope that the Minister will address that issue.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister for Regional Development to respond, I remind Members that it is unparliamentary to accuse other Members of telling lies. I must make that position absolutely clear.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be careful about how I refer to Members.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I also thank the Northern Corridor Railways Group for its work in producing the report. When we discuss the provision of railways in the North, I am always heartened

that Members on all Benches show an interest in the subject. It reflects my own interest in the topic. I am always heartened that the Assembly is so supportive of investment in the railways.

The future of the Belfast to Derry railway line has attracted interest and provoked much debate, not just today, but for several years. Furthermore, the uncertainty about its future has caused much concern. I appreciate the importance of the railway line between Belfast and Derry to the whole of the north-west, and I would like it to be upgraded so that people living there receive the same level of service as elsewhere on the railway network.

Before going into detail about future investment, I would like to look back on the history of investment or underinvestment in the line to date, without any of the revision.

In September 2000, the railway task force, which was set up to consider the future of the rail network, produced a report promoting what was described as a consolidation option for the railways. That distinguished between the heavily used lines around Belfast and the lesser-used lines north of Ballymena and Whitehead, which were sometimes referred to as non-core lines. The consolidation option envisaged modernisation of the heavily used line, continuation of services on the lesser-used lines, without major investment, and the replacement of the old Class 80 rolling stock with a fleet of new trains.

The Budget of 2000 provided £102 million additional funding for the consolidation option. Following on from the regional development strategy published in 2001, the 10-year regional transportation strategy produced in July 2002 acknowledged that addressing the transportation deficit would be a long-term challenge. It envisaged that progress could be made over the next 10 years if resources were available.

The Budget of 2002 provided a further £40 million to allow the consolidation option to be completed. Against that background, investment in the Derry line has been very limited. From 1999 to 2002, the Department bid £4.5 million for work on the line north of Ballymena, but only £1.5 million was actually invested. The regional transportation strategy proposed no investment in the lesser-used lines until the outcome of investment in the core network was evaluated.

However, it became apparent that more investment was needed in order to keep the Belfast to Derry line operational and that that could not wait until the evaluation was ready to proceed. As a result, a railways review group was established in 2003 to consider the immediate investment needs of the network and, in particular, those of the lesser-used lines. Following consideration of the review group's report, direct rule Ministers agreed to provide total funding of £23.6 million for the lesser-used lines, including capital of

£17.2 million, over a five-year period beginning in 2005-06. That investment was restricted to maintaining services at existing levels and to preventing further deterioration in standard on those lines.

On coming into office, I lifted the restriction on investment on the line from Ballymena to Derry. That followed a positive evaluation contained in an economic appraisal that considered the various options for the railway network here. As a result, references to lesser-used or non-core lines are redundant and should no longer be used. My decision allows Translink to prepare a business case for a substantial upgrade to the Coleraine to Derry line. The latest Budget and investment strategy include provision for the cost of that upgrade, which is currently estimated at £64 million.

Members will understand that improvements cannot be made overnight, given that certain processes must occur prior to commencement of the work. The preparatory work, for example, could not be undertaken until the strategic decision to invest on the Derry line had been made. The steps that Translink must now take to progress the upgrade include: the production of a project-initiation document; the recruitment of a feasibility team; and the completion of a feasibility study that considers issues such as track layout, design, speed, signalling, the work needed on the user-work crossings on the line, structures, Derry station, and environmental issues. Translink must also: produce and approve a business case; recruit design teams; produce track and signal designs; and recruit contractors. Each of those steps can take considerable time, but they are expected to be completed by 2011, allowing work to commence on the ground at that stage.

Translink is at pains to emphasise that it is at an early stage of planning the project and that timings may be subject to change. It is also important to note that the Public Accounts Committee heavily criticised the Department and Translink for the poor preparation and scoping of the Belfast to Bangor relay project, which resulted in an overspend of some £12 million. It is essential that all future infrastructure projects are planned properly and that risks are minimised and managed. Although I appreciate that rail travellers in the north-west wish to see an upgraded line as soon as possible, it is important that we do not cut corners and that the project is undertaken professionally so that we can optimise the impact that such a substantial investment in our railways will have.

It is envisaged that the project will entail a complete relay of the track between Coleraine and Derry, together with the provision of new signalling works and a new passing loop. Translink envisages that the project should be completed by 2013. In the meantime, some £12 million has been earmarked to fund a major project that is designed to extend the track life of the line, focused mainly on the stretch between Ballymena

and Coleraine. Currently, sections of the line between Ballymoney and Coleraine and between Coleraine and Derry allow trains to run at a general 60 mph, with specific temporary speed restrictions at various locations. The track-life extension project on the Ballymena to Coleraine section should enable an increase to 70 mph and the removal of the majority of the temporary speed restrictions.

By 2013, when the upgrade of the line from Coleraine to Derry will have been completed, the line will have been improved sufficiently to facilitate a reduction of approximately 30 minutes in journey times between Belfast and Derry. At that time, it is also proposed to introduce a further two new train sets to the route in order to facilitate a more frequent timetable and to allow commuter train arrivals in Derry before 9.00 am. I trust that Members will agree that that will represent a substantial enhancement of rail services to the north-west.

Other major projects on the Belfast to Derry line have been completed already. Mr Robinson referred to the Antrim to Bleach Green section, which was upgraded and reopened to a passenger service in June 2001 at a cost of £17.5 million. Several of the 23 new CAF trains, which cost almost £82 million, are deployed on the Belfast to Derry line. Other smaller projects have been completed in recent years, such as the new passenger terminal at Coleraine. I am also pleased to record that the passenger numbers on the Derry line increased by 16.7% in 2006-07 compared with the previous year. For 2007-08, the numbers have increased by a further 11.5%. Those increases can be credited to the deployment of the new trains on the line, demonstrating how well-placed capital investment is achieving results, with benefits to commuters, the wider community, and the environment.

However, funding of railway transport is expensive. Over the past four years, the Department has provided capital funding of £121 million for capital projects across the railways network and revenue of some £87 million to meet public-service obligation requirements. That further demonstrates the Government's commitment to rail services and shows how important it is to carefully plan improvements.

12.15 pm

As the motion rightly states, the long-term need for rail services must be recognised in the context of broader strategic plans for the North. It is therefore important that we ensure, as far as possible, that the region maximises the benefits that will flow from that expenditure, and that we consider the contributions that might be made by other stakeholders that stand to benefit from the investment.

I am also keen that we consider other examples of best practice in order to determine what works and what does not. That debate must happen. Therefore, I

am happy to explore how a study might address the wider social, land-use-development, economic-regeneration and environmental considerations. The aim of such a study would be to ensure that this important infrastructure investment would support wider growth and policy objectives. I also intend to raise the matter at the next North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting in order to ascertain whether the South has any interest in participating in such a study.

I support the motion, and I am happy to advance the Northern Corridor Railways Group's proposal for a railway corridor development study. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: The debate has been interesting and useful, and I thank the 11 Members and the Minister who spoke and other Members who intervened. For the most part, those contributions were constructive.

Plans for the railway's future illustrate the difference between direct rule and the devolved Assembly: they read the situation in quite different ways. Although the outcomes of decisions taken by direct rule Ministers gave the impression of malevolence, they were not necessarily so. However, they did not have the same feel for the situation as local politicians. As John Dallat said, we consider the matter in the round. Similarly, as the Northern Corridor Railways Group's report says, we see the railway as part of a broad framework for development in the area in which it serves. Hence, all aspects of an integrated approach to transport — the fit with the regional development strategy; economic development, including the role of the private sector; and other areas of social policy, including a commitment to vibrant rural communities — factor into our thinking. An investment in the railway is not just an end in itself; it is a contribution towards a greater goal.

That report is rightly called 'Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance', because it discusses the rebirth of the railway. It is important that the Assembly make its intentions clear, and, by dismissing the rail network's division into core and non-core activities and its spending only on maintenance, I believe that it has done so.

Given modern thinking about sustainability, what logic could there be in dismantling such public-transport infrastructure? In terms of balanced regional development, it would be an act of madness to remove the railway line between the two largest conurbations in the northern part of this island. Today, we must confirm the long-term future of the Belfast to Derry line, and I believe that the Assembly has made its views clear. I am confident that investment in that infrastructure will be the catalyst for further development along the line.

Having decided to retain the line, as the Assembly is minded to do, we must recognise that it is unsustainable

to operate it at its current low level. That is why the further study — based on the wider context that I described — that is proposed in 'Railway Renaissance' is necessary.

It is abundantly clear that investment in the line will immediately yield returns in terms of greater use. Since 2003-04, the introduction of new trains has resulted in passenger numbers increasing by 87% to more than one million, well ahead of targets. We now want to reduce journey times and increase service frequency.

I welcome the Minister's announcement, which he has repeated today, of £12 million for essential track remediation — note that that is merely remediation — to the north of Ballymena and £64 million for a track-relaying project between Coleraine and Derry, which will start in 2011. As the Minister said, that will reduce Derry to Belfast journey times by 30 minutes. He also referred to the provision of two extra trains, which will bring commuter services into Derry before 9.00 am, although not until 2013. The Assembly should inform the Minister that all those activities must be brought forward with the utmost urgency. I note that, in answer to a question yesterday, he referred to attempts to introduce that commuter service to Derry at an earlier date.

Along that line, people want more service. A petition signed by more than 800 people demands the reinstatement of the Dunloy railway halt, and that request will shortly find its way to the Minister.

Since the Northern Corridor Railways Group published its report, it has made a further submission to the Minister in which it highlighted the value of the rail corridor as a regional and cross-border asset.

It links the rail corridor to the intergovernmental study on the all-Ireland economy, and the high-level spatial strategies, North and South. The group asks that the railway corridor development study be considered in the context of the wider collaborative framework and in the cross-border regional context. It has requested that the Minister proposes the undertaking of a joint cross-border railway study to the North/South Ministerial Council. That is the right suggestion: such a major development of the infrastructure can contribute to the sustainable economic development of the whole of the north and west of the island. I hope that the Minister will support such a study.

Fred Cobain and Mervyn Storey raised the point of relatively low investment in our railway infrastructure. Ken Robinson, John McCallister and William McCrea strongly emphasised the point that we do not simply talk about a railway line from Ballymena to Derry, we refer also to a Belfast to Derry railway line, to the whole railway network in Northern Ireland and, as the SDLP argues, to the railway network throughout the

island. Moreover, William McCrea referred to an airport link. Those are all important points.

There is no difference of opinion. Although I argue strongly in favour of regional development, there is no real tension between the development of Belfast as a city and the development of the rest of the region. In fact, the two contribute to each other, and that is what proper development is about. Good transport infrastructure plays a vital role in that.

Raymond McCartney made a curious point about the involvement of the private sector that was mentioned in the report. His point revealed the influence of Karl Marx and, perhaps, even Sinn Féin's voodoo economics. We do not talk just about an iron way; but about substantial economic development along the corridor, of which the railway will be a part and a catalyst. Undoubtedly, that will involve private sector development. There may be private sector contributions to infrastructure along that railway line: I imagine that such schemes have happened elsewhere.

Mr McCartney: Even the report is not clear about what is meant by close involvement. I hoped that either Mr O'Loan or one of the other Members speaking in the debate would enlighten me; however, that has not yet happened.

Mr O'Loan: I am glad that the Member asked the question because I have just outlined that very point, so — clearly — he is ignorant of those basic points of economics. I suggest that, since the Member obviously did not take in what I said, he reads the Hansard report carefully tomorrow to see what I am saying.

David Ford and Ken Robinson made good points about sustainable transport and sustainable development, and emphasised the wider issue of sustainability. Mark Durkan made an excellent point about the potential development of the eco-village concept. Furthermore, he referred to getting freight onto the railway — a concept which has not been developed here at all.

The contribution from Martina Anderson was singularly unfortunate. She enhanced neither the debate nor the public perception of her party's standing. Ms Anderson said that there were restrictions on spending during devolution, decisions supporting consolidation going towards the non-core network. That is absolutely false. It is clear that spending on trains was predicated on the rejection of the non-core concept and of further investment along the line. That was the clearly expressed view of the Assembly, of the Minister who spoke, of the Minister of Finance at the time, of the Committee for Regional Development, and of the Executive, which included Ministers from the Member's party. Therefore, what Ms Anderson said was false and made no useful contribution to the debate.

Mr Durkan: I wish to make a point of information, as Mr O'Loan was not a Member of the Assembly

during devolution. This issue was not just discussed at the Executive; certainly, I assure Sinn Féin Members that Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún did not support the consolidation option when they backed investment in the railways, because the Executive did not buy that option. The two Ministers for Regional Development at the time told the Assembly that they were not working to the consolidation option: it is recorded in the Hansard reports that, in this Assembly, two Ministers said that they did not accept the option that had been generated by the Railway Review Group.

Furthermore, that had also been made clear during Budget discussions, including, as the Member rightly touched on, by the Committee for Regional Development at that time, which was satisfied that that was not the case.

Mr O’Loan: I thank the Member for his intervention; it is important to put such matters on the record. It is regrettable that that episode was mentioned during the debate. I hope that it can now be put aside and that the Assembly can focus on the main point, which is the endorsement of the report and our statement to the Minister that the matter should be taken forward. That has been the clearly expressed view of those who contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with interest the report ‘Northern Corridor Railway Renaissance’ from the Northern Corridor Railways Group; welcomes its focus on embedding the development of the line in the wider development of the area it will serve; recognises the need for long-term thinking about rail services in the context of broader strategic plans for Northern Ireland and for local areas involved; accepts its arguments for the close involvement of the private sector; and endorses the need for the Railway Corridor Development Study which it proposes.

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 first item of business after the lunchtime suspension will be the motion on the bill of rights and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern at the lack of cross-community support for the recommendations contained in the Report of the Bill of Rights Forum; and strongly urges the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to ensure cross-community support for its advice to the Secretary of State.

This is a very important debate that I hope will attract attention and contribution from Members of the House.

At the initial meeting of the Bill of Rights Forum on 18 December 2006, the Ulster Unionist Party stated:

“A heavy responsibility is placed on this Forum — on both the representatives of political parties and of various sectors within civil society — to determine rights supplemental to the ECHR, reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. If the Forum is to produce agreed recommendations to this end, consensus must characterise its workings and conclusions — both consensus across the various sectors of civil society and consensus amongst the political parties”.

From the outset of the forum’s work, my party emphasised the need to build cross-community political support for any recommendations that emerged from the forum’s deliberations. One would have thought that necessity to be self-evident. Some rights — often those particular to the circumstances of Northern Ireland — are contested in our society. Our conflicts and disputes have often been couched in terms of competing rights.

Therefore, is it not reasonable, startlingly obvious even, that any statement of rights — supplementary to those of the European Convention on Human Rights — particular to the circumstances of Northern Ireland must have cross-community support? Without that support, such a statement of rights would increase, rather than ameliorate, the divisions in our society.

The final report of the Bill of Rights Forum has now been published, one year and four months later. Among

all the points of dispute within that report, one matter cannot be disputed — there is no cross-community political support for the maximalist bill of rights in the recommendations debated and discussed by the forum. The report of the Bill of Rights Forum demonstrates that in the most categorical and explicit terms.

Whatever else might be said about the final report, whatever criticisms will be aired in this debate — and there are very many justifiable grounds for criticism — the report has done useful and necessary work in that respect. The report has explicitly and categorically demonstrated to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission that the model of a maximalist bill of rights — supported by some in the forum and, indeed, by the previous Human Rights Commission — does not have cross-community political support.

Some Members in the House will, of course, attempt to divert attention from that complete absence of cross-community political support. They will tell us that a bill of rights should be imposed on the people of Northern Ireland — over the head of the Assembly — despite the absence of cross-community political support.

Ironically, among their number will be those who stated loudly in the House yesterday that cross-community political support was necessary to determine which Department should have responsibility for the regeneration of a former military base. The regeneration of a former military base is no small matter. However, neither is a bill of rights; neither is the ordering of a proper relationship between a democratically elected legislator and the courts; neither is the proposal of some members of the forum to transfer decisions about public expenditure from the House to the courts.

However, I understand why some who support a bill of rights that transfers power from a democratically elected Assembly to the courts are anxious to downplay the necessity of cross-community political support.

The final report of the Bill of Rights Forum demonstrates why —

Mr Weir: Some may argue that a bill of rights should be imposed without cross-community support. One of the recommendations of the Bill of Rights Forum report, which will be lauded by some Members, is that before a bill of rights is presented to the House of Commons, it should require cross-community support in the Assembly. Those who argue that it should go straight to the House of Commons would be arguing against the report that they will laud in another direction.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the honourable Member for that well made and important point.

There is a case to be made for rights supplementary to the European Convention addressing the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. It is important to remember that “particular circumstances” is not an empty

phrase that can mean anything that we want it to mean. It has been defined carefully by the Belfast Agreement, which refers to:

“the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem”.

That emphasises the significance of cross-community political support. How can any proposed bill of rights adhere to the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem if it lacks cross-community political support entirely? It cannot.

That brings me back to the final report of the Bill of Rights Forum. I trust that it will be read carefully by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and that it will note carefully the levels of support recorded with regard to each recommendation in the report. If those levels of support are to be the outcome of the advice that the commission provides to the Secretary of State in December, the commission will have fundamentally failed and fundamentally compromised its standing in society in Northern Ireland.

What would encourage cross-community political support for any proposed supplementary rights? The answer is three key principles. First, it must be recognised that supplementary rights are just that — supplementary. They must not be an exercise in the rewriting of the Human Rights Act 1998. In the final report, an Alliance Party submission states support for:

“the maintenance of a common basic human rights regime throughout the United Kingdom”

That statement reflects accurately the wording and the intention of the Belfast Agreement.

Secondly, any proposal for the incorporation of justifiable social and economic rights contravenes a key constitutional principle laid down in the Green Paper of July 2007 ‘The Governance of Britain’, which states:

“some have argued for the incorporation of economic and social rights into British law. But this would involve a significant shift from Parliament to the judiciary in making decisions about public spending and, at least implicitly, levels of taxation.”

Finally, in addressing issues of parity of esteem and mutual respect, any proposals must give expression to both the rights and duties contained in the framework convention for the protection of national minorities.

The final report of the Bill of Rights Forum demonstrates beyond any doubt the absence of cross-community support for the vast majority of the recommendations discussed by the forum. It is now the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to ensure that its deliberations and advice do not repeat that mistake and failure.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“welcomes the level of constructive engagement between the political parties and the social partners in the Bill of Rights Forum which reported on 31 March 2008; believes that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, in developing its advice to the Secretary of State, must act independently to produce that advice based on human rights principles; and calls for the development of a comprehensive and progressive Bill of Rights that can promote and protect the rights of all, set out common values in our divided society, and act as common ground upon which we can build a shared future.”

As a member of the Bill of Rights Forum, which lasted for the past 15 months, I commend all those who participated in it — the five political parties and all those representatives of civic society who gave considerable time, energy and effort to the process.

All the contributions from civic society and the political parties were extremely constructive. It was a most interesting and valuable process, and the synthesis between the political elements in our society and those in civic society was enriching for everybody involved.

I listened very carefully to Mr Kennedy's speech. What it amounted to was an endorsement of the Bill of Rights Forum. What was the necessity for that forum? Why did we not simply work on a bill of rights in the Assembly? The reason was that the political parties could not reach a consensus on the shape, form and content of a bill of rights. Therefore, a separate, parallel process, in which people sought to reach agreement on a bill of rights, was required. That is why this debate is taking place.

A bill of rights has been a demand for many people in politics for many years. It long preceded the Good Friday Agreement. Its genesis, in relation to the current process, was very clearly enunciated in the Good Friday Agreement, as a commitment to a bill of rights is contained in that agreement.

We celebrate the tenth anniversary of that agreement this week, on 10 April. It was agreed by all the people of Ireland, North and South, with concurrent majorities. There was cross-community support for the Good Friday Agreement, and it contained a commitment to a bill of rights.

The shape, form and content of that bill of rights can be talked about, but the commitment to that remains. It is part and parcel of the Good Friday Agreement. The St Andrews Agreement contained a further commitment to a bill of rights, because all the parties agreed that there should be a forum to explore a bill of rights.

Another aspect of the commitment in the Good Friday Agreement was that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission would ultimately advise the Government on a bill of rights. That was because the parties involved in the Good Friday Agreement saw the obvious difficulties in reaching agreement in relation to the content, shape and form of a bill of rights.

The final advice that was to be given to the Government would not come from the Assembly or the political

parties — who clearly could not reach agreement on it — but from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. That is its mandate, and that is what it will do. Through the deliberations of the forum, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will seek to construct a document to advise the British Government on a bill of rights.

It is the function of Westminster to pass that bill of rights.

2.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member accept that it is absolutely crucial and imperative that any proposed bill of rights has the popular support, endorsement and confidence of the Assembly? Does he accept that, in the deliberations thus far, it has been clearly demonstrated that that is not there?

Mr A Maginness: Clearly, Mr Kennedy has not listened to a word that I have said. The forum was set up because political agreement could not be reached. It is clear that we cannot reach political agreement over the shape and content of the bill of rights, and that is why that process is in place. It is also why the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been mandated to produce a draft to go to Westminster. That is why Westminster, and not the Assembly, will legislate. Westminster will entrench the bill of rights for all the people of Northern Ireland. That process is needed because of political disagreement. If we had political agreement — which no one denies is desirable — there would be no need for the processes that have been gone through. Therefore, the British Government, the Irish Government and all the political parties agreed to the process that has just taken place.

Even prior to the forum, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission conducted extensive consultation on a bill of rights. In 2001, it published a consultation document, ‘Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland’. In April 2004, it published ‘Progressing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: An Update’. Those documents got no further because of the lack of political agreement and the lack of political buy-in, particularly from the unionist parties. Therefore, the process stalled, and we have now reached the current point.

The SDLP wishes to see an extensive bill of rights because of the Troubles, which emerged in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s and 1990s. The Troubles arose out of the abuse — indeed, the absence — of human and civil rights. The principle of one man, one vote was denied. Massive discrimination took place in employment. There was internment without trial. Massive abuses of human rights took place.

A bill of rights is needed to guarantee the peace that we have now and to ensure that those abuses will never happen again and that people will have the confidence to buy in to the new system of government and the new

political arrangements. A bill of rights will guarantee the peace that we have now established; it will not threaten that peace. Rights will not threaten anyone in the House or outside of it. Rights will not threaten unionist people, nationalist people or people who have no political allegiance to those two traditions. Rights will guarantee freedom and a peaceful future. That is why a bill of rights is so important to our society, and I appeal to all Members to support the process of drafting it.

I have little time in which to talk about the content of the bill of rights, and it is not necessary to do so. It is necessary to say that rights will create common values that we can all cherish and share. Ultimately, that will allow the creation of a society in which everyone can share, and in which everyone can live in peace. That is the importance of the bill of rights.

Mr McCausland: The process that we have come to know as the Bill of Rights Forum was a long process that lasted about 16 months, from the end of 2006 to March 2008. As a member of the forum, I was present throughout the process, from the first meeting to the last. I was also convenor of one of the working groups.

The forum was given a very specific remit: to produce a report on a possible bill of rights, taking account of the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. The working group of which I was the convenor covered culture, identity and language. It was quite clear that that area falls very much within the remit of the Bill of Rights Forum. We had some good discussions that explored some very difficult issues in depth. In passing, I pay tribute to the group's legal adviser, Dr Elizabeth Craig, who ensured that our debate was well informed.

Issues such as culture, identity and language get to the heart of matters in Northern Ireland, whether it is in relation to parades, minority languages or denominational education. They are particularly relevant to the individual circumstances of Northern Ireland, and we made good progress on a number of them; but, in the end, the process was rushed, and the opportunity for greater agreement was lost, especially as regards minority languages and the right of peaceful assembly.

Regrettably, I must say that I believe that it was a flawed process that produced a flawed product. It was flawed in a number of ways. First, significant sectors of our society were not invited to the table, and, secondly, too many areas were considered that did not fall within the forum's remit. Instead of the forum sticking to the remit that it was given, it devoted a lot of time to considering a wide range of issues.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member agree that there was a tremendous openness within the forum and that many groups that were not formally represented were invited to the forum? Furthermore, an extensive outreach process was also engaged in.

Mr McCausland: Alban Maginness asked me if I agree with him. The answer is no, I do not agree, because there is a big difference between being at the table —

Mr A Maginness: The Member is just factually wrong.

Mr McCausland: Perhaps if Alban Maginness would listen he might discover that he is wrong. My point is that there is a big difference between being at the table and being allowed to sit there and observe. There are people who should have been at the table from the start, but who were not.

Instead of sticking to the forum's remit, too many areas were considered, and, therefore, insufficient time was given to issues that should have been very much at the heart of our debate. The process was also flawed in that there were exaggerated — and, I believe, groundless — claims made about the process. I note another one today; Alban Maginness told us that a bill of rights would “guarantee” peace. It is not possible for anybody to give a positive 100% categorical guarantee of anything. The advertisements that were placed in Belfast — and further afield, I am sure — told us that poverty, sickness and virtually everything that is wrong with society would be made right. Those sorts of exaggerated claims are unhelpful.

In the end, a document was produced in which there was a marked absence of cross-community agreement. There were several hundred proposals, yet barely a handful achieved cross-community support, and I believe that none was unanimously agreed.

If a bill of rights is to contribute to a shared and better future in Northern Ireland, and if it is to be a positive and cohesive force rather than a divisive one, it must secure cross-community support and endorsement in the Assembly. The maximalist approach that was taken would, if implemented, disempower the democratic process. I fear that decisions would be made in the courts rather than in the Assembly and Parliament, and that lawyers would make a fortune at the same time — which might, of course, please Alban Maginness.

However, if it is to be a positive influence and cohesive, it must have cross-community support, which must be demonstrated in the Assembly through cross-community endorsement.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion, but I wish to speak in favour of the amendment. Some time ago, the DUP and the UUP criticised what they called the “lack of unionist representation” on the Bill of Rights Forum. I echo those concerns. I agree wholeheartedly that huge swathes of the unionist population have not been adequately represented on that forum. However, that is not because of a lack of representation; it is because of the abject failure of the DUP and the UUP to stand up for the rights of the unionist working classes. The evidence is there for all to see in the forum's reports.

The DUP and the UUP opposed the right to a decent standard of living, including adequate food, water, fuel and clothing. Both parties also voted against —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, I will not give way. Suigh síos.

The DUP and the UUP also voted against the right to the highest possible standard of health and social care. They opposed the right to a decent home that is safe and affordable, and they voted against the right to work and to enjoy a fair wage and proper conditions. The DUP and the UUP opposed —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: Suigh síos. I am not giving way.

The DUP and the UUP opposed the right to be free from slavery and forced labour. They could not accept the right to a sustainable, healthy and safe environment or the right to adequate social security and pensions. In fact, the parties opposed the vast majority of the report's proposals, but not all of them.

The DUP and UUP motion criticises the lack of cross-community support for the forum's recommendations. Perhaps both parties would like to take this opportunity to explain to their community why they failed to support those recommendations. Why did they fail to support the right of their people to enjoy decent wages, a decent home and to raise their children in a safe and secure environment? I fully expected them to oppose issues such as recognition for the Irish language. However, I am stunned by the massive disservice that they are doing to their people by continuing to rally against many of the extremely progressive principles in the report.

A strong bill of rights would provide a powerful tool to make a huge difference to the lives of our people. Remember: poverty, hunger, fear and exploitation are real issues across the social spectrum. Hungry children are hungry children whether they live on the Falls, the Shankill or in the Bogside or the Fountain.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, I will not give way. Go raibh maith agat. The Member can comment when he speaks.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is clear that the Member does not want to give way, and she does that at her discretion.

Ms Anderson: This issue is not about republican, nationalist, unionist or loyalist rights; it is about the rights of all. The bill of rights, if implemented, will compel Government to take whatever positive steps they can in order to address the economic and social problems that face our people. The Government of the day will have to legislate and provide whatever resources they can to turn the aspirations of a bill of rights into reality. If the Government fail to do so, they will have

to explain why and demonstrate when they will take appropriate action.

What do the DUP and the UUP fear about that? Do they not want their people to have equality, prosperity and a better future? They must answer those questions themselves, and they will get an opportunity to do so here. For Sinn Féin's part, it will continue to champion the rights of all. Therefore, at the risk of sounding like a unionist member of the Bill of Rights Forum, I oppose the motion but support the amendment.

Not only is a bill of rights a fundamental part of the Good Friday Agreement and a commitment of the St Andrews Agreement, it represents an incredible opportunity to make a real and positive difference to the lives of our people, and to squander that opportunity would be the greatest human-rights abuse of all. Go raibh maith agat.

2.30 pm

Dr Farry: I support the motion. I agree entirely with the sentiments of the amendment, but, sadly, I cannot support it, because it ducks the fundamental issue that we face: introducing a bill of rights without cross-community support. We must reflect seriously on that issue. Members can take it as read that the principles of international law and working towards a shared future are very close to the heart of the Alliance Party. However, we recognise the political realities of our society making progress.

The Alliance Party has supported a bill of rights for Northern Ireland for many years. Indeed, it was one of my predecessors, Sheelagh Murnaghan, who first proposed a Northern Ireland bill of rights, in this very Chamber in 1962. A bill of rights must build upon the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998, rather than rip them up and start again. We have had a tortuous process since the Good Friday Agreement. I welcome the report of the Bill of Rights Forum in so far as it sets out a comprehensive collection of proposals and positions of different parties. However, I am disappointed that it was unable to move the debate further on.

I pay tribute to the work of the Bill of Rights Forum's chairperson, Chris Sidoti, and his staff. However, I fear that the nature and format of the forum meant that it could not do much more than state the positions of various parties. Full agreement was not going to be possible, given that it was not the end of the process and parties would never show their final hands. Having a series of votes on individual proposals, basically, would have been death by a thousand cuts. In essence, the stating of positions was, frankly, the only way in which the forum could keep everyone around the table and avoid a walkout — it was that serious.

The Bill of Rights Forum was established to overcome the problem of lack of political support and buy-in for

what was happening. We have simply repeated the arguments that have been voiced over the years, without moving the debate on very much. The outcome of the forum is polarised, with huge chasms on fundamental issues rather than simple matters of detail. During the life of the forum, little effort was made to bridge the gaps between parties. It is deeply regrettable that, as far as I can see, too many parties and sectors pursued a maximalist agenda, rather than seeking to find common ground with their colleagues. The Alliance Party highlighted that on numerous occasions throughout the process.

There are many stages on the way forward: the Human Rights Commission will examine the report; it will go to the Secretary of State, who, in turn, will conduct public consultation; and the results of the consultation will go back to the Northern Ireland Office and then to Westminster. Therefore, the report must be robust and capable of going down those different avenues. At any stage the Assembly can have its say on the report, or any aspect of it, through a motion. Fundamentally, the Assembly will eventually be asked to give its support, through a cross-community vote, to provide entrenchment.

Frankly, there is no point in starting with a report that is doomed to failure further down the line. It must be capable of making the journey. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and ignore the lack of political buy-in. Frankly, it is ludicrous to think of a situation in which a bill of rights would be imposed on Northern Ireland over the head of the Assembly.

There was a disjunction between the people around the table in the forum and the political balance of power in Northern Ireland. It must also be acknowledged that the three main newspapers in Northern Ireland are currently editorialising against what is happening. There is huge cynicism among the public. I speak with a heavy heart, as someone who wants to see a strong, robust bill of rights in Northern Ireland. We have a mountain to climb, and we must acknowledge the difficulties that we are having in that respect.

The Alliance Party is not here to endorse the perspective of either unionist party. It has its own perspective and comes at issues differently. It found itself able to back many more of the proposals that were brought forward than either of the unionist parties. Having said that, there were matters on which we shared common ground and concerns about the path that was being taken, particularly in respect of the scope of some matters.

Looking at the way ahead, we must build upon the European Convention on Human Rights, rather than seek to rip it up and start again.

A common basis to human rights law is required, not only throughout the UK but across the island of Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: The Member referred to a chasm of opinion in the forum. However, does he agree that, despite a formal failure by unionist parties to buy in to a bill of rights, there was wide-ranging agreement? At numerous points, the two unionist parties said that they agreed in principle with many proposals put forward by representatives of civic society. Was that not an important and constructive step?

Dr Farry: The engagement was constructive, and positions are now more clearly set out. However, several forum members, including those from the Alliance Party on some occasions, agreed to some points on principle but considered that they would be better addressed as matters of policy or on a UK-wide level. Some matters, such as rights to social security, simply cannot be introduced solely to Northern Ireland. Social security is, de facto, a UK-wide issue. A bill of rights cannot dictate that Northern Ireland have a different social security regime from the rest of the UK, because that would create huge anomalies.

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

Dr Farry: I thought that I was allowed an extra minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I generously gave you an extra three quarters of a minute.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If a Member allows an intervention, the convention is that he or she is allowed an extra full minute to speak. That has already been applied today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the convention allows for up to one additional minute and I was, as I said, generous.

Dr Farry: I hope that the convention will be consistently applied throughout the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that the Speaker is in control.

Mr Hamilton: If Mr Deputy Speaker carries on in that vein, I fear that he may deny Dr Farry his rights.

I have still not worked out what I did wrong to be appointed a member of the Bill of Rights Forum, for from my first meeting I realised that the process was doomed to fail. For the first couple of hours, the forum debated ad infinitum, as it had previously and has done thereafter, how to reach agreement. Members could not agree on how to agree.

Without such basics in place, it was evident that the process would not end well, and that led to sustained criticism of the forum. Throughout its lifetime, the forum was criticised for its unrepresentative membership, as has been mentioned today, and about the strange ideas that emanated from its working groups.

In defence of the Bill of Rights Forum, its chairman, Chris Sidoti, issued a statement outlining five reasons why Northern Ireland needs a bill of rights. I will

touch on a couple of those and consider why, by the chairman's barometer, the forum failed in its work. The final reason for a bill of rights, as outlined by Chris Sidoti, was:

"To protect the rights of everyone, equally"

In a previous debate, many Members condemned my colleague Michelle McIlveen for calling into question the impartiality and political leanings of certain members of the forum who were drawn from so-called civic society; some sought even to curtail her right to free speech in the Assembly. However, when the cookie crumbled and with the passage of time —

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member acknowledge that it was the Secretary of State who appointed representatives of civic society to the forum? It was his judgement call, and, in the main, he got it right.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention — he has helped to make my point. As Secretary of State, Peter Hain made those appointments. However, his judgement on that, and on several other matters, has regularly been called into question.

When the cookie crumbled and with the passage of time, Miss McIlveen's judgement was shown to be correct. When unionist parties adopted a different stance from nationalist parties in the forum, those members representing civic society were more than 50 times more likely to vote with the nationalist, rather than unionist, parties. That proves her point. Such an example is contained in the report's section on the right to communicate:

"Everyone has the right to communicate with any public authority and receive a response in Irish."

Ulster Scots and other languages are excluded. In that instance, the same people who cried out for parity of esteem, fairness and equality denied them to others. Even had the proposal included a reference to Ulster Scots, the DUP would not have supported it, because it would place too onerous and punitive a burden on public bodies in Northern Ireland. What about protecting "the rights of everyone, equally" in that instance?

What about Ulster Scots and other minority languages? As one would expect, the clause was supported by the SDLP and Sinn Féin. However, it was also supported by the children's sector; the disability sector; ethnic minorities; human-rights non-governmental organisations; sexual orientation groups; trade unions and the women's sector. Do all women have a homogenous view on the issue? Patently, they do not. Do all trade unionists agree with the clause? I seriously doubt that. Why did the representatives of those sectors endorse the clause? They did so because they do not reflect the views of the society that they were supposedly appointed to represent.

The second argument that the chairman put forward was that a bill of rights would deal with the legacy of the conflict. In that respect, it fails spectacularly. Inadequate attention has been given to its specific remit of:

"the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland".

Scant attention was given throughout the process to issues such as parading, culture, language and identity, which go to the heart of the problem. Instead, clause after clause was dedicated to issues that, although worthy pursuits, should be dealt with in the proper forum of the Assembly, through policy decisions. Issues such as outlawing, condemning and abolishing slavery were included, and inordinate amounts of time spent on those clauses, even though slavery was abolished in this part of the world 200 years ago.

Finally, forum members were called upon to support a bill of rights because it would cement peace. However, because there is no unity in respect of what has been proposed — and this is a warning to the Human Rights Commission, the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State — any attempt to legislate for a bill of rights on the basis of the Bill of Rights Forum's report would far from cement peace. Due to the nature of the country and its conflict, and where it is going at present, the enactment into law of any bill of rights that is based on the forum's report would be counterproductive and a backward step.

Miss McIlveen: The last time that I rose to speak on the bill of rights, I was accused of playing the man — or more accurately, the woman — and not the ball. Perhaps it is not good that I be so gender-specific, given the politically correct document that has now been published. Perhaps I should talk about playing the person, and not the inflated sphere of non-specific material. Today, Mr Attwood, wherever he may be, can rest easy in his seat, because my contribution to the debate will concentrate on the consultation document, rather than on the framers. However, I cannot resist an "I told you so." The report reads a little bit like the Communist manifesto, although it does not criticise religion as expressly.

My main concern with the consultation document is that it takes an extremely liberal interpretation — I am being kind when I describe it in that way — of:

"the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland".

As some Members may have gathered from my previous speech on this topic, I am unconvinced of the need for a bill of rights that is particular to Northern Ireland. Certainly, the document has not, in any way, assuaged those doubts.

I was drawn to the section on youth justice. I must say that I read the working group's recommendations —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: I will give way. However, I do not have much time.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that there is a clear commitment to a bill of rights in the Good Friday Agreement, which was supported by the electorate, North and South, and that, furthermore, that commitment was endorsed at the St Andrews negotiations?

Miss McIlveen: I believe that the electorate spoke on that matter at the last election.

As I said, I was drawn to the section on youth justice. I read the recommendations of the working group on criminal justice and victims. I was extremely fearful that the bill of rights would “do a Ruane” by removing youth justice altogether and leaving people guessing as to what would replace it. Instead, there is a bit of a fudge. It states:

“The age of criminal responsibility shall be raised in line with international human rights standards and best practice.”

What does that mean, and how is it relevant to:

“the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland”?

It means that the UN or another international body can dictate that the age of criminal responsibility should be 18 years and that Northern Ireland is obliged to follow suit, even if the majority of its people and elected representatives disagree. For the record, I do not believe that that is in any way relevant to:

“the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland”.

Phrases such as “in line with international standards” and “best practice” crop up several times, which is a grave concern.

I also found myself drawn to the following statement:

“Public authorities shall guarantee the right of all individuals to work, including to conduct a business, free from paramilitary activity, other violence and threats, harassment, extortion and blackmail.”

2.45 pm

As much as that is a noble wish, we must ask what form the guarantee will take. If the state is unable to prevent someone from being threatened by paramilitaries, will the state — or, in other words, the taxpayer — be forced to pay compensation? That provision strikes me as incredibly onerous and impossible for the state to live up to. The victim, after all, cannot pursue the paramilitary organisation.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way, and I hope that the Deputy Speaker will allocate her extra time.

Martina Anderson said that everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, water, energy, clothing and to continuous improvement in their living conditions. How will that work? What if someone loses his or her job in a recession? That is a clear example of how the document is not based in reality.

Miss McIlveen: The document also contains a recommendation that “reasonable legislative and other measures” must be introduced to prevent pollution. That is a blank cheque to lawyers to question what is intended by “reasonable”. Such ambiguities litter the document and will keep the legal fraternity in work for many years to come.

In the section on the right to a fair trial, there is a recommendation to reintroduce the right to silence without inferences. Why? If someone accused has evidence that could exonerate him or her, why can that not be provided at the earliest opportunity? Why wait until giving evidence at the trial, when the accused is fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the prosecution’s case, before providing such evidence? Why refuse to give evidence at all? It is proposed that a court should not consider those questions.

In the consultation document, there is a proposal to ensure:

“freedom from slavery and forced labour.”

Members will correct me if I am wrong: I am fairly sure that slavery was abolished in the United Kingdom in 1807. I do not recall any moves or demands to decriminalise it. Moreover, I am fairly sure that Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) prohibits slavery, and that that article is given effect by the Human Rights Act 1998.

We must remember that the remit of the Bill of Rights Forum was to produce something supplemental to the ECHR and addressing the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. The forum also considered the rights to life, liberty, security, freedom from torture and all cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, liberty and security of the person, privacy and family life, and so on — all of which are adequately covered by the ECHR.

From reading the document, it appears that issues proposed by both unionist parties, that were directly pertinent to the circumstances of Northern Ireland and would have supplemented the ECHR, were not adopted. Many issues that were opposed by both unionist parties, on the grounds that they were not Northern Ireland-specific, were adopted. It is clear that cross-community support was not obtained and, without it, the document fails in its primary purpose.

The effect of a great deal of what is proposed has not been carefully thought through. The document has a sense of something rushed — a bit like my speech — and swiftly cobbled together. This is a wish list: one should be careful what one wishes for.

Mr Elliott: At one level, the motion cannot reasonably be debated. It states an obvious fact: anyone who has read the report of the Bill of Rights Forum is aware that the recommendations debated by the forum do not have cross-community political support. Members opposite

may have difficulty in accepting that. Levels of support recorded in the report make that explicit. There is no cross-community political support for the model of a bill of rights contained in the recommendations of the report.

The Bill of Rights Forum was created with the intention of promoting consensus. Over a year later, we must accept and face the reality: there was, and is, no consensus that will allow the recommendations made by the forum to become legislation. It now falls to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to give advice to the Secretary of State on the contents of the supplementary rights.

We are all aware that the advice of the Commission is due to be presented to the Secretary of State in December this year. That means that the Commission has eight months to read, learn and inwardly digest the report of the forum. If, after that time, the Commission produces advice that is not built on the solid foundations of cross-community political support, the entire bill of rights process should be brought to an end. It goes without saying that any attempt by the Westminster Government to legislate for a bill of rights that lacks cross-community political support in Northern Ireland could fundamentally undermine political stability and community relations in the Province.

Like many Members, I firmly believe in civil and religious liberty for all. Throughout the centuries, the British constitution has progressively extended the realm of liberty in our society through ongoing reform. Codifying fundamental rights and liberties is far from alien to the British constitutional tradition. The Human Rights Act 1998 belongs to a long tradition that dates back, at least, to the Declaration of Rights in 1689. At each stage of constitutional reform, care has been taken to ensure that proposed reforms are compatible with the principle of parliamentary government and that they are acceptable to the broad swathe of society. The same test must now apply to any proposals for supplementary rights to the Human Rights Act.

Power, particularly over social and economic matters, must not be transferred from democratically elected representatives to the courts. The role of the courts is to interpret and apply law but not to make it, and any proposals for supplementary rights — particularly in our divided society — must have cross-community political support.

The Ulster Unionist Party continues to recognise the scope for rights that are supplementary to the Human Rights Act, which address circumstances that are particular to Northern Ireland. Two examples are the right to parade and the right to protest, which — few Members would disagree — have been among the most significant and divisive rights to be contested in recent years. In Northern Ireland, it is obvious that some people have attempted to deny those basic rights

to members of the Orange Institution. That makes it even more surprising that the final report of the Bill of Rights Forum failed to recommend any supplementary rights to article 11 of the Human Rights Act, which enshrines freedom of peaceful assembly. That glaring failure to address our circumstances must be reflected in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's advice to the Secretary of State.

For years, many citizens of this Province were denied the basic right of life through brutal murders by terrorists in our society. Much responsibility is now on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; it has the benefit of the experience of the Bill of Rights Forum, and it knows the recommendations and proposals that do not have cross-community political support. I hope that an important lesson has been learned.

Mr Shannon: I am a firm believer in rights: the right to life; the right to freedom of conscience; the right to freedom of religion; and the right to gather in celebration of culture. However, as those rights are already enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998, the creation of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland is unnecessary. It was decreed in the Belfast Agreement that the notion of a bill of rights should be examined in conjunction with the Human Rights Act that became law at that time.

The mair hit wus maide clear i the Bilfawst 'greement at a bill o' richts shud bae researched hit isnae yin bit certain at a bill o' richts shud bae brocht in an' haein raid the report an' tuk advice fae legal minds hit's gyely clear at this bill es hit hes been presented wudnae seek tae protect an' heft the apstannin fowk o' the Province.

Although it was made clear in the Belfast Agreement that a bill of rights should be researched, it is by no means certain that there should be one in Northern Ireland. Having read the report and taken advice from legal minds, the proposed bill of rights would not protect and aid the upstanding folk of the Province. Instead, it is designed by one sector of the community and is divisive, because the positive discrimination against the pro-Union people of the Province is apparent throughout.

I am not alone in holding that view — it is held by most unionists, including those who are not noted for being politically minded. For example, in a publication, the Church of Ireland stated that the proposed bill of rights was divisive and detracted from the Union.

Mr A Maginness: The Church of Ireland has not taken a position on the proposed bill of rights and definitely has not opposed it. There was an editorial in 'The Church of Ireland Gazette' that expressed a position on the proposed bill of rights. However, the Church of Ireland made it clear that that did not represent its official view.

Mr Shannon: Ultimately, the people made their opinion clear, and they used 'The Church of Ireland Gazette' to do so. That editorial spoke for many of the people who belong to that Church, whether Members like it or not. Legal specialists have touted the view that it is unnecessary for Northern Ireland to have a separate bill of rights when the rest of the United Kingdom is merely looking into the possibility of adopting one.

Mr Ross: The Member made reference to a possible United Kingdom bill of rights. The Green Paper 'The Governance of Britain' states:

"this would involve a significant shift from Parliament to the judiciary in making decisions about public spending and, at least implicitly, levels of taxation."

Is that not a dangerous precedent to set? Does the Member agree that a bill of rights will encourage lawyers to make frivolous claims on behalf of their clients?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention and clear words, and, with graciousness, Mr Deputy Speaker, I believe that he has afforded me an extra 60 seconds.

The Belfast Agreement allowed for discussion on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland because of our particular circumstances. However, I believe that that was merely an attempt to further the nationalist cause, and, for that reason, a bill of rights is unnecessary.

There are a couple of reasons that I, and the majority of unionists, find it impossible to support the bill of rights. I cannot support a bill of rights that would allow young men who almost killed a constituent of mine in Newtownards to walk free because they were 17 years old, and not 18 — the age at which the bill of rights suggests that a person can be considered to be responsible for their crimes. That is not acceptable. Those young men knew what they were doing. They are going through a process that has been designed for people of their age, which will help them to understand what is acceptable, and it is hoped that they will come through the other side of that as men who are ready to give to their community, and not take away. An individual's right to life must be protected, but the bill of rights gives the wrongdoer more rights than the victim. I cannot support that.

I am also concerned that the unborn child's right to life is not protected in the proposed bill of rights. That right is definitely impinged upon, because the bill of rights would allow for the right to "reproductive health". I have been informed by individuals with knowledge of the law that that can be interpreted as a right to abort an unborn child. I cannot and will not support that, and I am not the only Member who feels that way.

During a recent Assembly debate on abortion, the House voted overwhelmingly to maintain our strong anti-abortion laws. I am a man of my word, and it is

hoped that all Members are men and women of their word and that they will not go back on that promise to support the cause of the unborn child. That would be unconscionable.

There are many other specific matters relating to the proposed bill of rights that are covered by the Human Rights Act 1998. The bill of rights is divisive in its composition and nature, and it does not uphold the basic rights that are required to make Northern Ireland a prosperous society.

Cross-community support was not achieved for the 41 substantive proposals, and only seven of the 216 secondary recommendations received cross-community support. How can a bill of rights that did not receive cross-community backing be progressed? It cannot. I urge the Secretary of State to take that into account and put the bill of rights in its proper place — the bin.

Mr Beggs: I served on the children's working group of the Bill of Rights Forum, and, from the early days, I was surprised that the group adopted such a maximalist approach. When I, as a member of the politicians' grouping within the forum, expressed my concern that attempts were being made to take decision-making away from the political process and to create a legal or courtroom-based decision-making process, I was ignored. It was strange that my concerns — and those that were raised by another unionist — were ignored by the grouping that was dominated by non-politicians.

Consensus and stability in Northern Ireland have been achieved by our listening to other communities, being aware of their concerns and moving forward in a manner that ensures cross-community support.

From the beginning, alarm bells that should have been heeded were ignored, and I thought that it did not bode well for the process.

3.00 pm

It is strange that Alban Maginness said that the forum was established as a parallel process because of a lack of political consensus. If the unionist community had wanted to achieve its aims and had decided to ignore the views of the nationalist community and proceed, with the support of the statutory system, to impose a new method of governance in Northern Ireland, how would the nationalist community have responded?

Mr A Maginness: The Member paints a lurid picture of political exclusion. However, the forum was inclusive; five political parties attended, two of which were unionist. The parties outlined their views firmly and robustly and were not excluded in any way.

Mr Beggs: The forum failed to listen carefully to the concerns of others and to proceed on a basis that would ensure cross-community support. The forum ignored the concerns of unionist representatives and the unionist community and produced a report. As I

stated previously, imagine if that had happened in reverse. Imagine that the unionist community decided to ignore the wishes of the nationalist community and imposed a new political system in Northern Ireland that removed much of the decision-making process from the Assembly — and, perhaps, Ministers and Departments — and transferred that power to the courts. It is a joke. We are moving towards a system whereby the country would be governed by the courts.

Rather than helping the most vulnerable people in our society, such a system would drain valuable resources, because more resources would be put into Departments and agencies to examine decisions from a social, economic and human rights perspective. More resources would be consumed by lawyers in statutory agencies and by individuals who take their discontent to the courts to decide whether they receive a service. The legislation provides no additional services and places limited funds into fat-cat lawyers' hands. That would adversely affect disadvantaged people in our community.

There has been a failure to recognise the real politics involved in decision-making and the importance of living within a budget. There is a proposal to progress legislation, including social and economic rights, so that, in the future, the Budget process could be determined by the courts. Therefore, what is the purpose of the Assembly? The report's failure to recognise, and reflect, the concerns of the unionist community is a mistake.

An area of interest in my working group — which is, to a degree, reflected in the main report — is children and armed conflict. I expected that to concentrate on ensuring that children are not abused by paramilitaries. However, when I examined the outcome, that section of the report prevented 16-year-old British citizens from joining the British Army, Navy or Air Force. The report is an abuse of the unionist community and will never gain cross-community support. The SDLP amendment attempts to sidestep that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: At the risk of being rebuked, the Member's time is up.

Ms Lo: Having served on the Bill of Rights Forum, I wish to begin by reflecting on some of its successes. All five parties that are represented in the Assembly took part in the forum to a greater or lesser extent, and participated in the final round of discussions to arrive at a final document.

First, it is fair to say that all five parties were committed to a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. The diversity of opinion centred mostly on the format and the content of such a bill of rights. Secondly, we might reflect that if we were guilty of anything, it was of setting the expectation level too high. All the participants worked hard, beyond the call of duty, including the observers who represented civic society even more widely.

However, those participants were unable to reach an agreed outcome that would have been acceptable to the Assembly, voting on a cross-community basis.

That was, perhaps, an unreasonable expectation. It could be argued that the foundations now exist to achieve the desired outcome. However, the Alliance Party shared the concern — raised consistently in the working groups and the forum itself — that not enough attention was paid from the outset to solving basic areas of disagreement on a cross-community and cross-party basis.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that concerns were raised by the children's working group, but were ignored? In that respect, there was no intervention to indicate the need for cross-community support.

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

Ms Lo: All the concerns that were raised were listened to and recorded. That is all that was asked for.

The objective was to achieve agreement between civic society and political representatives, which is no easy task, bearing in mind that we all live in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party supported the vast majority of the proposals in the report, with some exceptions, such as the attempt to write a two-community model into the bill of rights, which we opposed outright.

There were other serious concerns, such as the age of criminal responsibility, which were best held over to be dealt with in domestic law. Reproductive rights have a place in a bill of rights, but would never achieve the required political agreement without a compromise. The Human Rights Commission must now apply itself to the task of achieving that political agreement. It is in that context that we support the motion. I am sympathetic to the sentiments of the amendment, but the task in hand now must be to seek the political agreement that will allow us all to make progress.

I must reflect on one earlier comment. The Alliance Party's bottom line throughout has been the fundamental right to self-identification, accepted universally, but, apparently, not in Northern Ireland. The failure to accept that right amounts to an attempt to sectarianise the bill of rights, which we reject totally.

The Alliance Party remains committed to a bill of rights that seeks to enhance our democracy, not to replace it. We want a bill of rights that the people of Northern Ireland can support. The motion passes that responsibility not just to the Human Rights Commission, but to this Assembly, as representatives of the people. It would make a mockery of devolution to suggest that British politicians should legislate on this matter if the Northern Ireland Assembly cannot agree on it.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Like my colleague Alban Maginness, I welcome and acknowledge the constructive engagement by the unionist parties in the Bill of Rights Forum. I

also welcome this afternoon's more mature and measured debate compared with a similar debate on a previous occasion.

In his opening remarks, Mr Kennedy set out the context for the Bill of Rights Forum, in so far as its task was to examine rights supplementary to those contained in the European Convention on Human Rights. Some Members said that they had difficulty in understanding some of the forum's paper. The recommendations acknowledge that a better way of setting out the paper would be to establish the European standard and then set out the supplementary rights, with an emphasis on the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.

It is fitting that the Human Rights Commission has determined that it will hand over its advice to the Secretary of State by 10 December, as that is the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We must all reflect on the circumstances around the need for a bill of rights in the European Convention on Human Rights. It came about as a result of the two horrific world wars of the twentieth century, and our bill of rights has come about as a result of 40 years of conflict.

As my colleague pointed out, Northern Ireland needs a bill of rights because there were human rights violations in the past. A bill of rights will protect not only nationalists and unionists, but all the people of Northern Ireland. I hope that all parties will buy into it, and I note that some Members said that they have nothing against a bill of rights.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member acknowledge that the greatest abuse of human rights during the Troubles came from the republican movement, which maimed and murdered more people than any other group in this society?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his intervention. One of the absolute rights in any bill of rights is the right to life. The Member is quite right: paramilitaries and, in some cases, the state, took away the right to life of many of our citizens in the North and added to the conflict. Indeed, during the debate on the bill of rights, the SDLP looked to the rights of the families of the disappeared and the continued practice of exiling people. We have all said that that is unacceptable.

Although the Ulster Unionist Party did not endorse many of the supplementary rights in the forum's report, it agreed in principle to an extensive number of recommendations. That is progress over previous Human Rights Consortium debates.

I welcome Sinn Féin's support for the amendment. Martina Anderson highlighted economic and social rights in her contribution. Many Members seem either deliberately to misrepresent economic and social rights or to be ignorant of the fact that they are about progressive realisation, not about handing over power. That is

already being determined in the European Court of Justice. It is not a novel idea that we plucked out of thin air — it is happening already. Surely all Members want to use their power to build a better future and a better life for all our citizens.

It was striking that many unionist Members focused on the right to parade rather than on the right to good housing or health; they seem to be obsessed. Some Members reflected on the Irish language. The Irish language is recognised as a minority language in Europe; Ulster Scots is not. That is a fact, and we cannot do anything about it.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member acknowledge that the recognition of minority languages in Northern Ireland is a matter for the United Kingdom Government? In its ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages both Ulster Scots and Irish were recognised as regional minority languages, along with a range of languages in Great Britain.

3.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Unfortunately, there were no proposals from either the DUP or the Ulster Unionist Party to include Ulster Scots in the recommendations. To say that this is a matter best left to Westminster is to do it an injustice, because legislation is being brought forward in the UK that will violate existing human rights standards — provision for 60-day detention and the introduction of ID cards. Is that really the road we want to go down? Even the Labour Party Back-Benchers are not going to support their Prime Minister in that context. Those are simple facts.

We want a progressive realisation — which Alban Maginness clearly articulated — that the Human Rights Commission has a statutory responsibility to build the best society; build the best human rights framework for the future, and give advice on that to the Secretary of State. The buy-in of the representatives of civic society, who made representations and contributed greatly to the forum's debates, reflects a very wide range of people who designate themselves as unionist, nationalist and neither.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of the Bill of Rights Forum. As we are now coming to the conclusion of the process, it would be churlish of me not to recognise the contribution and help that was provided by the forum's secretariat and the many legal advisers. Some constructive work was carried out on technical issues on which there was agreement. However, when I look back at the Bill of Rights Forum, I do so with a fundamental disappointment at its results — not with a great deal of surprise, unfortunately, because the process was fundamentally flawed.

At the beginning of the process, a decision was taken by the Secretary of State to appoint a group of people to represent — as he saw it — civil society and

different groups within civil society. It is, perhaps, not important to question whether those who represented various sections of civil society truly represented everyone in those sections. For instance, it would be impossible for someone to represent all women or all older people. However, with the supposed representation of those sections, what we got was a panoply of sectional interests emerging.

I do not blame the representatives of civil society for pushing their particular agendas; in many ways, they were only performing their job in that regard. They backed each other with a level of solidarity that would have made the three musketeers look divisive. Time after time each representative section of civil society, with the possible exception of the business and Church sectors, simply supported one another in relation to the proposed bill of rights. The end result, inevitably — and again it was no fault of the representatives of civil society — was that a whole stable of hobby horses was released. The deafening clatter of the hooves of those hobby horses rings throughout this document, the result being that it displays a scattergun approach.

We have the situation in which many areas that fall outside the forum's remit find their way into the final report. There was a lack of focus on the key issues that are particular to Northern Ireland, and the result is that we have something that goes massively beyond the forum's remit. As stated by the proposer of the motion, the bill of rights is supposed to deal with supplementary rights that are particular to Northern Ireland. However, looking through the report there is a large number of proposed inclusions to the bill of rights that do not fall into that category. As a result of that, and because of the vast amount of ground that was covered, we ended up with a situation where there was insufficient time to focus on areas on which we could try to reach some degree of consensus. The end result was that, leaving aside the technical issues, there were 41 proposals outlined in the main body of the report — which dealt with which rights should be included — of which none received cross-community support in its entirety. None of those 41 substantive recommendations achieved complete consensus. As Jim Shannon said, only seven of the 216 secondary recommendations in the report received cross-community support.

In the Assembly we have been consistently lectured that the days of unionists as a majority imposing something on the nationalist community are clearly gone. We are not in that position. Crude majoritarianism, we are told, is not something that can ever happen again. Yet the opponents of the motion seem to want to replace crude majoritarianism with crude minoritarianism, and have a situation in which, despite the lack of cross-community support, something can be imposed upon the people of Northern Ireland from Westminster. This

is not Zimbabwe; we are not in a position where a minority can impose upon people.

On a subject as sensitive as a bill of rights, we must make progress on the basis that both communities will be able to buy into it, and the problem with the report is that it is not a document that both communities — or, indeed, their representatives — can buy into.

The proposer of the motion mentioned the importance — and absence — of cross-community support, and, in relation to Northern Ireland's particular circumstances, the need for the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Alban Maginness spoke about the gaping gulf between the political parties, and said that that is why a bill of rights is required. Sadly, the net effect of this process has been to widen that gulf. Indeed, because many people in civil society took a particular view, the political parties have not bound together; rather, they have diverged.

Mr Maginness also said that a bill of rights has been a demand in Northern Ireland for many years, and that it was mentioned in the Belfast Agreement. The point is that since the Belfast Agreement, the European Convention on Human Rights has been incorporated into domestic law under the Human Rights Act 1998. We are not operating in a vacuum; the human rights agenda is already here, and there are adequate protections.

In addition, I take exception to the idea that a bill of rights would guarantee peace, because, although I am sure that he did not intend it, the implication is that the absence of a bill of rights would provide some level of justification for people on either side turning to violence, and that is unacceptable.

Nelson McCausland raised the matter of cultural identity in language, and those are the types of issues on which we should have concentrated our time.

Dolores Kelly later mentioned —

Mr McCausland: Does the Member agree that in relation to peaceful assembly, which is one of the most basic human rights, it was interesting that both the SDLP and Sinn Féin opposed the inclusion of the most recent, comprehensive and coherent guidelines from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and that that illustrates their lack of interest in human rights?

Mr Weir: That is one of the many disappointments in the report.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I am sorry, Alban, but I do not have time, and I want to fit as much into my 10 minutes as possible. As I understand it —

Mr A Maginness: The SDLP supported the right to peaceful assembly at —

Mr Weir: I simply say that people can read the report for themselves, and make up their own minds.

Dolores Kelly wondered why unionists seem to be obsessed with parades, rather than other matters. Perhaps that is because, in the bill of rights' remit, the parading issue — whatever one's opinion might be about it — is fundamentally particular to Northern Ireland's circumstances, whereas economic and social rights are, by nature, universal.

I took grave exception to Martina Anderson's lecture about standing up for the rights of the unionist working class. For the past 30 or 40 years, her party's military wing has been responsible for denying the most basic human rights to many unionist working-class people.

She mentioned social security, which, as Stephen Farry and others said, it is unwise to tamper with, because such tampering would destroy the parity principle and actually make people vulnerable to changes.

Nevertheless, we agree on a range of issues that she mentioned. The DUP wants adequate living standards and housing, but those matters are not particular to Northern Ireland — they apply throughout the world. Secondly, they are policy issues, and that point has been the basis for a fundamental misunderstanding.

Mrs Anderson said that a hungry child is hungry whether he or she is on the Falls or the Shankill, in the Bogside or the Waterside, and I completely agree. However, it is strange that she chose those examples, because, in 'An Phoblacht', she used slightly different language. She stated:

"A hungry child is a hungry child, whether they live in Belfast or Ballymun, Dundalk or Derry."

It is also true that a hungry child is hungry in Birmingham or Banff, and that argument proves that such rights are not particular to Northern Ireland; they are universal and beyond the remit of a bill of rights.

Stephen Farry dealt with the fundamental issue of the nature and format of the Bill of Rights Forum, and said that it would be ludicrous for its recommendations to be imposed on us. A major problem with the forum's proposals is that they are not supplementary to the European Convention on Human Rights, but are, once again, an attempt, in effect, to rip it up and rewrite it, and that falls beyond the forum's remit.

Simon Hamilton highlighted the forum's scattergun approach. Michelle McIlveen spoke about a range of issues, particularly in relation to youth justice, where we have been left with several ambiguities.

Tom Elliott highlighted the fact that, ultimately, a solid foundation of cross-community support is needed. Jim Shannon argued that protecting many rights is unnecessary because they are already covered by the remit of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Roy Beggs talked about the dangers of adopting a maximalist approach and replacing accountable democratic rule in an Assembly with a judge-based position. The danger of that from a budgetary perspective is that the Executive would have to choose between funding items that are enshrined in a bill of rights and those that are not, instead of being free to make choices. To echo what was said by a representative of Sinn Féin in another document, the Government may be compelled to take certain actions. Therefore, the Government may be forced to choose between putting resources into worthy causes that are covered by the bill of rights and equally worthy causes that are not.

Anna Lo made the important point that not enough time was taken to resolve the differences of opinion. If we try to take forward a bill of rights that lacks cross-community support — as is the case with a range of other issues in Northern Ireland — we are simply doomed to failure. It is time that the opponents of the motion woke up and smelt the coffee, and realised that, rather than making this divisive proposal, we need to find something around which we can all unite.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will Members please return to their seats? A mistake has occurred in the system. Therefore, we will re-run the Division.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 33; Noes 51.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Gallagher and Mr McGlone.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, 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 B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Kennedy and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern at the lack of cross-community support for the recommendations contained in the Report of the Bill of Rights Forum; and strongly urges the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to ensure cross-community support for its advice to the Secretary of State.

3.45 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes.

Mrs Long: I thank Members for their support for my bringing this issue to the Floor. I also thank the Regional Development Minister for making himself available for this debate, despite having had an extremely busy day. This issue may not be on the same scale as the recent news about public transport, but it is nevertheless important to constituents of East Belfast. From that perspective, I appreciate the Minister's attendance.

The issue is relatively straightforward. When Kingsdale Park was made adopted land in May 1959, the pavements, for some reason, were omitted. I have discussed this matter at length with residents and departmental officials, and it appears that there was no particular reason for that omission. It was not the case that the pavements were substandard in some way, or did not meet the right design guidance for adoption. It appears that that was simply an omission.

An almost unique situation has been created, because the public road is the responsibility of the Roads Service, and is adopted, but the adjacent pavement is not. Therefore, the responsibility for maintenance of that pavement lies with the residents. That is a particularly invidious situation, because people use the main public thoroughfare and park their cars with two wheels on the pavement, thereby causing damage. People view that thoroughfare as a public road, but the residents are left with the bill for damage.

As far as I am aware, the pavement has not been repaired since 1959 — it certainly has not been repaired since 1980. There are defects in the pavement. I understand that Roads Service and the Department for Regional Development are not in a position to seek out unadopted pieces of road and pavement, and adopt them all. That would create a precedent, which could result in difficulties.

However, as I outlined, Kingsdale Park represents an exceptional situation. On that basis, it should be possible, on this occasion, for Roads Service to reconsider its opinion, and for the Minister to intervene. The pavement could be adopted, or some other redress could be sought to alleviate the burden that the residents currently bear.

Most of the residents of Kingsdale Park are elderly. Many of them bought their properties when they were first built. From their perspective, repair of the pavement represents a major financial pressure. The residents also bear a degree of legal liability in respect of the potential for accidents on the pavement, etc. That causes residents a great deal of distress.

It appears that the current situation is the result of an administrative oversight, and is therefore completely different to the one that often pertains in new developments, whereby developers deliberately create private roads and unadopted areas to leave them in the ownership of those who purchase the properties. Given that the pavement appears to meet all of the conditions for adoption — bar its current condition — there is a degree of exception to this situation.

I am sure that the Minister has more accurate figures, but, from what I have been able to ascertain, there is only one other public road in Belfast that is immediately adjacent to an unadopted pavement.

Without labouring the point, I ask the Minister to reconsider the decision. Other elected representatives from the area have also been lobbied by the residents, who are extremely stressed and concerned by the situation. Although I accept Road Service's argument, I reiterate that this case is unique, and that would allow a precedent not to be created.

In the context of the overall roads budget, the cost of repairs is a relatively small amount of money. However, it is a significant burden for the individual residents. Kingsdale Park is not a short, five-house street; there is a considerable number of properties along the road. Making repairs is a significant piece of work for the residents to undertake.

I will not labour the issue any further, and I do not intend to use the 15 minutes to which I am entitled. I am happy to make the appeal and ask the Minister to give the matter further consideration.

Lord Browne: I wholeheartedly agree with Naomi Long, but I will not go into the technicalities that Naomi has gone into.

Although the street is a cul-de-sac, it consists of 72 dwellings. It is a mature area with many elderly residents. On two recent occasions, I visited the area and spoke to the residents. A partially sighted resident is very apprehensive about going outside, even in the hours of daylight; the other elderly residents will not go out during the hours of darkness. Many of the area's footpaths are in an advanced state of decay. One can see the loose chippings and the depressions that have led to ponding in many areas. Last summer, several houses experienced serious flooding.

The state of the footpaths in Kingsdale Park is unacceptable. We have heard the reasons why it is a

very unusual situation — the footpaths have not been adopted even though the carriageway has. The residents deserve to have the footpath replaced or upgraded. It is unusual that the road surface is made of cement; I do not know how many areas in East Belfast still have cement roads. The condition of the road, as well as of the footpaths, is poor. The lighting has not been replaced for many years, so the area is in need of upgrading.

I appreciate that considerable money and investment is needed to manage and preserve our roads and pavements, but I feel strongly that the residents of Kingsdale Park, through no fault of their own, have had to endure many years of neglect. It is a mature area and many of the houses are 50 or more years old. In the past, some repairs were made to the pavement until it was pointed out that the road was unadopted. Steps must be taken to upgrade the area and to have the footpaths adopted. I do not want to go back into the history of the area and trace the ownerships, as many years have passed since then and it would be unfair to expect the residents to plough through mountains of red tape with officials in order to get the road adopted. I appeal to the Minister to find some method of fast-tracking the process of having the road adopted.

As Naomi said, we do not want to labour the point, but the area has been neglected and it is only fair to the residents, many of whom are elderly, that the area is given full consideration.

Sir Reg Empey: There is little point in repeating everything that has been said by the two Members who have spoken; I agree with their comments. However, I ask the Minister to consider the issue from a health and safety perspective. I understand the nervousness about the idea of adopting unadopted entries, pavements and roads in the city, and I will comment on that in a moment. However, the health-and-safety aspect ought to take precedent over some of the other concerns that the Department for Regional Development might have.

It has been pointed out that anyone who is unsighted or partially sighted has great difficulty walking on those footpaths. Much of the damage to the footpaths has been caused by visitors to the area who, over the years, have parked their cars on the pavement, and erosion is responsible for the rest. We understand that. The question is: what happens now?

I want to widen the scope of the debate a little and focus on the many unadopted areas in Belfast. Most of those areas would have originally been owned by the occupants of individual properties under old leasehold arrangements. The site map shows that those properties normally extend over what we would call the "back entries". Many of the properties were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they each have an individual piece of land in an entry that is under separate ownership. The council has now reached the

stage where it has withdrawn refuse collection services from some unadopted areas, as it does not believe that it is safe to access those entries because they are overgrown with weeds and are full of potholes, and so on.

Similarly, residents often find it impossible to operate alley-gating schemes because they cannot always get permission for them — it takes only one resident to object. Certainly, Belfast City Council colleagues may remember the battle that we had to get the site of the current Finvoy Street Walkway Community Centre. It took years to secure that site because we had to vest every wee bit of land.

Clearly, my proposal would have financial implications, but perhaps the moves to change the powers of local authorities could present an opportunity to tidy up the matter. It makes no sense to have bits and pieces of roads, footpaths, back entries, and so on, in all sorts of different ownership. Every ratepayer is entitled to the same services. If an individual's property backs or fronts onto an area that is unadopted, that person will receive less of a service than everyone else. Council workers will not go on to private property, which is what unadopted land is. The matter may go back to the original estate company that bought the site, or it could involve other concerns.

I want the Minister to address the problems with footpaths in Kingsdale Park, but I want him to consider the wider issues of principle throughout the city. The east of the city seems to have a greater density of those unadopted patches of land than other parts of Belfast. Naomi Long has made a good argument today, and I thank her for securing the debate. I hope that the Minister can respond positively.

Mr Newton: I am the fourth Member to speak in the debate, so there is not much more that can be said about footpaths in East Belfast. That said, I should point out that the situation is complex, as other Members have said. The problem has arisen for historical reasons, and if there is to be a solution to it, it is surely not down to the ratepayers and taxpayers who live in the area to find it. It would be well nigh impossible for them to do so.

Anyone who walks over the streets in East Belfast will know what they are like. My colleague Wallace Browne and I have tramped the area in the run-up to numerous elections, and we hope to tramp them again in the not-too-distant future.

4.00 pm

The point has been made that it is a health-and-safety issue, and it is one which, I say to the Minister, must be addressed. It is, too, a health and safety issue that is getting worse. Much of the damage has been created not through the fault of any of the homeowners, but by heavy-goods vehicles from the private and, indeed, the statutory sector as they ply their trade on the street. In

addition, as contractors have gone about their business — for example, building extensions to homes — that has caused continuing damage to the footpaths.

Kingsdale Park is a stable area. The vast majority of the residents have great pride in their homes. There are two social extremes: an ageing population and young families. I welcome the fact that this issue has been brought before the Assembly and that the Minister is present. Like others, I hope that the Minister can address the matter in a positive manner.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I note the comments and concerns. People have acknowledged that this is a complex situation and one towards which we would all like to be sympathetic and to find a solution. Nevertheless, it is a difficult situation and one that brings with it a degree of precedent.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the situation in Kingsdale Park, and I have asked my officials to take a note of any specific issues raised and to try to address those for Members following this debate.

By way of background, in relation to the adoption of private streets, I will summarise the legislative position. Under article 9 of the Private Streets Order 1980, as amended, a road can be considered for adoption where the Department is of the opinion that the street should become a public road, that the majority of frontagers so request it, and the street is first brought up to adoption standard at the expense of the frontagers, or owners, to ensure that the road is fit and proper to become a public road.

Article 9(3) of the 1980 Order advises that, where the Department is not satisfied that the street is in all respects fit and proper to become a public road, it may, in exceptional circumstances of such a kind as the Department may determine, declare the street to be a public road. The difficulty with that — and I believe that that was one of the issues mentioned by Naomi Long — is that if the Department did declare, in exceptional circumstances, that a street should become a public road, it is obliged immediately to bring it up to standard. That then becomes a resources issue and a priority issue for Kingsdale Park as opposed to other areas in Belfast City Council area and the Roads Service's eastern division area.

Article 9(5) of the 1980 Order makes a provision for the applicant to request a hearing with the Planning Appeals Commission to appeal against a decision to refuse to adopt. Under article 9(6), the Department will consider any recommendations made by the commission; and under article 9(7), the subsequent decision of the Department shall be final.

All Members will be aware of unadopted roads and private laneways in their areas. In 2002, there were an estimated 62 km of unadopted private laneways

throughout the North. There have been many requests to have those adopted into the public-road network. However, very few of them are fit for adoption. At 2002 prices, it has been estimated that it would cost approximately £14 million to bring all private laneways and roads in the North up to the necessary standard for adoption. That estimate excluded the cost of land, service alterations and accommodation works, which would substantially increase that sum.

With regard to Kingsdale Park, the Roads Service adoption records indicate that the carriageway was adopted by Belfast Corporation on 19 May 1959. Unusually, the associated footways were specifically excluded from the adoption. Unfortunately, there is no indication as to why they were omitted from the adoption at that time. There are some 74 properties in Kingsdale Park, and I fully appreciate that it is an unusual situation whereby pedestrian access to residential properties is dependent on privately owned footways alongside a substantial public street. My Department is, therefore, content in principle to adopt those footways providing that they are brought up to an acceptable standard for adoption.

For the reasons that I have already covered in the legislative requirements that are imposed on the Department, I am sorry that I must confirm the Department's position that the responsibility for carrying out the necessary improvements and repairs to bring the subject footways up to adoption standards, lies with the frontagers — that is, the residents.

I sympathise fully with the arguments that have been put forward today. The situation is unusual, although there are many unique situations, and people can find them all across the North when discussing precedent. I will not close my mind to other ideas that might be advanced or explored on the matter; however, I have stated the position in which we find ourselves under the legislation. If the Department were to adopt the footpaths before they were brought up to standard, it would be required to bring them up to standard immediately.

Reg Empey made a point about health-and-safety regulations. Again, as I said, I am prepared to examine any ideas, but most unadopted roads will raise health and safety issues for people who wish to walk or drive across them.

Perhaps there is merit in looking to the future. I am not offering a solution, but the discussions on the review of public administration include the public-realm issue and the responsibilities that will be transferred to local government. Perhaps there will be opportunities to sort out some anomalies during the discussions on the transfer. That may offer a way forward, although not specifically in this case.

There are many anomalies, and, although Reg Empey referred specifically to Belfast, the same situation pertains

across the North, and one can find anomalies in public-realm issues in cases where roads or footpaths were not adopted. Perhaps in the discussions on the transfer of public-realm functions to local government, we can kick ideas around and find ways to reduce anomalies. As I say, I am willing to consider ideas.

That said, Roads Service is always willing to provide whatever assistance is required with guidance and advice on adoption standards. However, at present, the cost of design work must be borne by frontagers.

I realise that I can provide no immediate solution, although I share Members' concerns. I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report, so that if I have missed any points that were raised, I will write to the Members concerned.

Adjourned at 4.07 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 14 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr McCausland: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate on the bill of rights in the House on 8 April, a Member was asked to give way and refused, and said so in English. On at least two occasions, in response to Alastair Ross and Roy Beggs, the Member addressed them in a few words of Irish, which I understand to mean “sit down”. First, is it in order for a Member who is speaking to tell another Member to sit down? Is it not the role of the Speaker to tell a Member to resume his seat?

Secondly, is it not the convention that if a Member speaks in Irish or in any other language, that they should provide a translation of what has been said, which was not done in this case? Considering that the people whom the Member was telling in Irish to sit down do not speak Irish, it was pointless for her to do so: they would not have had a clue what she was saying.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. It is the job of the Chair to indicate to Members to sit down. I have said to Members that whatever language they decide to speak in, it is vitally important that it is translated into English after they speak.

Ms Anderson: I have noted that point, and in future I will speak in English as well as in Irish. On a further point of order: will the Speaker clarify whether the comments made by Gregory Campbell during the debate on the lack of investment in the Derry railway line, when Mr Mark Durkan and Mr Campbell were covering each other's backs, are in line with parliamentary language?

In response to an intervention by Mark Durkan, Mr Campbell said:

“I thank the Member for the intervention. I can confirm that I did not work under any restrictions”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p174, col 2]*.

The Member must have been asleep. He went on to say:

“Anyone who declares that I did is blatantly telling lies, but that would not be the first time, nor would it be the first crime that they had committed.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p174, col 2]*.

Minister Conor Murphy gave an accurate account supporting what I had said and was not challenged by the MPs who are now desperately trying to cover each other's backs. Given that I did speak the truth, is Mr Campbell afforded protection by this Chamber when wrongly accusing me when he is blatantly covering his back?

Mr Speaker: As the Member will know, I dealt with that issue at the time. I have looked at the Hansard report, and Mr Campbell used the words:

“Anyone who declares that I did is blatantly telling lies, but that would not be the first time, nor would it be the first crime that they had committed.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p174, col 2]*.

The comments did not refer to one specific Member. I refer the Member to the Hansard report.

I remind Members that it is unparliamentary to accuse other Members of telling lies. I dealt with the matter at the time, and I could not have been any clearer. I have considered the report of the debate, and I do not consider that anything unparliamentary was said. No further action is necessary. However, I ask Members, again, to look at the Hansard report. It is a different issue, however, if a Member deliberately accuses another Member of telling lies.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I beg to move

That the Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations are being made under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Order) 2005, which is commonly referred to as SENDO.

A Cheann Comhairle, tá forálacha san Ordú a dhéanann é mídhleathach do fhorais cáilíochtaí ginearálta — nó forais dámhachtana mar a thugtar orthu in amanna — leatrom a dhéanamh ar iarrthóirí atá faoi mhíchumas agus iad ag dámhachtain cáilíochtaí.

SEUDO contains provisions that make it illegal for general qualification bodies — or awarding bodies, as they are sometimes known — to discriminate against candidates with a disability when awarding qualifications.

A separate, but linked, set of regulations with a complex title — the Special Educational Needs and Disability (General Qualification Bodies) (Relevant Qualifications, Reasonable Steps and Physical Features) Regulations 2008 — has also been made. Those regulations were subject to the negative resolution procedure and came into operation from 1 April.

I appreciate that the proposed regulations are technical in nature and that a limited time has been allocated for their debate, but they are important. They provide another opportunity for the Assembly to demonstrate its commitment to promoting equality for all — in this case, for young people who have disabilities.

Mar is eol do Chomhaltaí, i gcroílár na físe atá agam don oideachas tá tiomantas don chomhionannas agus don chothroime agus rún daingean a chinntiú go bhfuil an deis chéana ag ár n-aos óg uile éirí sa saol agus a barr a gcumais a bhaint amach.

As Members will know, my vision for education has, at its core, a commitment to equality and fairness and a determination to make sure that all young people have the same opportunity to succeed and to reach their potential. The regulations cover the enforcement mechanisms and procedures for making claims, and they require awarding bodies to make reasonable adjustments to leased premises. The latter issue was included to maintain consistency with the regulations for bodies that award professional or trade qualifications.

In the main, it is procedural, because most general qualifications are taken in centres such as schools, colleges or other community-based venues.

The regulations will mean that the enforcement of claims against general qualifications bodies will be available through the county court system. Other disability legislation in respect of employment and professional and trade qualifications is enforceable through employment tribunals, but the nature of general qualifications means that it is more appropriate to enforce those rights through the county court system.

Ní rachfar i gcionn an fhorfheidhmithe seo ach mar rogha dheiridh, agus ní dócha go mbainfear feidhm as na cumhachtaí seo ró-mhinic. Oibríonn forais cáilíochtaí ginearálta go crua le cothrom na Féinne a chur ar fáil do gach mac léinn, agus ní dhéanfaidh na rialacháin seo ach cur leis an dea-cheachtas atá ann cheana féin.

That form of enforcement is a last resort and I do not expect to see those powers used very often. General qualification bodies already work hard to provide fair opportunities to all students and these regulations will serve to underscore the good practice that has already developed. The local qualifications body, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, which is also known as CCEA, has advised that it is already fully compliant with the draft regulations.

The Joint Council for Qualifications, which represents the qualification bodies, has set up a resolution procedure with the aim of settling disputes at an early stage. I am pleased to report that the Equality Commission will extend its disability conciliation service to cover complaints against general qualification bodies once the draft regulations come into operation. Members will appreciate that there are a number of avenues available to people with disabilities before having to seek redress through the courts.

The Equality Commission will also be producing guidance for qualification bodies, and officials from the Department have met with representatives from the Commission and explained how the regulations are designed to promote equality for people with disabilities.

Following a constructive meeting the Commission indicated its support for the regulations being made; and I am very grateful for the assistance that the Commission provided to the Department during the development of the regulations. I am also grateful to my officials, who also worked very hard on the regulations, bringing them to the Education Committee and issuing them for public consultation.

Tá mé cinnte go dtacóidh Comhaltaí leis na rialacháin seo, nó féachann siad le mic léinn a chosaint ar an leatrom anseo agus le reachtaíocht míchumais atá ann cheana féin a neartú.

I am sure that Members will support the introduction of these regulations as they seek to protect students against discrimination and strengthen disability legislation that is already in place.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, which follows on from an important debate that took place in the House last week concerning the provision of courses for young people in the further education sector. The motion closes the loophole that exists within SENDO, in relation to qualification bodies.

Will the Minister assure us that her Department and departmental officials will be working closely with the Equality Commission and the various qualifying bodies to ensure that no young person is discriminated against as regards the awarding of qualifications? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin, a Phóil. Thank you for that question, Paul. The Department believes firmly in equality for everybody with a disability. To even the playing field, I am delighted to say that departmental officials have been working very closely with the Equality Commission on this issue and many others, and with the qualifying bodies. The qualifying bodies have already —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will finish what I am saying. The Member had an opportunity to put his name forward. Cuir d'ainm síos.

The CCEA was ahead of the game here and is operating under procedures that are very fair.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of Europe

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion to appoint a Member to the Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of Europe. As with similar motions this will be treated as a business motion; therefore there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly appoints Mr Sean Neeson as its nominee to the Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of Europe. — [*Lord Morrow*]

12.15 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Locally Produced Food

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

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to bring forward plans to increase the Northern Ireland public sector's procurement of locally produced food.

I thank the Business Office for accepting the motion. Food sourcing in Northern Ireland has been the subject of much debate in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. The past year has allowed the Committee to use its power and influence to reach out to the main retailers in Northern Ireland with a view to encouraging them to source food locally rather than importing produce from South America and mainland Europe, or from our next-door neighbours in the Republic of Ireland.

Undoubtedly, we have experienced some success in our attempts to encourage local sourcing. For example, Sainsbury's recently announced that, from the end of March 2008, 100% of fresh beef sold in its stores in Northern Ireland would be locally sourced, processed and packed. On Wednesday 9 April, I was delighted to read that Asda is committing its support to the Good Food is in Our Nature campaign, which is being run by Food Promotion Northern Ireland through an in-store promotional campaign to encourage people to buy local produce across Northern Ireland. The campaign will take the form of 20 new pieces of point-of-sale signage across the 13 Asda stores here.

I am pleased to say that the Ulster Unionist Party supports the SDLP amendment on the labelling of local produce. That, in itself, is progress. Thanks to the work of many people, not least Food Promotion Northern Ireland, retailers are increasingly thinking about stocking locally sourced food that is supplied from Northern Ireland-based agriculture businesses.

I have always been of the opinion that it is vital to make retailers recognise the quality of produce that is available in Northern Ireland if any sort of impetus was to return to the agriculture industry. I am delighted with the progress that is evident through the examples that I have given. Although that is a reasonable start, there is no doubt that much more must be done and

that work must continue to encourage retailers to build locally sourced stock.

We must also broaden our outlook and increase the current focus on developing interdepartmental connections among the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) — which is responsible for processors in Northern Ireland — and the other Departments with a view to increasing the amount of local food that is used by public bodies. That could produce real benefits for the agricultural community in addition to ensuring that local people receive the healthiest and finest-quality food in hospitals, schools, training colleges and other public facilities in Northern Ireland.

Each day, thousands of people work in, or attend, such public facilities. Those are maintained by various Departments in the Province. In a single day, expenditure by those people at mealtimes runs to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of pounds. If the food that is sold in the cafeterias of public institutions throughout the country was all locally sourced, it would have a monumental impact on the sales of the local agriculture markets. It would also give a further boost to the local economy, particularly the agriculture industry. In addition, the public would know that the food that they were eating was produced by local hands and was of a high standard. The food would also bring advantageous health benefits because it would be likely to be higher in quality and fresher than anything that we import into the Province. Furthermore, increased local produce would bring the advantage that fewer vehicles would be needed to transfer produce from one place to another, resulting in a reduction in fuel emissions and a lower carbon footprint. I am sure that Members will agree that those are highly credible benefits.

The agrifood industry demands a high standard of food production from farmers in Northern Ireland. DARD has an extremely rigorous regime for maintaining produce quality and standards. Unfortunately, Departments appear to be happy to purchase products from countries that do not adhere to such standards.

Members may be interested to know the situation in other United Kingdom regions. The Westminster Government aim to provide a sustainably built and sustainably managed central Government estate that minimises carbon emissions, waste consumption and water consumption and that increases energy efficiency.

In May 2004, the Scottish Executive adopted a report that included a priority to support local and regional economies' food procurement. In Wales, members of Value Wales (Procurement) have piloted new approaches to encourage local supply chains and to improve nutrition.

The majority of Members will be aware that Northern Ireland's public procurement policy is set by the procurement board, which is chaired by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and comprises the permanent secretaries of the 11 Northern Ireland Departments, the Treasury Officer of Accounts, the director of Central Procurement Directorate, an observer from both the Strategic Investment Board and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and external experts.

Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), which sits in the Department of Finance and Personnel, facilitates the procurement board's work. Its role is to support the board in developing and reviewing procurement policy and to execute the procurement of supplies, services and works for the public sector.

At present, Northern Ireland does not have a specific food-procurement policy. Central Procurement Directorate, in its submission to the review of environmental governance, stated:

"The overarching concept in NI public procurement policy is that of achieving 'best value for money' which is defined as 'the optimum combination of whole life cost and quality (or fitness for purpose) to meet the customers requirement'."

That aim could best be achieved by increasing our focus on developing local sourcing among public bodies. To do so would demonstrate the Assembly's willingness to learn from the examples of Scotland and Wales, both of which have been in the same position.

DFP officials are working with the Departments of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Education — the two largest food-procuring Departments in Northern Ireland — to develop awareness sessions on those contracts that are due for renewal in the near future. The main objectives will be to raise awareness of upcoming contracts, to explain the procurement process and to encourage more local companies to tender. Events, which will be targeted at small and medium-sized producers and processors, could increase local sourcing among those two Departments' public bodies to unprecedented levels. I sincerely welcome that, and long may it continue.

I am aware that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her Department have already done some work on food sourcing. DARD staff provide technical support and advice to individual farmers or processors, to large and small producer groups and to co-operatives to help them to obtain public-sector contracts.

Furthermore, under the draft rural development programme for 2007-13, the processing and marketing scheme assists the agrifood sector to improve its competitiveness and to enable it to compete for contracts. I am pleased to learn about that valuable work.

Last November, DARD, in conjunction with the Department of Education and DHSSPS, announced

plans for closer co-operation on local sourcing in order to explore the promotion of local foods in facilities that those Departments run.

I am concerned that no foods from Northern Ireland are included in the EU protected food names scheme. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must promote that scheme in a more proactive fashion. I ask the House to support the motion and the SDLP amendment.

Mr Doherty: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after 'plans' and insert

"that encourage and assist local food producers to compete for Public Sector Procurement contracts."

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The intent of the motion should find widespread support in the House. However, it places the responsibility for procurement on the wrong Minister. I am sure that the proposers of the motion are aware that the responsibility for public procurement falls with Peter Robinson, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and his Department's Central Procurement Directorate. Therefore, to ask DARD to introduce plans to increase local procurement is slightly misleading. It would be much more sensible to propose a motion requesting the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to introduce plans to help local producers to compete for public-sector contracts.

One of the main barriers facing small and medium-sized local producers is the fear that those contracts are beyond them. They may also be concerned that they might not be able to deliver on such a large scale. In addition to the Central Procurement Directorate adjusting its policy to attract local producers, it is vital, therefore, that those local producers are given the skills and the confidence to bid for contracts.

I am sure that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development will outline the efforts that she has made to assist our farmers and others to get a better foothold on the public procurement ladder. It is undoubtedly the case that Departments have their role to play in assisting our industry through the way that they spend their budgets. We must find creative ways, within EU rules, to allow Departments to give priority to our local producers when it comes to purchasing food.

The application of an expanded local procurement policy to big-spending Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education, could, for example, go a long way towards reducing the difficulties currently faced by the pig sector. Although the motion is well intended, the amendment puts it on a more appropriate footing for the Minister at whom it should be directed. I urge the proposers of the motion and the House, in the interests of the agriculture industry, to support amendment No 1.

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 2:
At end insert

“; and to promote country of origin labelling on menus in hotels and restaurants.”

I thank Tom Elliott and John McCallister for securing the debate, although it is regrettable that after nine months of governing ourselves, the tabling of such a motion remains a necessity. Bearing in mind the manner in which the Assembly carries out its business, only one Minister is present — the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development — to inform us of what her Department is doing to increase the procurement of locally produced food. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about DARD's efforts as regards local procurement. Perhaps when she addresses the motion she will update the House on any meetings that she has had in the past nine months with the other Departments about purchasing local produce. There may be a success story there that we are not aware of.

I wish to slightly amend the motion to include a measure that the Minister will be able to enforce. I could have taken my amendment further by asking that she deals immediately with country of origin labelling on food sold in supermarkets, but as that might be a trifle complicated to achieve, I resisted doing so.

It is relatively simple for the Minister to implement legislation that demands that the country of origin of foods be displayed on menus in hotels and restaurants. On March 13, during the red meat sector seminar held in the Long Gallery, many stakeholders in the industry expressed views that are reflected in the motion and in my amendment. The procurement of local produce by Government and their agencies was referred to in the reports delivered from the workshops held on the day.

There was considerable concern about the inadequacy of our labelling demands, and views were expressed that the labels that many processors apply leave a lot to be desired. Indeed, some went so far as to say that some labels were designed to confuse the consumer deliberately. If one looks at the information on many of those labels, it is easy to understand why that point was made.

12.30 pm

Once again, I remind the Minister that the crisis in the agriculture sector is not being overstated; it is as real as it gets. On taking office, the Minister declared that she planned to be the champion of the farmer. I can tell the Minister that the farmers — and being from South Down, I also include the fishermen — are still awaiting her first real supportive moves.

Procurement of local produce by all Departments and giving full information on the menus referred to will not alone save the industries. However, that would at least be an indication that the problems are being addressed by those responsible. Who knows; even at

this late stage, a recovery plan could be created to address the uncertainties that are being lived out on our family farms.

At first glance, Sinn Féin's amendment appeared to be worthy of inclusion in the motion. However, on closer examination, it calls on local food producers — that is the farmers — to compete for public-sector contracts. Is that not the role of DARD or those who process food? I am also concerned that the amendment calls for farmers to enter the world of commercial contracting, a request that can only add to the bureaucracy that is already crippling our farming community.

I thank the proposers of the motion for accepting the additional few words that the SDLP added to the motion. I also thank again the Members for tabling the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea):

I open my remarks by congratulating Mr Elliott and his colleagues for bringing the motion before the House. It is a worthy motion and one that certainly deserves our support. I also agree wholeheartedly with amendment No 2, which stands in the name of Mr Bradley and his colleagues.

Speaking personally, I find amendment No 1 strange. Mr Doherty said that it would be somewhat misleading to ask the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake work such as this. Given the recent debate on the Forkhill military site, I find that to be a strange comment, because during that debate, it seemed that the Minister had a wide range of responsibilities; it was almost as though she was working on matters that fall under the remit of all the other Departments. Therefore, perhaps it would not be difficult to ask her to be responsible for something that is within her remit; on the other hand, however, it might be that that is more difficult.

My reasons for opposing amendment No 1 are the same as those of Mr P J Bradley. Placing the burden of responsibility on the farmer is too much at a time when the farming community is facing difficult challenges, with farmers feeling that they are often left to their own devices. I feel that in many ways amendment No 1 adds insult to injury.

The motion stems from the efforts that the Committee has made on this matter, and I congratulate Committee members for their genuine efforts in attempting to get the main retailers to source local produce. We have had some success in that, and I am delighted in particular with Sainsbury's achievements.

I recently attended the opening of the new ASDA store in Ballyclare, and I was greatly impressed by the local produce in that store and by the very clear labelling on products. That labelling not only denoted the fact that the item was from Northern Ireland, but it

actually gave the name of the producer. Labelling produce in that manner is exciting and visionary, and it should be encouraged throughout the retail sector.

The efforts of the Committee are producing some results, and we have made a reasonable start. However, we need to impress further on our departmental officials and public bodies the need for them to take the lead in this matter.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development can take the lead and tell other Departments that it is not good enough for them not to lead by example — be that the Department of Education in schools or the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in hospitals. Those two Departments should provide the best possible produce to children in schools and patients in hospitals — what else should people in hospital get but the best possible standards of hygiene and produce? I am concerned that low-level products from foreign countries could be served in our hospitals.

Farmers have gallantly faced the challenges before them: for example, the issues raised in the red meat task force report, which acknowledges that there is a problem; and the nightmare currently faced by the pig sector. Many years ago, farmers in the pig sector were told that there would be financial rewards if they produced quality-assured produce. However, those promises were not kept. Farmers sweat and toil to produce the highest-quality produce, and they must be given a proper price. Departments must clearly tell those farmers that they will purchase their produce. There should be proper labelling in hotels and restaurants so that consumers know that they are buying Northern Ireland produce.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: No; I have only three seconds left.

There must be proper labelling that highlights the country of origin. Northern Ireland produce must be identifiable. It is of the highest quality and should be purchased by the public sector.

Mr Bresland: I congratulate the Members who brought the motion to the House and those who proposed amendment No 2.

For a number of years, the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland has faced many challenges. The problems faced by the beef and sheep sector are well documented in the Red Meat Industry Task Force report that was published recently. Regrettably, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has failed to respond positively to the problems faced by our beef and lamb industry. The Minister's only prescription is diversification, and the response from many farmers — particularly our suckler-cow farmers — is to downsize. That worrying trend is highlighted in the most recent census.

The Northern Ireland pig and poultry industries also face considerable challenges due to increases in the price of grain. In the past 12 months, the dairy sector has witnessed increases in the price of milk. However, that sector also faces many challenges: one look at Saturday's edition of 'Farming Life' will show the number of dairy farmers who are dispersing their livestock and getting out of the milk industry.

Fishermen have also faced many challenges and, like the farmers, find themselves tied up in European red tape and bureaucracy. Undoubtedly, the Minister will wring her hands and say that little that can be done and that she must work within the procurement rules of the European Union. However, she should be proactive in encouraging Departments and Government agencies to procure Northern Ireland products.

All parts of the public sector, which includes schools, colleges, hospitals, prisons, police and the Civil Service, procure food. It is vital that the Minister explores ways for the Northern Ireland agri-food industry to secure those valuable contracts. The Minister will seek to hide behind European Union procurement regulations, but DARD must be more proactive in working with farmers, processors and the Livestock Marketing Commission for Northern Ireland to ensure that the public sector purchases Northern Ireland's excellent food products.

In recent years, DARD has introduced a supply awareness programme that has targeted over 1,000 farmers, along with processors and retail outlets. However, it has failed to engage with the Northern Ireland public sector, which — collectively — is a large buyer of food products.

That is also an issue for the Assembly Commission, because of the food sold in the Assembly restaurant and cafeteria. Northern Ireland food products must be on the menu. It should be known whether the bacon comes from Denmark or Castlederg; the beef in the shepherd's pie from Argentina or Newtownstewart; the lamb chops from New Zealand or the Sperrins.

Those are the choices that we must all make if we are to maintain a sustainable farming industry in Northern Ireland. I support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 1, and I welcome this debate. I put on record that procurement by Government Departments of local produce is essential in any society and an issue on which I have been intensively lobbying the Minister. I have met Government procurement officials — the director of the CPD and its head of policy and planning. Both assured me that the CPD is seeking innovative ways to put local suppliers in a position to win Government contracts, within EU constraints.

They also inform me that the Minister has been to the forefront of providing local food producers with greater access to Government procurement procedures. CPD is keen to develop the local supplier base so that they are better placed to bid for contracts. They pointed to InterTradeIreland's Go Tender programme as an example of what can be done. Under that scheme, small and medium-sized suppliers are invited to meet the buyer to get a rundown of what is needed to win Government contracts.

However, under the EU treaty and procurement directives, it is illegal for public bodies to discriminate in favour of domestic producers. The key principles of the treaty relevant to public procurement are those around the free movement of goods and services, transparency and non-discrimination on the grounds of nationality. Public bodies cannot specify in their contracts that catering contractors and suppliers open up their supply chains to only small and local producers, but are allowed to make fresh produce a requirement. With such significant buying power, the public sector could, by changing its buying habits, make a great deal of difference by creating a large market for more sustainable products and ways of procuring those products.

Irish produce is among the best in the world, and the Assembly must take a public lead in encouraging buying locally. It is important in all public-sector activities that a policy can be shown to benefit the local community. How food is served, prepared, purchased and produced can have a major impact on the health of individuals, communities and their environments. Local produce is essential to the well-being of all communities, and procuring it close to home helps promote good health.

Factors that could act as a catalyst in supporting our agriculture and fishing industry through the public procurement process include having access to healthy food; supporting the local economy by buying food from as close by as possible; and eating food in season. On top of that, encouragement should be given to sustainable farming through setting high environmental standards and reducing energy consumption; promoting animal welfare and valuing nature and biodiversity; and establishing fair prices, fair trade and ethical employment in Ireland and overseas.

Local food procurement allows the healthy eating, economic and environmental agendas to be combined and acted on, which gives Government an opportunity to take the lead in a field that truly makes a difference to local communities. The Executive should use every avenue to promote procurement of local produce. They must think creatively and produce clear objectives and procurement guidelines to ensure that locally produced food is used locally. The Executive need to apply existing procurement rules as robustly and favourably as possible throughout the public sector.

It is contradictory for the EU to prioritise the environment and yet constrain so tightly the extent to which environmental objectives can influence procurement. The procurement process must take into account the carbon, as well as monetary, cost of goods. Research published in 2002 by Morgan and Morley found that Italy, France and some Scandinavian countries adhere to "buy-local" policies in all but name.

These allow policy makers —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr W Clarke: I have very little time. I will give way if I am given some extra time.

Mr Speaker: It is really for the Member to decide whether he wishes to give way.

12.45 pm

Mr W Clarke: "Buy-local" policies allow policy makers to support local sourcing and to provide advice about what is legal and acceptable. Such policies also address supply issues; consumer education issues; ways in which local food could legitimately be specified within procurement rules, including buying fresh food, short delivery times and minimal packaging; specifying that milk is delivered in bulk rather than in cartons; and considering the issue of organic food. Those issues all favour local producers.

The organic sector remains fragmented, and there appears to be less competition for organic contracts from large remote businesses. A shift towards more temperate varieties creates opportunities for domestic growers, and a return to seasonal consumption patterns creates an opportunity —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and, as a farmer, I declare an interest.

The issue of increasing the public sector's procurement of local food has long been a key priority for the farming industry. Indeed, it was a key part of the UFU's document, 'Five steps to a better future'. Many factors point realistically to local procurement being good for the farmer, the consumer and the environment, and the Assembly has a duty of care to each of those areas.

It is often said that Northern Ireland is kept financially stable due to the large numbers of people employed in the public sector. Indeed, it is reported to count for 63% of the economy. However, the phrase "financially stable" would not apply equally to our resilient, yet stressed, farming industry.

Farming is the largest industry in Northern Ireland. The productivity and economic viability of our agrifood industry would rise if the public-sector procurement of

local food were increased. From a consumer point of view, locally sourced produce is proven to be healthier and fresher than imported produce, as it spends little time in transit. We must consider the food that is in transit for many thousands of miles by sea, air and land. Moreover, we must consider the problem of cheap, imported meat products and the devastating effect that those are having on our farming industry.

Mr T Clarke: Amendment No 1 suggests that farmers compete for public procurement, therefore, asking them to compete even further. Surely the competition will be unfair, as other countries will not have the same stringent rules as we have about produce coming into the country. Therefore, we are being asked to compete unfairly and to cheapen the market value of our produce.

Mr Irwin: I agree. The EU regulations on procurement of food are complicated; however, they allow for consideration of environmental and social issues when making awards. I am keen to enquire whether full consideration is given to those areas so that it is not simply a case of the cheapest tender getting the contract, as cheap is not always best value.

The public sector is a massive consumer base. Therefore, there is no reason why our locally sourced produce should not be procured in high volumes for the public sector while still remaining within the terms of EU directives.

In previous debates, reference was made to the Central Procurement Directorate. I am keen to enquire about the technicalities and length of the tendering process. The Minister previously stated that DARD provides assistance on tendering, and that is appreciated; however, there is a real need to make our producers more aware of the process and to ensure that they are competitive.

In the Scottish Parliament, the issue of tendering was raised as a potential stumbling block for smaller producers, as — almost immediately — the complicated nature of the process often rules out smaller producers. There is strong evidence that increased local procurement can help to sustain the local industry. Using Scotland as an example, the East Ayrshire Project witnessed school meals transformed and a commendable 70% of local food making up the menu in local schools. We can learn lessons from that study.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must promote country-of-origin labelling, and it must encourage retailers to participate in that and take it on board. We could and must do a lot more to assist local food producers. We must remember that we are trying to encourage the local farming and agrifood industry in what is a very difficult marketplace. I support amendment No 2.

Mr Ford: I support the motion standing in the names of Mr Elliott and Mr McCallister, and the amendment standing in the names of Mr P J Bradley and his colleagues, because they appear to address the fundamental needs of farmers in Northern Ireland and to advocate the building of the type of partnership that is necessary between the public sector and producers. I fear that amendment No 1, on the other hand, weakens the motion, and places too much of the onus back on the producers, rather than on developing a partnership.

This morning, I attended a follow-up to a fair-trade event that was held at the beginning of March by Antrim Borough Council, of which I am a member. The March event included a cookery competition for local schools, and today we awarded Parkhall High School for having won. Part of reason for the council's efforts to promote fair trade was the impetus created by aspects of international development: fair trade for producers of primary produce in the Third World and seeking to access Fairtrade tea, coffee, bananas, and a variety of other items, just as the Assembly does. The council has also been concerned with the issue of fair trade for local producers. I am delighted that Dale Farm, for example, as the leading trading arm of the local milk producers' co-operative, was a co-sponsor of the event in March, and that other local food producers attended that event.

Fairness and justice must apply to a tea producer in Sri Lanka or a milk producer in County Antrim. We must ensure that we secure those types of benefits. The public sector in Northern Ireland is significantly behind the position of a number of local authorities in Great Britain in particular, as Mr Irwin has highlighted.

If a county council in GB can ensure that its schools operate a local procurement policy whereby the significant majority of the food that it buys comes from local producers, why is that not the case for the Department of Education and the five education and library boards here? Our farmers are in every bit as much need as farmers in GB. By the same token, I have grave difficulties with the type of catering contract that exists, for example, for the former United Hospitals Trust area in Antrim. Why is it that food is served to patients there on a cook-and-chill basis, and brought in from Scotland, yet staff and visitors can go to a canteen to get food, locally produced in some cases — though not enough — and freshly cooked on the premises?

We must change the mindsets of those who administer catering contracts across the public sector from striving for the cheapest to striving for the best. There is no doubt that fresh, locally produced food has been shown to be better than food that is mass-produced several hundred miles away and kept for a period of time. That food may be acceptable, but it is not of the highest-possible quality. Surely, our schoolchildren and hospital

patients — and anyone else who depends on the public sector — have a right to expect the highest quality of food. That would directly benefit local producers.

There is no doubt that there are, in some cases, difficulties with European regulations, which require appropriate terms and conditions in contracts. However, there is also no doubt that those problems can be tackled. Bureaucrats in this part of the world have an unfortunate habit of sometimes seeking to gold-plate EU regulations, whereas our neighbours in England, Scotland, and particularly the Republic seem to find creative ways to make the most of the regulations. The simplistic response on this estate from those who administer those types of contract is too often to gold-plate the regulations in order to show how good we are. Let us show that we are good European citizens who also support our local producers, because that can be done, and we have plenty of examples from other parts of these islands where that is being done.

The one slight concern that I have with the motion is that it calls on DARD to take action. I have no doubt that the Minister will be able to make a response in that respect. However, it seems to me that, if there is to be any real effort to implement the thrust of the motion, it is not just the Agriculture Minister who should be present. She must speak to other Ministers — particularly the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Education, and the Minister for Employment and Learning — to examine the opportunities to shift local contracts and to see that our producers receive the benefits.

Mr Savage: This is an important debate, and it could not have come at a better time because, in a few weeks' time, Northern Ireland will have a chance to showcase its agricultural produce and promote its wares to the public at the Balmoral Show.

I may be slightly biased in my opinion of our produce, but I believe that our standards for quality, traceability and animal welfare are higher than they are elsewhere. Indeed, our products are produced to a higher standard than that required by EU regulations. In conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Assembly must help farmers to attract a better price for their product and to appeal to more customers in this fast and ever more competitive market. It is pointless for farmers to produce a good product if that product does not appeal to the consumer.

The big supermarkets could do much more to help the farming industry, but, sadly, the only people who are promoting local produce are the farmers themselves. There is no easy or cheap way to produce quality food. If one is to produce healthy food, one cannot afford to take short cuts. The farmers deserve a fair and decent return for their product. We must bear in mind that farmers

lose more and more of their profit margin because of sharp rises in the costs of feed and fuel each month.

We must never forget that agriculture is the backbone of industry in Northern Ireland, as many Members have said. Currently, Northern Ireland has 28,500 farms that employ some 80,000 people. On the surface, that sounds good. However, all is not well in the agriculture industry at this time. As I said, farmers are faced with high input costs for feed and fuel. A recent Deloitte report highlighted the fact that many producers are facing an almost 100% rise in feed prices, which lowers farmers' ability to compete on an EU and global scale. Those higher costs of fuel in the UK mean that other countries are far better off; our costs are spiralling out of control because of this stretch of water around us.

Low farmgate prices are being driven by an imbalance in the profit margin among retailers, processors and primary producers. The UK Government policy on voluntary modulation is such that less grant money is going directly to farmers, thereby putting them at a disadvantage to EU competitors.

Northern Ireland is made up of small-scale farms and processing companies, which can stunt efficiency. However, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's website details its commitment to sustainable development:

"For government, sustainable development means creating policies and making decisions on behalf of the country that equally support our communities, improve our standard of living, and help us to live within environmental limits. For example, in the case of government procurement policy, it means not just buying as cheaply as possible, but seeking to procure so as to generate positive results for the economy, society and environment."

That is a very welcome statement, and that is the direction in which policy on Government procurement of locally produced produce ought to be headed. However, the Government must do more for the local farmer. The Government of the South of Ireland give overwhelming support to local farmers. I urge the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to take a leaf out of her Southern counterpart's book and invest properly in our local farming by introducing grant-aided schemes for farm improvements and modernisation. In that way, we can streamline our farming enterprises and compete in a real and challenging world.

A number of clear benefits flow from the procurement of locally produced produce. The Executive can give a strategic lead on the promotion and sustainable development of the local agriculture and food sector, thereby setting an example for the private sector. The local food sector is producing high-quality, healthy and unique products, thereby creating jobs and giving local farmers a source of income.

This sector is the freshest way to buy food and cuts down on transport and reduces the number of people involved.

1.00 pm

Mr Shannon: Aa' wud first o' vau laek tae kimmenn' tha proposer o' this moatshin, an cud aa' daor tae think that ma' questyin askin tha Menistar o' Agricultur en Rural Developmunt tae set oot tha steps that she is takkin tae pit fort Norlin Airlan produce sich as Portavogie prawns, Commer praities, en Glestry ice craem, was tha inspirayshin fer tha moatshin.

Whun aa' wus gien tha anser tae ma' questyin aa' wusnae setisfied that muckle enouch wus bein din that cud be din tae pit fort Norlin Airlan superior products tae tha rest o' tha United Kindim en farthuer afeil.

I wish to commend the proposer of the motion. May I dare to think that my asking the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps that she has taken to promote Northern Ireland products such as Portavogie prawns, Comber potatoes and Glastry Farm ice cream was an inspiration for the motion? When I received the answer to my question, I was not satisfied that all that could be done was being done to promote Northern Ireland's superior products to the rest of the United Kingdom and further afield.

I support the motion and amendment No 2. We are certainly in an age of prosperity in the Province, and the peace and stability that we have enjoyed of late have done wonders for the profile of Northern Ireland. We have more opportunity for tourism and international investment — something that is to the fore as we think on to the investment conference to be held in May. The profile of the Province has been raised through such means as the Lonely Planet travel guide and other notable recommendations. Now is the time for the Minister to ensure the promotion of the natural beauty of the Province and its investment possibilities — as our counterparts have done — and also to promote its produce, which is second to none.

I will give examples of a few local products that have acquired international renown, yet which have the potential for achieving so much more. Portavogie prawns, for example, are highlighted on the 'Northern Ireland: Take a Closer Look' website, and are on menus from the Waterfront Hall to the Quays restaurant in Portavogie. It was a treat, and an encouragement, to read on an expats' website that among those things missed from the United Kingdom, Portavogie prawns were listed as being the main ingredient in the top five sandwiches that were thought of when abroad. Therefore, those who live in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa clearly say that they miss Portavogie prawns, and that has got to be good news.

There is also the special mention made in the Belfast restaurant guide of the superior quality of —

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that, while local people may miss Portavogie prawns when they are away from home in the United States, perhaps they could equally miss them when they are working in the Department of Health, the Department of Education, or some other Department here in Northern Ireland, if they are not available in those places?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, and we will shortly get guidance on that matter. I agree absolutely, and I believe that the superior quality of the prawns, which are home-grown, is one of the reasons why they are missed when abroad.

Perhaps I may also mention Glastry Farm ice cream. Many have not yet had the opportunity to sample that creamy delight, which is a taste of the peninsula. Many will not have heard of it and yet we see that Jenny Bristow the TV chef repeatedly mentions it as a perfect way to finish "a culinary feast". Glastry Farm ice cream has also been approved by the training guru and international best-selling author Robin Sharma, who specifically mentions it as being something special — and if he sees it as something special, it is something special. The farmer who took the initiative saw that farming alone could not sustain his business and, therefore, diversified. I understand that he was given financial aid to help with the cost of setting up the factory. Having tasted the ice cream, I know that it will be a worldwide best-seller, especially with the recommendation of so many. The National Trust sells Glastry Farm ice cream at its properties in a Taste of Ulster promotion. That promotion has been a success and proves that, with a little help, diversification can and will work. However, more could be done to promote products such as Glastry Farm ice cream to create worldwide recognition.

The classic example of what home-grown products can achieve is found at the Tayto factory at Tandragee. There was a time when only those from the Province had sampled the best crisps in the world. Now, however, Tayto is an international phenomenon, with Americans and Canadians enjoying what they call "British chips".

I am aware that the Minister has said that the Department seeks to ensure that local produce is used by Government bodies as much as is permissible under EU regulations. However, more has to be done, and what better than our own produce? I recognise, too, that the Minister and her Department are trying to promote local produce; again, however, more needs to be done. Let us learn from the Tayto factory's success and ensure that it is repeated across the Province.

What could be nicer than to sit down to a starter of Portavogie prawn cocktail, a main meal of a good Ulster steak and Comber potatoes with Willowbrook Foods vegetables, finished off with hot Armagh apple

pie and Glastray Farm ice cream? I know how good it tastes; my waistline indicates that. I urge the Assembly to support the motion. By doing so, it will assist local producers and promote the sweet and satisfying taste of Ulster.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad that it is my turn to speak, because having listened to Jim Shannon's remarks, I am starving and cannot wait to get to the canteen.

At the outset, I want to point out that I assumed that Mr McCallister and Mr Elliott would be aware that responsibility for public procurement lies with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Peter Robinson. His Department's central procurement directorate is working to bring forward new public-procurement guidance for procurers, which will assist them to develop specifications that will deliver fresh, seasonal produce and for which local producers can compete. I emphasise that although my Department will work through the legislation to do all that it can to encourage more local food companies to tender for contracts, it is up to producers to compete for and win business. Obviously, the Department is obliged to help them; however, it cannot compete and win business on their behalf.

The fact is that, as many Members have pointed out, it is not in my gift to bring forward plans to increase the public sector's procurement of locally produced food. The EU treaty requires free movement of goods, and fairness and transparency in all procurement. It also states that buyers cannot restrict their purchases to specific locations or suppliers. Therefore, the Department's challenge is to work with suppliers and to help them to compete more successfully. In the debate, I will concentrate on what I can do and have done in that regard.

I have always believed in local produce. We have access to some of the world's best and freshest ingredients right on our doorstep. We must not take that for granted. To buy local produce means to vote for fewer food miles and fresher food. It is also a vote of confidence in local food producers, who work day and night to bring their produce to market and to support their families, often in rural communities.

As I mentioned earlier, the Programme for Government incorporates the principles of sustainability and recognises that building a sustainable future is a key requirement for economic, social and environmental policies and programmes. A widely accepted definition of sustainable development is:

"Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Although that sounds grand, to get across what sustainable development is and to show that it is relevant to people's lives is a challenge for all Departments. In that context,

increased local procurement could be a contributor and driver for change.

It would be helpful for Members to note that the total that has been spent on procurement of food across Departments amounts to just over £27 million per annum. That may seem a significant figure to many people. However, to put that into context, the total turnover of the agrifood processing industry is £2.4 billion. Therefore, public procurement accounts for just over 1%.

Although my Department does all that it can to maximise local procurement, Members will realise from the data that I have provided that the industry is heavily dependent on exports outside the North. While not losing sight of the importance of local produce, I must remind the House that exports are the bread and butter of the agrifood industry's future sustainability. On 10 April, I raised the matter with Nigel Dodds in the Executive that the investment conference is a good opportunity to showcase the best of our produce. I have asked him to ensure that local food produce and the people who supply food for different events are promoted at the conference.

In 2007, when I promoted local produce in the States, I discovered that if a niche product were to tap into 2% of the overall American market, its market would be bigger than the entire market on the island of Ireland. It helps to put that into context. The Department tries to ensure that it exploits the markets that it wants for local products; that it is able to export and to add value to those products; and that it does its best for the industry.

The farming and agrifood industry brings vital employment to rural areas, accounting for some 19,000 jobs in the processing sector and almost 30,000 jobs on farms. That represents 7% of the local workforce.

At a practical level, DARD has been working closely with central procurement directorate officials because the Department feels that getting the guidance right will be the key to increasing the level of local sourcing, thereby helping to imbue more sustainability in rural communities. As a Member alluded to earlier, we had all signed up to the UFU's five-point plan. Less than a year ago, when the Executive was formed, I raised that issue as one of my first priorities on my first day in the Department.

However, a number of contracts were midway through their term, and we cannot stop a two-year contract that has only been running for six months. We have to work within limitations and ensure that new contracts will result in an increase in the amount of local produce being used. We are working very closely with CPD to achieve that.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) already runs well-established education and training programmes to help food

producers and processors to take advantage of new opportunities and become more competitive. Indeed, Glastry Farm — one of the businesses mentioned by Mr Shannon — received help from Loughry College. We have helped numerous businesses in that way in the past number of years and have enabled them to hone their product to an excellent standard so that they can compete for different markets. We have helped and supported businesses and products in many areas — the Causeway Cheese Company and Tickety-Moo Super Ice Cream are examples.

DARD also administers the processing and marketing grant for 2007-13, which will provide more than £20 million of new funding to help to improve the competitiveness of the agrifood sector and help it to compete more successfully for business.

George Savage mentioned grant aid to producers. The rural development programme will provide about £10 million of aid for a farm modernisation programme. Everything that the Department does is aimed at helping our industry to improve and become more competitive.

When I was in the United States, I spoke to people from Tayto who told me about their success in entering the American market. They have used the hills and countryside around Tandragee to promote Tayto crisps as an Irish product in the American market and have successfully brought business back to Tandragee. What they have done is exceptional. I want those sorts of companies to fly the flag at the investment conference in Belfast in May and promote their produce to the American delegates in attendance.

A number of Members have mentioned the other Ministers who have responsibility for public procurement. I have met Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey, and, more recently, Minister Robinson, to discuss the procurement of local food products. We were particularly interested in the possibility of rolling out the successful renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFAEL) project.

The RAFAEL project — funded by INTERREG and centred on the north-west — aimed to help local food producers and processors to compete for contracts in the health and education sectors. The pilot exercise proved that greater autonomy for smaller organisations allows tenders for smaller lots; therefore, not just helping the big guys but opening up the process to small local companies. The model could also be successful in other areas, and I am proud that my Department has been involved in that over the past number of years. That is the key to enabling small producers and processors to compete for contracts.

I agree fully that patients in hospitals and children in schools must be able to avail themselves of the best local produce. The most vulnerable people in our society need to be getting the best of our produce. We

are pushing that message very firmly with the Ministers who have the relevant responsibility. Local produce — with its accruing low air miles — should not be sitting on shelves losing valuable vitamins and minerals. It should be reaching our schools and hospitals, ensuring that the most vulnerable in our society have the best quality of food. We are all speaking with the same voice on that issue.

1.15 pm

My officials have been working closely with colleagues in CPD, regional supply services and the education and library boards to take forward work on several fronts. CPD has produced a draft sustainable procurement action plan, which will apply across the public sector, and the policy for that will be tabled at the next meeting of the procurement board, on which all Departments are represented. Furthermore, CPD is preparing draft guidance for practitioners, which will provide practical advice on integrating sustainable-development and healthy-eating objectives into the procurement of food and catering services. That guidance was the subject of consultation with DARD, the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and CPD plans to issue it shortly.

In conjunction with the Health and Education Departments, DARD has committed to organising awareness sessions, targeted at agrifood businesses, on contracts that are due for renewal. The key objective is to raise awareness of the contracts and explain the procurement process, thereby encouraging more tenders from local agrifood companies. DARD is also working to establish a baseline for the amount of local produce that is already in procurement contracts by analysing data from the Health and Education Departments. That baseline will be important for measuring progress against new arrangements. Again, it will help to ensure that our strategy is as effective as it can be. From the information available, I can confirm that the vast majority of suppliers to the health and education sectors and DARD canteens are local.

With regard to promoting country-of-origin labelling on menus in hotels and restaurants, I inform the Assembly that, although I have not ruled out introducing legislation to make such labelling mandatory, I would like to consider the options first, as I do not want to burden businesses unnecessarily with more red tape.

DARD officials are monitoring the approach that has been taken in the South, while a pilot scheme is under way in the North, in consultation with key stakeholders, for country-of-origin labelling for beef in the food-service sector. I wish to consider feedback from that pilot, along with market research findings, before I decide on the best way forward.

I take this opportunity to emphasise that all of us have a role to play in this issue individually and collectively. I encourage everyone, from big corporate businesses to families doing their weekly shop, to support local producers wherever possible. I recognise that we must all live within a budget, whether it is the family budget, or a large, departmental procurement budget; however, we should consider wider value implications as well as absolute cost. I agree with many of the comments that were made today. Yes, although some produce may be slightly cheaper, will it cost us our environment and sustainable rural communities? That is what we must debate.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the prime responsibility for public procurement lies with my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. We must work together, and I remind Members that the IFEX exhibition will take place at the end of this month. That exhibition will provide a great opportunity for local producers and processors to showcase their products to the hospitality and retail sectors. I will open that exhibition, and I invite Members to attend it to see the quality of produce that will be on offer.

In the meantime, my Department will continue to contribute positively to the central procurement directorate's work in developing guidance on the procurement of local food. Moreover, it will continue to work with producers and processors to ensure that they will be in a position to tender for, and win, public procurement contracts. I strongly desire that our collective activities will lead to a win-win situation for the North's agri-food industry. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr P J Bradley: I must try to decipher my hurried writing.

Mr Speaker: The Member has five minutes.

Mr P J Bradley: First, I thank Tom Elliott and John McCallister for introducing the motion. In his opening remarks, Tom Elliott said that were the health and education sectors immediately to take the lead role in securing local procurement, we would get somewhere. Pat Doherty repeated that sentiment when proposing amendment No 1.

The Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr McCrea, referred to the Committee's success and to the reaction of Sainsbury's and Asda to its efforts. Let us hope that other giant retailers follow suit sooner rather than later. Mr Bresland referred to the continuing exodus from farms and the — now commonplace — disposal sales of livestock. That situation should not be allowed to go unnoticed by DARD — or by any Department, for that matter.

To my surprise, Mr Willie Clarke spoke in favour of the motion. Furthermore, he supported amendment No 2. I welcome the fact that he made no reference to

farmers taking on the role of tendering. Like Mr Elliott, Mr William Irwin referred to the support and attention that has been given to procurement in Scotland and the benefits that have already been identified there. Mr Ford, speaking on the same subject, also referred to Scotland's experience, and he highlighted the methods used by county councils in England.

Mr Ford referred to other countries' failure to implement EU regulations. Members have often discussed how we toe the line when regulations are made, while other countries fail to implement those regulations. Perhaps the House should debate that matter at some stage.

Mr George Savage mentioned the high quality and traceability of our good food, which, for whatever reason, is a message that is difficult to get across. He outlined the support that is given to the industry in the Republic of Ireland. If such support were offered here, perhaps we would not need to debate this issue.

Fellow County Down Member Jim Shannon availed himself of the opportunity to promote Portavogie prawns and Glashy Farm ice cream, which I recently tasted and enjoyed at a recent Ulster Farmers' Union dinner. I hope that Mr Shannon's message is heeded because the food industry is important along the County Down coastline.

The Minister spoke in favour of local produce and outlined monetary sums and employment figures. I was surprised to hear the Minister refer to the UFU document 'Five Steps to a Better Future', but I will say no more than that at this stage. The Minister's speech was informative on current initiatives. However, more emphasis on positive plans for delivery would have been preferable. The House should, perhaps, revisit that issue in a few months' time. I am disappointed that no plans are in place to identify countries of origin on our hotel and restaurant menus. I thank the proposers of the motion for accepting the amendment.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Amendment No 1 outlines that DARD's role is not one of procurer. The Minister clarified that she plays an important role in promoting our agricultural produce, and any confusion about which Department deals with procurement would not be beneficial to anyone. Therefore, I strongly support our amendment.

Public bodies are aware of the superior health regime here and, therefore, should be encouraged not only to buy, but to promote the fact that they almost exclusively use our own produce.

The House must consider that, unlike elsewhere, we do not have a specific food-procurement policy. We need to examine general procurement because there are some difficulties with the Public Procurement Board that will become evident in the near future.

The health and education sectors use a large amount of food in schools and hospitals. We must advise those sectors that buying the cheapest produce might not necessarily be a good idea and, in fact, might damage our economy. If farmers lose a market as large as the health and education sectors, they may move away from food production towards the biofuel industry. That would be a very serious situation, which has led to food shortages in other parts of the world — as demonstrated by a recent television programme. Moreover, it is dangerous to consider buying cheaper produce from places such as Brazil an example of good economics. That will, fundamentally, destroy our whole economy. The situation will worsen, and we will be forced to buy increasingly cheap produce because of a lack of money. That is an escalating downward problem.

The House will, undoubtedly, strongly support the intent of the motion. However, it is important to correctly identify whom to approach about procurement. The Minister made that very clear. That places an onus on the farming industry here to be more competitive. Some Members do not like that idea.

However, the point is that if public bodies can be persuaded to procure more food from local producers, the resulting increase in sales will make farmers more competitive — which is similar to the philosophy adopted by Woolworths. The aim must be to push sales and promote locally produced food by being as competitive as possible. As with any cheaper goods that are imported from all over the world, local food producers will always have to compete with cheaper imports. It must be understood that local producers are part of a global economy.

Mr Elliott: Local producers must compete with imports from countries whose standards of produce may be lower than in Northern Ireland. Does the Member accept that that is unfair competition?

Mr Brolly: Absolutely; the competition will continue to be unfair, but that is a matter for regulation. The import of Brazilian beef has been one of the biggest problems for local producers. However, political considerations, associations between nations, an unwillingness to offend friendly nations, and so forth, mean that the authorities here seem reluctant to tackle the issue. The problem should have been knocked on the head much earlier. The authorities are now making an effort to reduce the impact of the import of Brazilian beef. However, its import will continue, and local producers must accept the need to compete.

When Mr Ford said that DARD is not responsible for procurement, I got the impression that he supported Sinn Féin's amendment. He mentioned the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other public bodies that procure food.

Mr Ford: I sought to make the point that procurement is not solely DARD's responsibility and that an Executive-wide discussion is required. The Minister's appearance here today demonstrates that DARD accepts that it has some level of responsibility.

Mr Brolly: The Minister clearly outlined DARD's position and its responsibilities. However, DARD is not responsible for procurement.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCallister: I thank those Members who spoke in support of the UUP's motion. As my colleagues Mr Elliott and Mr Savage said, the UUP is more than happy to support the SDLP's amendment.

Mr Elliott clearly outlined the main issues when he opened the debate. The agrifood sector is Northern Ireland's largest employer. I declare an interest as a dairy farmer and shareholder in the processing company United Dairy Farmers.

Mr Elliott entered the food miles debate when he referred to the high quality of local products and the environmental impact of transporting so much food around the world. That impact is being drawn into sharper focus, particularly given rising fuel prices. I am thankful that more questions are now being asked about why so much food is being shipped into Northern Ireland, when excellent food is produced here. As much locally produced food as possible should be consumed here.

The Minister's opening remarks were about DFP's central procurement directorate. Why did she come here today? If she does not want to deal with procurement, the Executive could have put forward the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or any other Minister, to speak in the debate.

Mr Elliott and Mr Ford mentioned that procurement is a cross-cutting issue; DFP and DARD have responsibilities.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education are both massive spenders on food, and other areas of Government — for example, the police — were also mentioned.

1.30 pm

Given the benefits that sourcing local produce has for our local farmers, there is an impetus on all parts of Government to source food locally.

When moving the Sinn Féin amendment, Mr Doherty said that the Government have a role to play in prioritising the sourcing of local foods. It was unfortunate that Sinn Féin tabled that amendment, given that it added nothing to the debate, and, judging from the other parties' lack of support for it, that has been noted.

Mr Bradley rejected the Sinn Féin amendment, saying that it added to the bureaucracy that farmers deal with. Indeed, Dr McCrea made a similar point. That amendment

puts too much of the burden on to the already overburdened farming industry, which does not need any more bureaucracy. Dr McCrea also mentioned that the Assembly should encourage the labelling of locally produced foods.

Several speakers mentioned the health benefits of locally produced foods. The Minister herself accepted that the best of our produce should be used to feed the sick and weak in hospital. It is nonsensical that we are not guiding hospitals towards using the best-quality food for people whenever they are at their lowest.

Mr Bresland made several interesting points. He suggested that DARD sometimes puts too much emphasis on diversification. Diversification can have a positive role, but not everyone can diversify into the processing and marketing of their produce. Mr Bresland also mentioned the falling number of suckler cows — certainly, DARD could be doing a lot more to encourage the increase of suckler cow numbers. That is the cornerstone of the quality-beef end of the market. If too many of our suckler cows are lost, the industry will struggle to produce the top-quality beef that Mr Shannon mentioned and that we all look forward to when we go for lunch.

Mr Bresland also mentioned the role of the police and other public-sector bodies, and I include local councils in that. Many of my Assembly colleagues are local councillors, and pressure should be put on councils to support the use of local products. Mr Bresland mentioned different products from his own constituency — from Newtownstewart, Castlederg, and the Sperrins — that are good to know about.

Willie Clarke talked about InterTradeIreland, the movement of goods and public-sector buying power. I accept that the public sector has huge buying power. I want to point out that we are in direct competition with the Republic of Ireland; we do not all work together, so we must remember that. I know that the Member might not like that, but it happens to be true. Mr Clarke tried to shift the debate away from its focusing on the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, and he instead talked about the Executive. However, I want to know whether the Minister has introduced firm proposals about procurement to her Executive colleagues. I hope that she has been very active in drafting the policy for the Central Procurement Directorate.

Mr Irwin, who runs a large dairy farm in County Armagh, spoke of the difficulties that EU rules on procurement create. When making an intervention, Trevor Clarke made an interesting point about competing on a level playing field, and my colleague Mr Elliot made a similar point. Many in our farming industry feel that they are always up against it. Mr Ford mentioned gold plating, and it seems that, in Northern Ireland, we are always implementing and gold plating rules and living up to the highest standards, while others are not meeting all their obligations, or even being forced to meet them. That is an unfair advantage.

Mr Ford talked about fair trade. Fair trade should extend to local producers. Last year, the Ulster Unionist Party published a document on fair play for local farmers that highlighted the importance of fair trade across the world as well as locally.

Mr Ford said that DETI has a huge role to play in this matter, and the Minister talked about exports. DETI has a key role in promoting the agrifood sector, which, outside Government, is Northern Ireland's largest employer. Therefore, it is a hugely important industry to the economy of Northern Ireland.

Mr Savage mentioned the Balmoral Show and the showcasing of food at that show. To add to Mr Savage's point, the value of the Balmoral Show and local shows across Northern Ireland in educating the public and particularly young people about where our food comes from is important. Such shows make the link between our food products, how they are produced on farms and how they get to people's tables.

Mr Shannon lost no time in promoting produce from the Strangford constituency. There were four or five references to Portavogie prawns — I hope that he has some with him today to share around. He mentioned Comber potatoes, and Glastry Farm ice cream also got a fair mention. I do not know whether he is a shareholder in Glastry Farm; perhaps he should be their main marketing man. Mr Shannon made important points about diversification into processing, and talked about Tayto crisps as another fine example of local produce.

The Minister reiterated and addressed a lot of the issues that were raised. Some £27 million worth of food is bought annually by the Central Procurement Directorate. However, when the agrifood industry has a turnover of £2.4 billion, that is a little out of kilter. Therefore, the Government could possibly do more.

Northern Ireland, being so successful at producing, cannot consume all that is produced. Therefore, exports are our bread and butter.

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

Mr McCallister: I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to bring forward plans to increase the Northern Ireland public sector's procurement of locally produced food; and to promote country of origin labeling on menus in hotels and restaurants.

Former Military Sites

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other speakers will have five minutes. Two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Doherty: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the United Kingdom Government to transfer lands at the vacated military sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh to the Executive, to facilitate the development of the education village as proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I accept amendment No 1, which was proposed by the DUP.

As the MP for West Tyrone and an MLA for the constituency, I have great pleasure in tabling this motion, along with my colleagues Barry McElduff and Claire McGill. I welcome the amendment from my fellow West Tyrone MLAs Tom Buchanan and Alan Bresland.

This motion calls on the British Government to transfer lands at the vacated military sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh to the Executive, in order to facilitate the development of the education village as proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group and also to facilitate other social developments.

In West Tyrone, the most strategically important sites in regeneration terms are those at Lisanelly and St Lucia. Both cover an expanse of some 200 acres and are located in close proximity to the centre of Omagh town. Key stakeholders including the Omagh Educational Campus Group and the Lisanelly lands working group — which is a cross-party group of Omagh district councillors — have been working collectively with local and regional government to develop a shared vision for the future use of the site.

The process involved extensive consultation with educationalists, the business community and other interested individuals and groups. In the course of those consultations, a wide and varied number of ideas emerged. Central to those is the innovative regeneration project with the concept of a shared educational campus at its heart. That project has been developed and advanced by the Omagh Educational Campus Group, and its members are represented in the Public Gallery here today.

Those unprecedented proposals involve the collocation of schools from all sectors of the community on a shared educational site. By pooling resources and expertise, the broadest-possible curriculum could be made available to our young people in the most modern and up-to-date facilities. In the longer term, the educational campus

will create a specialised and skilled knowledge base that will benefit the wider economy of the region. The proposals are not only unprecedented in educational terms; they are also a practical expression of the collective desire for a shared future.

Coupled with the educational campus proposal, Omagh District Council has expressed interest in developing flood-plain land on the St Lucia site for recreation purposes and has been successful in acquiring funding through Sustrans Connect2 to develop a riverside walk through the site. That would enhance the connectivity of communities that have been physically separated by the huge military garrison. In turn, that will aid regeneration and community cohesion.

Other proposals include social and affordable housing; an enterprise centre; a Tyrone County museum; and the use of listed buildings in the site as a civic centre that would be open to the people of the Omagh district, the wider county, the north-west region and further afield. That would provide an opportunity to celebrate our shared heritage and culture.

In their entirety, the proposals enshrine the aspiration of a shared future. That is the guiding principle of our society as we emerge from decades of conflict and division, and look towards a brighter future.

Key stakeholders, including my own office, have been engaged in extensive meetings and the lobbying of Ministers. Correspondence indicates that the Department for Social Development — which has overall responsibility for regeneration — and the Department of Education are supportive of the proposals. Members will be aware that, in April 2003, a joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments indicated that vacated military and police sites might be made available to the regional Administration at Stormont. That is contained in paragraph 10 of annex 1 to the declaration.

The rationale behind that was to help underwrite the peace process and generate a public asset base for communities that had been affected adversely by the conflict and have a high multiple deprivation rating.

1.45 pm

However, the most recent proposal for vacated military sites is that in which the Executive, if they wish to acquire all or part of them, must do so at full market value. That Ministry of Defence (MOD) position was articulated by British Defence Minister, Des Browne, during a recent exchange with me in London. The Ministry of Defence's position runs contrary to the spirit of the joint declaration of April 2003, and the British Government's failure to fulfil their commitments are obstructing progress on that unprecedented proposal.

The failure of the British Government to fulfil their commitments has caused a delay in developing a master

plan for the site. That process would enable the planned development of St Lucia and Lisanelly to move forward in a way that supports the economic and social development of the region. If development of the site is not properly managed and planned, it could not only thwart future regeneration but undermine the excellent regeneration work that has already taken place in Omagh town.

Omagh District Council, in partnership with Departments and key stakeholders, has commissioned a team of specialist consultants to develop an Omagh-2025 vision. That work is at an advanced stage and it will provide a strategic framework for the development of Omagh that contributes to the balanced development of the region.

I ask the Assembly to back the motion unanimously. The Assembly's support will represent a major boost in our collective efforts to get the British Government to transfer the necessary lands at those vacated military sites and will allow this unique proposal to go ahead. A strong message from this Chamber will help refocus attention on the British Government's lack of political will on the issue. The location of schools from all sectors to that site will represent an inspirational beacon to the world in respect of conflict transformation. The British Government have it within their gift to make that happen, and they must be made to rise above short-term financial considerations and look at the bigger picture to help facilitate our shared future.

Mr Bresland: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Executive," and insert

"to be used for the development of the Omagh district, in line with the priorities set by the Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy, including the possible development of the education village proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group."

St Lucia Barracks has been described as the finest example of a Victorian barracks in the British Commonwealth. It is a listed building, and it has been in military use from the early 1880s until its recent closure. Lisanelly military base was established during the Second World War and was retained as a garrison by the Ministry of Defence until its recent closure. St Lucia and Lisanelly barracks have, over the years, brought considerable economic wealth to Omagh, and the long-term development of those two sites must also bring economic opportunities to the people of Omagh and west Tyrone and that opportunity must not be missed.

The St Lucia and Lisanelly sites offer over 47 hectares of development land in the heart of Omagh and offer the potential of being the largest regeneration site outside Belfast. Any development of those sites must also respect the history of the military barracks, especially in relation to the St Lucia site.

I recognise the need that exists in several local schools — especially Omagh High School — for major capital investment. However, I have reservations about the

concept of the education village. The development of an education village, which would attract the enrolment of up to 3,000 children on one site, will require significant investment in infrastructure, including a massive investment in the road infrastructure in the town of Omagh. As with many other towns, Omagh has major traffic problems, and to bring more than 3,000 children on to one site would cause major transport problems for Omagh.

The Lisanelly and St Lucia sites offer great economic opportunities for Omagh and its surrounding area. However, little or no thought has been given to alternative options for the development of those sites. Should the education village develop, it will potentially free up an additional 27 hectares of development land in Omagh town centre. In addition, it is important to factor in the possible impact that the review of public administration might have on sites that are currently occupied in Omagh town by Omagh District Council and the Western Education and Library Board.

I fully support the economic regeneration of Omagh, and there is a need to take a strategic approach to its long-term development. That strategic development should include the St Lucia and Lisanelly sites, along with other potential development sites that may become available as a result of the review of public administration, and any sites that may become available should the establishment of the education village proceed. The Programme for Government, which was agreed earlier this year, commits the Executive to economic regeneration and to building a dynamic and innovative economy. That concept is at the heart of the Programme for Government, and must also be at the heart of the development of the military sites.

The Programme for Government highlights the need to create jobs and attract inward investment. If the town of Omagh and the surrounding area are to prosper, creation of jobs must be the most important factor. Development of the military sites must provide the vehicle for job creation. I fully recognise that the proposals of the Omagh Educational Campus Group are innovative. However, those who support establishment of the education village have ignored alternative options for the sites, including any role that they could offer as a result of the proposed changes to local government. They also fail to develop a business case for the project.

I support the request to transfer both sites from the Ministry of Defence to the Northern Ireland Executive. I firmly believe that the St Lucia and Lisanelly sites should be developed to enhance the economic opportunities of the people of Omagh, in keeping with the commitment to regenerate the economy that is contained in the Programme for Government.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “village” and insert

“, social and affordable housing and civic facilities, as well as investment in an enterprise centre and the development of the necessary partnerships to realise the economic development potential of the site.”

I thank Pat Doherty, and his party colleagues who represent West Tyrone, for proposing the motion. I also commend the education authorities and educationalists in the area for their foresight, initiative and collaboration on the project so far. That is the type of co-operation that sets a good example for education generally in Northern Ireland, and for other aspects of the governance of Northern Ireland that involve several Departments.

The SDLP does not oppose the motion. We heard Pat Doherty's contribution. However, the amendment in my party's name adds to the motion, and points to other developments that can utilise the full potential of that extensive site, which amounts to almost 170 acres. I understand that up to six schools may be involved in the project, and it is very welcome that a special school is included in that number.

As in the utilisation of other developments, the support and co-operation of other key Departments is needed. The SDLP amendment mentions social housing, which would involve the Department for Social Development. For those who do not know the site, I should explain that there was housing there while it was a military barracks. Therefore, as part of any initiative, it makes sense to consider using the site for social and affordable housing.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety could also be involved. If there are to be schools on the sites, important support services, such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, could be provided. Those services would help children who attend those schools. Indeed, children from other schools throughout West Tyrone could come to the sites for assessments.

The inclusion of an economic development package would tie in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As the business case is developed, some form of visitor attraction — possibly an enterprise centre or a research and development facility — could serve not only West Tyrone but the entire west and, possibly, the border areas.

None of those projects would detract from the educational plans for the sites, the development of which would offer West Tyrone unique social and economic opportunities. Moreover, such a development would present great possibilities to enhance Tyrone's county town of Omagh.

When advancing any plans, an integrated approach should be adopted. The development should provide not only a base for the excellent schools to which we

have referred but, on the remaining lands, lasting social and economic benefits for the entire area. Such an approach would draw support from at least five or six Departments — possibly more. Their working towards the same objective will strengthen the case for securing the land from the MOD.

As Pat Doherty said, it is important that the Assembly's view be unanimous. Allan Bresland, the proposer of amendment No 1, said that this opportunity must not be missed. If we take those sentiments on board, we can send a clear message to the MOD that the development plans have the support of the Executive, the Assembly, the people of West Tyrone and, indeed, the entire Northern Ireland community.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Omagh sites, and I could not but be impressed by the facilities and the sites' potential. Rare will be the opportunities for such large tracts of land to become available for redevelopment so close to a town centre and in such a key position.

I would love those and other sites to come into the Northern Ireland Executive's ownership, and we have all been attempting to encourage Her Majesty's Government to do with those sites that which they did with the tranche of military sites that became available on the previous occasion on which the Executive were operating. The potential that such development would afford, not only to West Tyrone but to other places in Northern Ireland where military sites are located, is obvious. Mr Speaker, you will be aware that your home city seeks to develop the potential of such a site. Therefore, the development of former military sites would give Northern Ireland a huge economic boost.

Several Members suggested that the sites in Omagh should be used to build an education village, and further-education provision was highlighted. As Members who represent that area know, we have recently completed a new college, and, consequently, the opportunity to build a college on that site no longer exists. Having said that, the new college is not far away.

The concept of an education wedge in Londonderry that would, Mr Speaker, stretch into parts of your city is being considered, and I am sure that the Members for West Tyrone could be equally creative.

2.00 pm

The college was built recently at its current location, and it is a successful and popular institution. Therefore, the question of reinvestment from the further education sector into either of the sites is not a viable option. Had we been starting again, however, I would have been keen to see that happen.

I have visited the two sites and, having seen their potential and discussed it with the local district council,

I have no doubt that they offer a magnificent opportunity. I am sure that the use of the sites will not be confined to education, because they comprise large swathes of housing and open land — which, because of the flood plain, is not available for development — that is suitable for recreation and sport. I can think of no other boost that would be as great to the area as the transfer of those sites to the Executive.

The portents have not been good. Government spokespersons have set it aside, and the Conservative Party spokesperson for Northern Ireland said that the sites should be sold and not transferred to the Northern Ireland Executive. All Members must work hard to try to persuade the Prime Minister — who will attend our major economic conference next month — to transfer the sites to the Executive. Some positive announcements have been made in the past couple of days, and it would be fantastic to hear that the sites were to become available to the Northern Ireland Executive.

I would even be content if the sites were transferred through a rolling programme. The sites in west Tyrone are unoccupied, so there is a security cost. They have been offered to various parts of the public sector, and, in no time, they could be sold to developers. Alongside the impending conference, it is hoped that Members will prevail on the Prime Minister to give those sites to the Executive so that they can be developed and the people in west Tyrone will be able to take advantage of them in the most unique opportunity that will come about for many years.

Dr Deeny: I am delighted to speak to the motion, which deals with an issue in my constituency of West Tyrone. I support the motion and the amendments; I do not want to rock the boat, because it is important that the motion goes through in some form. I am worried about the inclusion of the word “possible” in amendment No 1, but I will support it. Amendment No 2 deals with other services, which Tommy Gallagher mentioned, but they may be included in the Programme for Government.

As Sir Reg Empey said, the sites have enormous potential, and they offer an opportunity that must not be missed — not only for west Tyrone but for the whole of Northern Ireland. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it embraces the future and the shared future.

The idea of the campus is inspirational. It is the way forward for the education of children in Northern Ireland. Members should note that the integrated college is not part of the project, because it applied for a site some time ago, and building on that site is well under way. The proposed campus is the future.

The project is supported by everyone across the political divide, Churches, school principals, governors, trustees, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Western Education and Library Board and all the business leaders in the area. It is a collective

vision of collaboration and co-operation being enhanced among schools, and it must be commended highly.

Special schools, primary schools, high schools and grammar schools will be located at the site, and the facility provided will be a full service, incorporating health services, social services, adult education, youth provision, sports, arts, recreation, and community regeneration and development. It is unique to have those services on one site.

The matter should be resolved urgently. This is the second time that it has been debated in the House; it was the subject of an Adjournment debate. The people of Omagh are excited about the proposal, which sets a precedent and an example for a shared future.

If the British Government are serious about maintaining peace and prosperity and about promoting a shared future, I agree that they should gift the site to the people of west Tyrone and Northern Ireland. That would be a wonderful gesture from the Northern Ireland Office and the British Government, and it would be a way of stating that they are determined that the peaceful society that we have now will be permanent. That would be a way of putting down a marker that states that they are serious about the future.

I went to the De La Salle school in Downpatrick, which was known as the “red high”. We were on one hill; the Protestant school was located on the other hill and was, ironically, known as the “green high”. We were always jealous of the guys who attended the “green high” because there were girls at their school and not at ours — we did not see girls from one end of the week to the next. I thank God that I was lucky enough to have attended third-level education and to have been involved in sport, because it was through those mediums that I met people from different religions and cultures. If I had stayed at home after leaving school at 18, I would have met few people from different religious backgrounds and cultures.

The proposal for an educational campus at the Lisanelly site is the way forward, and I am excited about it. The campus would be a wonderful flagship project for the Department of Education. I note that the Minister of Education is in the Chamber. The proposal would allow her Department to show the way forward. It is well known that some schools already need newbuilds, and the project would allow that to take place.

The plan is also exciting from a commercial point of view, as it would open up a huge area in central Omagh. The military site can be used for the rebuilding of schools, which is needed anyway. Not only would the future of education be settled, but land would become available in the centre of Omagh. It should be remembered that Omagh is the second-largest centre of population

west of the Bann. The development of the site would send a message not only to the people of Northern Ireland, but people further afield, that we are serious about a shared future.

Mr G Robinson: I support the DUP amendment. The two locations that are mentioned in the motion, Lisanelly and St Lucia, are valuable historical and architectural sites for Omagh and its hinterland. The sites are noted as being among the finest architectural examples of Victorian barracks in the world. Due to the importance of the barracks, we all want to know what their long-term future will be. Whether we like it or not, the barracks have played an important role in the history of Omagh. It is of great importance that the history of towns is not rewritten on a political basis and that a true, accurate record is kept. Omagh should be proud of its military history and should remember all those who travelled to fight for their country — regardless of class or creed — from the barracks.

More importantly, I understand that the educational village, which is a worthy proposal, is the only project to have been given serious consideration at the site. Where is the justification for that approach? A strategic view must be taken that considers all possible ramifications when approaching the development of the site. My colleagues Mr Bresland and Mr Buchanan outlined their concerns, and I readily agree with their outlook. Business cases must be presented to ensure that the most viable options, in line with the Programme for Government, the Budget and the local population, can best be met.

Scrutiny of the plans must consider the need to sensibly use the six sites that would become available if the plan were to go ahead. Consideration of how those six vacated sites would be used must form an integral part of the entire proposal.

An ill-thought out application for any one of those six sites has the potential to damage rather than enhance Omagh's prospects. On scratching the surface of the motion, I am afraid that a few serious concerns emerge that must be addressed before any definite proposal can be approved. If the proposal were to be approved, that would also set a serious precedent for those of us with military sites in our constituencies, whether vacated or soon to be vacated. That is a major concern.

Such vacated sites must be put to best use. That involves the examination of options and a rigorous strategic economic appraisal. That is why I support the DUP amendment and not the motion. Much more must be done before any proposal can be accepted.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I declare an interest as a member of the Western Education and Library Board and as a former teacher. I will speak to the motion, but first, I wish to comment on the DUP

amendment. I read the Official Report of 4 March 2008 to determine whether specific mention was made in that day's Adjournment debate solely on the benefits that might accrue to the Omagh District Council area. However, I was content that Mr Buchanan had included the wider western area in his comments. I welcome the involvement of the DUP in this debate.

In co-sponsoring the motion with my party colleagues, and in calling for cross-party support, which I believe exists in many ways, it is important to highlight the reasons why the education village project proposed by the Omagh educational campus group, is an opportunity that is too good to be lost.

As other Members have said, this pioneering project would see six secondary-level schools from different sectors in Omagh coming together in an education village campus. Each school would have its own independent environment on the campus and retain its own unique ethos. That is important from everyone's perspective; we want to live together, but we do not want to impose our position on others. However, each school would share state-of-the-art facilities, and excellent potential exists for collaborative working arrangements. That is vitally important in view of the challenges that we face from the entitlement framework and what schools will have to provide on the basis of that framework.

All of this would serve to benefit the quality of education for each and every child on the campus in an environment in which diversity is not only respected, but celebrated. If the education village becomes a reality, it will provide first-class education facilities for more than 3,000 pupils in a way that could not be provided in any stand-alone education unit.

On 4 March 2008, during the Adjournment debate secured by my colleague Barry McElduff, the Minister of Education, who is here today, said that the educational village must be established. As schools face up to the entitlement framework, as I have already said, this visionary project can create a template of best practice for providing state-of-the-art education facilities for our children in the years ahead while ensuring that we can foster genuine reconciliation in a practical and fundamental way.

We talk a great deal about how young people are the future. There is symbolism in that what was once a military site, will, through this visionary proposal, enable young people to share facilities in one place and work out their futures together. That symbolism is important.

This is a visionary project in a space that was used for military purposes, and can now be used in a positive manner. That will provide inspiration to transform other areas where there has been conflict. Opportunities such as this are rare, and the Assembly must join me in calling on the British Government to not only pay lip service

to their avowed support for measures that foster true reconciliation, but — using the vernacular — to put their money where their mouths are and transfer the necessary land to make this new beginning happen. Go raibh miath agat.

2.15 pm

Mr Elliott: I apologise that I have only just arrived. This is an important issue. No Member will disagree with the sentiments of the motion — that the land should be transferred. The MOD would gladly transfer the land. However, at what cost? I support the transfer of the land for free, which is what the motion calls for. However, I have doubts that that will happen. From discussions that I have had with the MOD, I believe that it will want as much money as it can get for the land, which it is entitled to do.

It is interesting that, last week, Members debated a motion about the military site at Forkhill, which one Department was happy to purchase. However, in this case, the Department concerned is seeking the transfer of the land without charge.

It is great that Mr McElduff is taking an interest in military bases. From his background, I assume that he always took an interest in military bases, but from a different perspective.

Some time ago, I had an interesting conversation with the manager of Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He highlighted the significance of the site to the entire Omagh district, and the opportunities that it will bring, such as the education campus. That should be developed. It has been mentioned that, when the headquarters of the new combined council is moved to Fermanagh, a council sub-office could be opened on the site. I support such a move.

There are concerns in the community about how the project will be developed, funded and what will happen to the redundant sites of the schools that move to the proposed education village. Will the six schools that have shown an interest in moving put their existing sites up for sale? The money that is made from such sales would help to progress the project. The schools that have expressed an interest in moving are from the controlled sector and the Catholic-maintained sector. Has there been any exploration with the Western Education and Library Board and the Catholic-maintained sector of whether money from the sale of the schools' existing sites could be used to develop the project? My and my party's support for the project is clear.

There is concern about potential traffic problems and the transport arrangements to get to the site. If a large volume of children attend school at the site, Roads Service — in conjunction with the education authorities — will have to provide a collective transport system and structure in the area.

It is interesting that housing has been one of the projects that have been mentioned for the military site. There are quite a few houses already on the site. I do not know whether those houses can be developed in conjunction with the development of an education village. Members may be able to tell me the number of new builds that are on schedule in the Omagh area. There is a proposal for a newbuild school at Carrickmore and a newbuild for a new integrated school at Omagh.

It may be premature to progress with those newbuilds while the project is under way. Indeed, a bigger project should perhaps be considered.

All those questions must be answered. Another important question relates to whether one section of the community would dominate on the campus. I would not like to think that the Catholic maintained sector would dominate simply because there is a smaller unionist population in the Omagh area.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Lisanelly site offers a unique opportunity to the educational community in Omagh to move in a new direction and to embrace the concept of sharing, which is becoming a central theme in the developing educational process. The challenges facing schools require sharing and co-operation to meet the entitlement framework. Sharing of buildings, facilities and staff can help to ensure that a first-class educational estate is available to the young people of the Omagh district, without the unnecessary waste of duplication.

An education village at Lisanelly would make a major contribution to a shared future, by integrating educational provision in the area, with the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors working in co-operation, collaboration and interdependency.

I welcome the strong buy-in to the proposals from local interests. The scheme has the potential to lead the way and be an example to other areas. Furthermore, the Lisanelly campus fits very well with the policy of area planning, and it will facilitate that process in the Omagh area.

We have heard much about the peace dividend, but, sadly, many of our communities have seen little evidence of it. Once again, we have an opportunity to allow the people of west Tyrone to share in that dividend. We all hope that the suffering that the people of Omagh have had to endure — and still endure — will, in some way, be ameliorated by the development of the scheme.

The joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments of April 2003 promised vacated military sites to local people who have endured decades dominated by the Troubles. The declaration states:

"Many of the vacated military and police sites ... might be made available ... to ensure that the process of normalisation generates a new public asset base for those communities most directly affected by the security arrangements to date."

There is no doubt that Omagh is one such place.

During Question Time on 3 March 2008, in response to a question about the Lisanelly site, the First Minister said:

“We will press the issue again shortly — directly with the Prime Minister if need be.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p137, col 1*].

During the same Question Time, I put a question to the First Minister — and I am glad to see him in the Chamber — about the Forkhill military site. His response was:

“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.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p137, col 2*].

I welcome the commitment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the acquisition of those sites, and I urge them to redouble their efforts to ensure that the sites are available to our people without further delay. I also urge them to meet the Prime Minister as soon as possible to press the case. I commend the Omagh community for its work in developing the proposal.

As public representatives, the least we can do is to provide the resources needed for the community’s vision to become a reality. As I said on a previous occasion, if devolution is to be meaningful to our citizens, we must be seen to deliver on projects such as the one we now discuss.

We have heard much talk about a peace dividend; we must see the evidence of that. Communities that have suffered through decades of conflict deserve recognition, and the project proposed for Omagh fits the bill perfectly in that respect. I call on all the Departments —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up.

Mr D Bradley: I call on all the Departments concerned — Social Development, Education and Health — to work in co-operation to ensure that all the people of Omagh benefit from the project. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Members will be aware that Question Time is due to start at 2.30 pm. I propose that the House takes its ease until then. When we resume the debate, the next Member to speak will be Mr Trevor Lunn

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland: Intercultural Education

1. **Mr Elliott** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it is taking to promote education in ethnic minority cultures and additionally to promote the education of Northern Irish culture to resident ethnic minorities. (AQO 2884/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The deputy First Minister and I are committed to promoting social inclusion for new and established minority ethnic communities. In fact, that is one of the targets in our Programme for Government. A key step in promoting social inclusion and integration must be mutual understanding and relationship-building between people of different cultural backgrounds — whether longstanding in Northern Ireland or recently arrived on these shores.

We have just completed the awards process for a new one-year funding scheme for minority ethnic communities. We have substantially increased the amount of money available for that scheme — by 33% — which will mean that more organisations across society will now be funded to promote mutual understanding and good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, thereby improving community relations and facilitating integration. However, that must be a two-way process that requires efforts from all involved — host communities and new arrivals.

We are keen to ensure that all people have an awareness of their responsibilities as well as their rights. In partnership with other organisations, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has funded a series of guides to migrant workers’ rights to help new arrivals to integrate into our society. Those guides provide comprehensive information on social security, housing, employment, health and immigration.

Other Departments have a significant role to play; in particular, the Department of Education. Citizenship is a new part of the revised curriculum, being phased in

between September 2007 and June 2010. It will be compulsory for all pupils, from year one onwards. Under that part of the curriculum, young people will explore issues such as cultural identity and heritage, diversity, inclusion and promoting respect for others. In doing that, they will look at our indigenous cultures and other cultures, including those of minority ethnic people who live here.

Mr Elliott: I thank the First Minister for that comprehensive answer. Thus far, has any work been undertaken with specific employers, in particular those based in the Dungannon and south Tyrone area, where there are a large number of migrant workers? Has any work been carried out with large employers such as Moy Park, Dumbia foods, Linden Foods and Fintec Crushing and Screening Ltd?

The First Minister: The employers are working on the programme of integration. I have no up-to-date information on the specific area that the Member mentioned, but I will write to him about it.

Mr Ford: The First Minister has responded to a question on “Northern Irish culture”. Can he inform us what he considers to be Northern Irish culture?

Given the huge differences in the cultural backgrounds of the people in this region — be they indigenous or more recently arrived — does he agree that the most important part of building a shared future is to recognise that diversity?

The First Minister: In recognising the cultural aspects of that issue, one key objective of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is to protect, nurture and grow cultural capital. In developing cultural capital, the Department promotes social inclusion and the positive economic development of Northern Ireland. Cultural capital manifests itself in four significant ways: in our people; in our products; in our services; and in our infrastructure. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be able to provide the Member with more detailed information on that matter.

Mr O'Dowd: A Cheann Comhairle, I welcome the 33% increase in funding for ethnic minorities. How does the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister propose to promote tolerance and understanding of the traditions of the Travelling community and, indeed, understanding between the Travelling community and the settled community, and vice versa?

The First Minister: Will the Member help me by repeating the first question?

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise, First Minister. I was congratulating the Department on the 33% increase in funding for ethnic minority groups. Will OFMDFM outline how it is promoting better understanding between the Travelling community and the settled community, and vice versa?

The First Minister: Members of the Travelling community have submitted several applications for funding. Those applications will be attended to, and we must wait and see how that will happen.

US Investment Conference

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the actions it is taking to encourage attendance at the US investment conference. (AQO 2871/08)

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister and I, along with our colleague Nigel Dodds, are heavily involved in efforts to attract senior business executives of US companies and other influential figures from that country to the conference.

We have made four trips to the United States in the past three months — I am just getting back to normal after one such trip. We met chief executive officers to encourage them to attend the conference. We also took our message to President Bush when we met him on 7 December, and the deputy First Minister reiterated that message when he met the President on St Patrick's Day. I have just returned from a week-long visit to New York and Washington DC, where I presented the Northern Ireland business opportunity to senior executives in the financial services and the investment-funds sectors, as well as to members of the Bush Administration.

I am pleased to report that I had the opportunity to conduct several one-to-one meetings with chief executives, and, as a direct result of those meetings, several such people have finalised their plans to attend the conference. I also used my meeting in Washington DC with the Under Secretary of the Treasury for International Affairs to encourage him to come and see for himself what Northern Ireland business can offer.

Minister Dodds and other Executive colleagues have also recently contacted many businesses and Government organisations in the United States to seek their advice on how best to position Northern Ireland's economic message and identify potential conference participants. In addition to our meetings with President Bush, we had extensive discussions with the President's Special Envoy on Northern Ireland; the Secretary of State for Commerce; Michael Bloomberg, who is the Mayor of New York; and Senators Clinton and Kennedy.

Minister Dodds and Invest NI have been liaising closely with the Northern Ireland Bureau business advisory group, which comprises contacts in the US who are working on our behalf to promote the conference and target potential participants.

I am delighted to say that, as a result of those efforts, on my return from the US last week, corporate America's interest in the conference was at a particularly high

level. More than 80 delegates, who represent more than 50 high-profile corporations, have indicated that they plan to attend, and that significantly passes the target of 30 to 40 chief executive officers and senior executives that Minister Dodds announced earlier in 2008. In fact, the number of invitees who have confirmed that they will attend has resulted in the need to readjust planned accommodation arrangements for the duration of the conference.

Finally, I was delighted to attend last week's unprecedented announcement by New York City Comptroller, William C Thompson Jnr, at which he committed \$150 million to a fund that will be used to invest in various projects in Northern Ireland. The New York city pension funds' investment is a massive vote of confidence in Northern Ireland. It is a substantial endorsement of our key priority of driving economic development and demonstrates that the conference has already produced significant dividends.

Mr Moutray: I want to congratulate the First Minister on the role that he has played during recent visits to America and the job that he has done to attract US investment to Northern Ireland. Can he give details of the role that the US Administration will play in May's investment conference?

The First Minister: My job was done with the help of many others. Everyone who was involved made strong pleas in the United States of America. As well as politicians' visits, visits to America from businessmen and others have been helpful. We are moving in the right direction.

I was absolutely flabbergasted by the announcement that was made during our meeting with members of New York's trade unions. If Members study their history, they will find that although many controversies arose in the past, those have now been overcome. All the people of Northern Ireland will benefit from the freedom of New York's trade unions to help us in our time of need.

Shortly after that meeting, the deputy First Minister and I also met the New York State Comptroller, who is to attend the conference. I understand that another fund that contains a large sum of money may also come Northern Ireland's way. We look forward to having a good and successful time and to taking a step towards making Northern Ireland what it should be.

Mr B McCrea: Does the First Minister agree that the Executive's ability to make quick, decisive and informed decisions will greatly influence the decisions of potential investors in Northern Ireland? Can he assure the House that he has made that point known to potential investors? Does he believe that the delay in making a decision on the Maze project is undermining the process?

Furthermore, does the recent resignation of Tony Whitehead signal a further delay? What steps does the

First Minister intend to take in order to deal with that delay?

The First Minister: The first part of the Member's question is flawed; it is wrong for him to think that the Executive have not made rapid progress in the United States of America.

2.45 pm

I have been to the United States many times but I have never witnessed such enthusiasm as I did on my most recent visit. Ten of the principal banks in the United States were represented at one breakfast meeting that I addressed. Those banks will also be represented at the investment conference in Belfast.

We will be inviting — and indeed will have the joy of receiving — to Northern Ireland, people who can help us in this time of need. We should be careful not to criticise them, rather, we should thank them for what they are doing and encourage them to do even more. When those businesspeople come to Northern Ireland, I hope that there will be no controversy among us. We should welcome them as friends and hope that we will receive more help from them.

I did not go to the United States as a beggar, rattling a can and saying that I wanted paper money only.
[Laughter.]

I am glad that I have made those men laugh because they had looked very sorrowful — I thought that they were attending a wake when I came into this meeting.

We should be grateful to those businesspeople for what they have done — but they, too, will benefit. My message in the United States was that if businesspeople come with us, we will do them good. We can do them good as they do us good.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gallagher: I note the demanding schedule of the First Minister's visit to the United States. We are happy to send him off again right away if he is going to return with another emerald fund. That, of course, goes for the deputy First Minister, too.

Does the First Minister agree that the emerald fund parcel should be examined in advance of the investment conference? Will the \$150 million on offer be invested entirely in Northern Ireland, or will half of the fund be invested in New York? Whatever we are getting, what will that amount be in sterling?

The First Minister: How the fund will be used is a matter for the organisation that will be set up; indeed, an organisation has already been set up to handle that money for the unions. It would not do for me to tell that organisation what it must do with the money. However, we can make suggestions about how the money should be spent. Indeed, I hope that everyone will make strong representations to the organisation.

The better the case that we make, the more that they will be impressed, and we will win the money.

Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps being taken to introduce legislation in Northern Ireland similar to the Great Britain Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005 and if the Minister will confirm that this should be undertaken as soon as possible. (AQO 2855/08)

The First Minister: We can confirm that we intend to bring forward similar regulations for Northern Ireland. That matter also deals with policy issues that fall under the responsibility of the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Regional Development. Therefore, the deputy First Minister and I have written to those Ministers seeking their support.

Our officials are developing the regulations and are consulting with officials in the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development who have the policy lead.

Although it is not possible to confirm the exact timing for making the regulations, the deputy First Minister and I can confirm that we will ensure that the legislation is introduced as soon as possible, taking into account the processes that we are required to undertake.

I understand that officials will brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the regulations at its meeting this week, and we will consult the Committee during the development process.

Mr Shannon: The reason for that question and for my concern is that the OFMDFM Committee, of which I am a member, has been informed that the subcommittee, which consists of officials from DOE, DRD and OFMDFM, has not even met. That subcommittee is the first stage of the process, and, if it has not met, the regulations cannot be developed. Will the First Minister tell the House why that subcommittee has not met and when it intends to do so?

The First Minister: Although there has been some delay on the transport regulations, officials have been working on other disability issues, including the Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 and the publication of guidance on matters to be taken into account in determining questions relating to the definition of disability. In order to bring the guidance into operation, two pieces of legislation were made: the Disability Discrimination (Guidance on the Definition of Disability) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008; and the Disability

Discrimination (Guidance on the Definition of Disability) (Appointed Day) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

As the transport regulations involve three Departments, an initial meeting of senior officials took place on 19 March 2008. The establishment of an interdepartmental working group was discussed at that meeting, and ministerial approval is being sought from all three Departments to move that work forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

Like Mr Shannon, I listened recently to a powerful presentation in the OFMDFM Committee from the Omnibus Partnership, which is based in north Down. That group gave powerful testimonies about the obstacles to accessing public transport that its members face day in, day out. Will the First Minister reassure the Assembly that all possible measures are being taken to provide suitable modification to existing and future public-transport vehicles?

The First Minister: As DOE and DRD have policy responsibility for those matters, it was unclear initially which Department had the powers to make the transport regulations under article 7 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. As the primary legislation team that works on the Order had already progressed considerable work on the public authorities, premises, private clubs and questions regulations, and to avoid any delay in making those regulations, consultation on them was launched in July 2006. In November 2006, OFMDFM received legal advice that it, rather than DOE or DRD, was responsible for making the transport regulations under the Departments (Transfer and Assignment of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999.

The required commencement Order was made on 7 November 2007 for article 7 of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, entitled the Disability Discrimination (2006 Order) (Commencement No. 4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007. That provided OFMDFM with the power to remove the exemption for the operation of transport services from Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 on 31 December 2007.

Now that the passage is clear, we can go forward. The honourable Member asked me to give him an assurance. To the best of my ability, I assure him that we want to do everything that is necessary to solve that dreadful problem.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the acknowledged therapeutic value of free public transport for disabled people, what measures will the First Minister take to encourage his Executive colleagues to introduce it? What is he doing to reduce travel costs for people — especially those on

low incomes — who use public transport to attend medical appointments?

The First Minister: There is a proposal to introduce free travel for people aged 60 years and over. I cannot say anything further on that matter.

US Investment Conference

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in the light of the recent downturn in the economy of the United States of America, if it has received any assurance from the United States Administration that this is an appropriate time for the investment conference. (AQO 2894/08)

The First Minister: The US/Northern Ireland investment conference has been planned for some time. Its purpose is to market the long-term economic product that Northern Ireland has to offer; that is an important message to convey during the early years of the Executive.

We are encouraged by the direct support of the President, the US Secretary of Commerce, the US Secretary of the Treasury and many other influential business figures from that country. Over several months, Ministers have been involved in extensive consultation with representatives of the United States Administration and the business community to develop the event.

The international business community must recognise that the Executive are focused on economic matters and that they are developing a product that will assist our key priority — to build economic prosperity. We have taken extensive advice on the date of the conference. As I outlined in an earlier answer, during my visit to the United States last week, I met senior members of the Bush Administration and discussed the recent performance of the US economy and its potential impact on the conference. A number of points were made in response, including the fact that 50% of corporate American profits derive from overseas operations.

Moreover, US-based companies continually seek to explore new markets. That is an important point, given that 95% of the world's commerce takes place outside the United States. Against that background, Northern Ireland represents an excellent investment opportunity for US companies because, during periods of economic volatility, such companies will seek new markets in which to invest.

There is a high level of interest in the conference, and attendance levels will be significantly higher than expected. That fact, coupled with the announcement made on Friday 11 April in New York and today's announcement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Finance in the Irish Republic on the establishment of an international financial services

centre, bears out the position that I have outlined. I welcome the statement made by the Taoiseach-elect of the Irish Republic.

For those reasons, I am convinced that this is the best time to hold the event. It will be a success and will significantly help us to achieve our number one priority, as set out in the Programme for Government: the development of a dynamic and prosperous economy.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate the First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and Invest NI officials for their efforts in arranging the event; the number of acceptances is testimony to that. Will the First Minister outline which sectors in the US have been targeted to attend the conference?

3.00 pm

The First Minister: We targeted the sectors that were suggested by President Bush's ambassador. She provided us with the names of the people whom she considered it would be best for us to contact and invite to the conference. It would be foolish for us, sitting in Northern Ireland, to think that we know who should be invited.

The most influential members of the business community in the United States of America have been contacted and invited to meetings at which the programme was put before them. The deputy First Minister and I received a wonderful response. They did not promise to think about it; they are coming to the conference. As has been said, finding sufficient accommodation is difficult. Therefore, if my friend wants to open his home, we may be able to supply some millionaires to occupy it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Development Programme 2007-2013

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that Strathfoyle, Newbuildings and Culmore will be included within the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

(AQO 2928/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Some time ago, I asked my officials to review the status of those three areas in the Derry urban area, as well as some areas in the Belfast metropolitan area. Concerns had been raised by various politicians, groups and individuals in the north-west that the three areas, which are locally preserved as

rural, had been excluded from the 'Rural Development Programme 2007-2013'. My officials worked with NISRA and have completed the review. I am pleased to announce that Strathfoyle, Newbuildings and Culmore are now included in areas that are eligible for rural-development programmes. Also included are four areas in the Belfast metropolitan area: Milltown, Helen's Bay, Crawfordsburn and Groomsport. I hope that their inclusion will mean that rural dwellers will make good use of the opportunities that the programme provides.

Ms Anderson: I welcome the Minister's confirmation of the inclusion of those areas, and I thank her for her efforts. Will she outline the potential benefits to the community their inclusion in the 'Rural Development Programme 2007-2013'?

Ms Gildernew: Now that those areas are eligible for the programme, rural dwellers, farmers, businesses, and community groups will be able to apply through open calls for the measures that come under axis 3: farm diversification; micro-business creation; tourism; village renewal; and conservation of rural heritage. That will create opportunities to build communities and the economy in those areas.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister outline what progress her Department has made on the implementation of axis 1 of the programme, particularly measure 1.3, which concerns the modernisation of agricultural holdings?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what the Member's question is: I could not quite pick up what he said. I will happily reply to his question in writing.

Mr P Ramsey: I join Martina Anderson in welcoming the Minister's response to the question on Strathfoyle, Culmore and Newbuildings. Will the Minister tell Members which benchmark was used to assess whether such areas should be included in the 'Rural Development Programme 2007-2013'? What, if any, consideration was given to the area-based concerns — for example, the traffic problems and resulting high level of fatalities in Culmore — that have been put to other Ministers? Concerns have also been raised about contentious planning applications in the area.

Ms Gildernew: My Department is not responsible for those two issues. We included those communities in the 'Rural Development Programme 2007-2013' to promote the opportunities that it offers to those deemed to be outside the urban area in Derry. As a result, an additional 11,500 rural dwellers will be included in the programme. The effect on the overall distribution of funds will be negligible, but more people in rural areas will have an opportunity to benefit from the programme. However, the inclusion of those areas will have little effect on other Departments.

Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe

2. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the issues discussed at her recent meeting with the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development and to outline her vision for Northern Ireland having a more influential role in Europe. (AQO 2926/08)

Ms Gildernew: I highlighted the importance of the EU task force in maximising the North's economic potential at a meeting with Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel on 14 March 2008.

The Member will be aware that that report was published today. I took the opportunity to share our initial thoughts on the CAP health check with the commissioner. In particular, I raised issues of importance to us, such as modulation, simplification of the single farm payment scheme, preparing the dairy sector for a soft landing when quotas are removed in 2015, and the abolition of set-aside.

Furthermore, I raised the issue of the WTO talks, and I stressed to the commissioner the concerns of the local agrifood sector and the need to achieve a balanced outcome to the negotiations, so that they do not have a disproportionate and detrimental impact on agriculture. I also discussed progress with the farm nutrient management scheme, and how the Department and farmers are striving to complete work by the end of December 2008.

Regarding the single farm payment, I relayed to the commissioner the continuing concern here about the penalties that arose in 2005 as a result of duplicate fields. Although the commissioner recognised the difficulty, she was very clear that there was no scope to deviate from the provisions of the legislation that DARD has followed to date.

I shall announce the opening of the countryside management scheme at an event in late spring or early summer.

Finally, I want to build on the work of the EU task force and the positive relationships that already exist with the EU Commission to ensure that our voice is heard, that we make the most of the opportunities available to us, and that we play a full and constructive role in EU affairs.

Mr Doherty: Does the fact that this is still only a regional Assembly present the Minister with any particular difficulties in being taken seriously in Europe by the European commissioners?

Ms Gildernew: I do not think so; the fact that Commission President Barroso saw fit to establish a special EU task force, aimed specifically at strengthening our relationship with Brussels, is clear evidence that we punch well above our weight. On various important

issues — for example, rural development or animal health — we have demonstrated that engaging directly with the EU Commission can pay handsome dividends, and I fully intend to continue with such engagement.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister raised important issues with the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, one of which was the issue of duplicate fields. Certainly, the resolution of that issue will be of great benefit to many of Northern Ireland's farmers; however, perhaps the Minister could also resolve the issue within the Department. Many farmers believe that the Department's resolution of the issue could ultimately become the way in which the EU legislation, which is currently rather strict, is interpreted.

Ms Gildernew: As the Member pointed out, I did raise the issue of duplicate fields with the commissioner, who was concerned that the regulations must be applied in such cases. Obviously, I have discussed that issue with Department officials since taking office. I am keen to emphasise that there is no gold-plating of the regulations — we intend to make the application of the single farm payment process as helpful to the farmers as possible.

I accept that the public perception of the issue may not necessarily fit with that description of it; however, I assure the Member that I have taken every available opportunity to ensure that the issue is resolved to the benefit of the farmer in as many cases as possible. I am obviously not content with the EU situation and will continue to work to resolve it; however, at the moment, I do not receive much succour from the Commission on it.

Mr Elliott: Has the Minister made a submission to the European Union regarding the EU health check? If so, what proposals and suggestions have been included in it?

Ms Gildernew: We are at an early stage of the health check, so our communication involved making the Commission aware of our initial thoughts on it, and the issues affecting Northern Ireland in particular. Therefore, the Commission has an opportunity to take that into account before it publishes its legislative proposals in May. Following that, my Department will conduct a consultation to inform my position for the upcoming negotiations, later this year.

Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the impact of increased vehicle excise duty on farmers who currently own and use 4x4 vehicles to carry out their daily agricultural business. (AQO 2933/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. DARD has insufficient information about the duty at farm level to

make a reliable assessment of the impact that the change will have.

Duties vary according to the level of vehicles' CO₂ emissions. Furthermore, any assessments are further complicated by the fact that farmers often use 4x4 vehicles for business purposes and for personal use. In absolute terms, vehicle excise duty represents a small part of the overall costs of running a farm business. However, I accept that any increase in costs will be unwelcome for farmers.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister accept that a more lenient excise duty should apply when the use of 4x4 vehicles is essential?

Ms Gildernew: Taxation and excise duties are excepted matters. Although it would be desirable for the Executive to have more autonomy on fiscal matters, it is not currently in the gift of my Department to make changes in that area. I appreciate that increasing costs are unwelcome for any business, but my hands are tied as far as excise duty is concerned.

Mr Irwin: Given that farmers are required by law to use 4x4 vehicles to tow trailers, does the Minister agree that the increased vehicle excise duty is unfair to them? The legislation was designed to encourage people to downgrade their vehicles. Therefore, why should farmers be forced to pay higher excise duties when they do not have the option of downgrading?

Ms Gildernew: I agree that that is unfair. However, as I said, we did not make the rules. I accept that one of the difficulties in working with a body across the water is that we cannot reach that level of understanding. I recognise that the impetus for the legislation was to try to get people to use vehicles that are more fuel efficient, and I recognise that there is a need for that. However, it is an unfortunate and difficult situation for farmers that is not in our gift to resolve.

Mr O'Loan: My question also concerns fuel. Has the Minister made any arrangements to help the fishing industry to deal with the high prices of diesel? Furthermore, what assessment has she made of the consequences to the industry if those high prices continue?

Ms Gildernew: Most of our fishing fleet trawls for prawns, which requires the consumption of a considerable quantity of fuel. Fishermen, however, benefit from a tax rebate on their fuel, which means that it is about 10p per litre cheaper than the red diesel that is used by farmers.

Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone

4. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her reasons for not accepting the recommendations of both the Assembly and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

to compensate farmers who suffered financial loss as a result of scientific advice concerning the presence of alpha-nortestosterone in farm animals. (AQO 2837/08)

Ms Gildernew: When this issue was debated in the Assembly, I outlined the actions that I had taken and why my Department would not pay compensation to the farmers affected. Although many of the events occurred well before I became Minister, I made it a priority to deal with the issue quickly and proactively. I met the farmers involved and apologised for the distress and trauma that was caused by the on-farm searches. I also went beyond my Department's statutory obligation and authorised a goodwill payment to farmers to cover the cost of condemned animals, which resulted in the payout of over £87,000 to 139 farmers.

Furthermore, I initiated a review of DARD's handling of the matter to ascertain what lessons could be learned. I accepted that report's recommendations in full, and those are now being implemented by the Department to improve future handling arrangements.

Legal advice confirmed that, under EU law, DARD must remove from the food chain male cattle that test positive for alpha-nortestosterone, regardless of whether evidence of illegal administration has been found. DARD is also required to carry out appropriate follow-up investigations on the herd of origin. Legal advice was clear that DARD can discharge that responsibility without incurring liability to pay any compensation.

I reiterate my view that that was an honourable and correct approach, which balanced the requirement for DARD to meet its statutory obligation to protect public health and maintain the reputation of the local livestock industry, while ensuring that no one was unfairly or unreasonably treated. Given the unique circumstances that prevailed at that time, I am content that my Department handled that complex and difficult issue in the most reasonable manner possible.

The Ruddock report concluded that the actions taken by DARD were reasonable and complied with legislation. That report also made a number of recommendations on how DARD could improve the handling of similar situations in the future, and I am glad to be able to report that all of those recommendations have now been implemented by the Department.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. Naturally, though, I remain unsatisfied with her lack of real action on the issue. If the Minister in any way doubts my concern or the importance of my continual comments on the issue, is she prepared to accept a non-transferable invitation to visit the farming families that were most affected by the false allegations that were made against them?

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: I had planned to meet four of the most-affected families before now, but I had to postpone those meetings for a short time due to diary commitments. I have been very proactive in dealing with the families affected — I met them on a number of occasions, and I will be looking at what can be done to ease the hurt.

I reiterate that I was not the Agriculture Minister when that issue arose. Therefore, I can only take so much of the responsibility for what happened. I have made considerable effort to alleviate the financial hardship caused. That remains my position. I hope to meet members of the most-affected families in the next week or two.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on the actions that she took in respect of the alpha-nortestosterone issue. Have the recommendations of the Ruddock review been implemented? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: The Department is in the process of implementing each of the recommendations of that review. Those recommendations should strengthen and improve the procedures of the Department, particularly in relation to faster policy development in light of emerging science, and better communication regarding on-farm searches.

As the review highlighted, meat processors are an important link between the producer and consumer. My Department is committed to involving them more fully — via the representative body NIMEA — in developing contingency plans for the future.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her answer. Even at this late stage, will the Minister accept that, in the handling of this entire matter, some DARD officials made unsubstantiated allegations against a number of farmers? Will the Minister also accept that a number of farmers suffered very severely, both financially and by way of character defamation, due to wrong assumptions that departmental officials made?

Ms Gildernew: I have already said that the Department regrets any disturbance or indignation caused to the families. The actions of the Department were guided by EU law to protect the consumer and the wider beef industry.

Assisting the Fishing Industry

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to encourage assistance for the fishing industry through the de minimis scheme. (AQO 2902/08)

11. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she has given to suspending landing and marketing fees for

this coming financial year and to provide an emergency grant to assist the fishing industry. (AQO 2899/08)

Ms Gildernew: With the Speaker's permission, I will take questions 5 and 11 together.

I have met representatives of the fishing industry about that matter. Others have written to me about the financial difficulties faced by the fishing industry because of high fuel costs. There is every indication that the cost of energy will continue to rise — that will have a knock-on effect for many industries and for domestic consumers.

Trawlers use a great deal of diesel. Therefore, energy costs represent a high proportion of the input costs of fishing businesses. Fish prices have been slow to respond and profit margins have been squeezed. I have listened carefully to proposals made by and on behalf of the fishing industry. I acknowledge that the catching sector has difficulties in coping with high fuel costs, and I applaud the initiatives taken to reduce costs through collective purchasing arrangements. However, many other industries also experience difficulties with high energy costs.

The European Commission's regulation on de minimis aid, which was adopted in July last year, allows member states to pay up to €30,000 per three-year period per beneficiary. De minimis aid is deemed not to distort competition, and the Spanish Government have opted to pay such aid, reportedly to maintain industry competitiveness.

I have been asked whether de minimis aid could be used to offset charges such as those levied by the Fishery Harbour Authority. In principle, they could, but a longer-term strategic plan is needed to deal with the problems of spiralling fuel costs and low fish prices. That was one of the issues that I discussed with Commissioner Borg when I met him in Brussels on 1 April. He encouraged my Department to develop such a plan.

We must examine options for restructuring the industry to create the right conditions to attract new entrants and encourage investment in newer boats and equipment. The aim should be to have a fleet that is capable of fishing more efficiently and is less vulnerable to changing market conditions.

I want to begin a dialogue about that aim with the industry so that a strategic plan for a profitable and sustainable fishing industry can be jointly developed. In doing so, we should together consider the scope for utilising the €36 million of public investment that is available under the European Investment Fund.

One issue that was raised was the days-at-sea regime. As I said in my statement following the December Council, some flexibility was secured in the way that that could be operated. I decided that the Department should introduce a different arrangement for managing

days at sea — one that is known as a kilowatt-day system. Under those arrangements, vessels will be able to fish the same number of days that they were able to in 2007. My officials will consult industry representatives on the detailed implementation arrangements.

I have also asked officials to examine the scope for meeting some of the costs associated with the operation of the satellite vessel-monitoring system here. I will make a full statement to the Assembly in the near future when I have completed my consideration of the various representations that have been made to me.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for visiting Kircubbin last week; it was very much appreciated by the members of the regeneration group. The Minister must know that the fishing industry is dying before our eyes. The fishing personnel are adamant that our Minister can help, either through the de minimis scheme or by other means, and they ask her to act in whatever way she can before it is too late. The Spanish and the French have given grants to help their hard-pressed fishing industries. Why can the Minister not help the Northern Irish fishermen?

Ms Gildernew: Mr McCarthy is correct. The Spanish Government have opted to pay de minimis aid to their fishing industry, reportedly to maintain industry competitiveness. It is my view that a longer-term plan is needed to restructure the industry and to encourage investment in newer boats and equipment so that our fleet can carry on the business of fishing more efficiently and be less vulnerable to changing market conditions. My opinion, which is shared by many people, is that the cost of fuel will continue to increase and that the de minimis aid is likely to be a sticking plaster on a big problem that must be dealt with on a long-term basis.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has spoken to the fishermen's organisations, and we have all — probably most of the elected representatives here, including the MP for Strangford — written to her on numerous occasions. We have also tried to emphasise clearly where the fishing industry is going if the Minister does not help it.

The Minister said that assistance through the de minimis scheme could not be given as it would be a short-term measure. Nevertheless, will the Minister consider giving help through that scheme in the short term? Will the Minister also consider suspending landing and marketing fees for the fishing industry? If we do not do something in the short term, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will not need a fisheries division as there will be no fishing industry to look after. I urge the Minister to consider seriously that matter. Finally, has she brought the matter to the attention of her fellow Executive members?

Ms Gildernew: I have raised the issue with Executive colleagues. I am considering proposals, and I will

make a statement to the House in due course. In relation to the charges for landing and marketing fees, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA) sets uniform dues and charges for vessels at the three local fishing ports. Over the past three years, landing dues, which are the largest component of the charge paid by active vessels, have not increased and remain at 2.75% of the value of fish landed. Increases in berthing, slipping and various supplies have risen to ensure that NIFHA can deliver a good level of service to the local fishing fleet at all three harbours. I am sympathetic to the issues facing the fishing industry. I am considering proposals and will come back to the Assembly with more details in a few weeks.

Mr McNarry: Following on from the issue of France and Spain providing financial assistance to their fishermen, will the Minister explain to our fishermen why she is failing to respond to their proposals?

Ms Gildernew: I have made the point to the Assembly on several occasions that I have many industries under my Department's authority that are in severe financial difficulties, including the pig sector, the poultry sector and the red meat industry. The agriculture industry faces serious problems —

Mr McNarry: I am asking only about the fishing industry.

Ms Gildernew: I am putting the matter in context. Unlike France and Spain, we are not a member state, and we do not have the same autonomy as those countries. We will look at what we can do to put together a long-term package of aid for our fishing community. I want to see a viable and sustainable fishing industry, although it is difficult to achieve that now. However, I am mindful of the issues and the high input costs that face some of our other sectors.

I must make across-the-board decisions that attempt to help everybody.

Mr Burns: Has the Minister identified any other agricultural or rural schemes that might benefit from the de minimis policy?

Ms Gildernew: No; I have not considered that possibility, and I am not sure where the Member is going with that question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Tackling Brucellosis

7. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) how brucellosis is being tackled; and (ii) the progress of her Department's recent brucellosis initiative. (AQO 2932/08)

Ms Gildernew: Since the outbreaks of brucellosis peaked in 2002, we have made significant progress,

and I am determined to press for the eradication of that disease. The cornerstones of my Department's brucellosis control programme are: the early detection of disease; the removal of diseased animals and animals that have been in contact with them; restrictions on the movement of animals; and advice to herd owners to improve biosecurity. Those measures are important elements of the campaign to remove sources of infection and in preventing the spread of the disease, which will be achieved by early detection through a programme of blood testing, additional surveillance measures, and tracing and investigating contacts between infected and other herds. In addition, farmers are compensated for animals that the Department decides must be culled.

If further progress is to be made in eradicating the disease, genuine partnership with farmers is essential. In March 2008, my Department began discussions with the industry in order to establish a partnership approach with local farmers in the fight against brucellosis. The brucellosis initiative emphasises all the controls that I listed; however, the strengthening of working relationships with local farmers is of particular importance. We have already held successful meetings with farmers in south Armagh and Enniskillen, at which it was agreed to form local liaison groups.

DARD vets met their Southern counterparts to compare the details of their respective disease programmes, additional epidemiological resources have been made available to staff in field offices and arrangements to increase the focus of the programme's management are being finalised.

Although we have a robust programme, it must be recognised that farmers play a crucial role in the success of the brucellosis programme, and it is particularly important that they take responsibility for good biosecurity on their premises in order to protect their herds from the disease. It is also important that farmers report any suspicions of brucellosis — particularly abortions in cattle — without delay. The earlier the disease is detected, the more likely it is that we will be able to stop it spreading further.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Why is the South of Ireland closer to eradicating brucellosis than the North?

Ms Gildernew: In the South, since disease levels peaked in 1998, there has been a significant reduction in occurrences of brucellosis. We are experiencing a similar pattern in the reduction of disease levels, and there is clear evidence of a significant decline in the incidences of brucellosis since its peak in the North at the start of 2002. The trend of brucellosis outbreaks in the North is about five years behind that in the South, where eradication is a realistic possibility. Given the brucellosis control programme in the North and the

disease's trend in the South, we expect a similar trend to follow here.

My ultimate aim is to eradicate brucellosis from the North completely, and we continue to work towards that end. My Department will continue to liaise closely on brucellosis matters with counterparts in the South, to share best-practice measures and to assess what further measures can be taken to reduce successfully incidences of those diseases here. It is in our shared interests to move as quickly as we can towards an island that is free from that awful disease.

Dr W McCrea: I am sure that the Minister has read the Welsh Assembly's innovative proposals that are aimed at tackling the serious problem of TB in livestock. Will she update the House about her proposals, and will they be effective? Is the aim of such proposals — whether in relation to TB or brucellosis — to eradicate those scourges rather than to attempt to reduce the number of affected animals?

Ms Gildernew: I have recently received the badger stakeholder group's report, which I have decided to publish. It makes a good contribution to our deliberations on tackling tuberculosis in badgers in the North. I am keen to study the report's findings, and, before I come to any decision on the way forward here, I will give full consideration to what the group says.

In recent years, we have made considerable progress on TB. Since peak disease levels in 2002, herd incidence has reduced by nearly 50%. In Wales, the trend inclines sharply the other way.

3.30 pm

Evidence that the removal of badgers reduces the instance of TB in cattle is complex; it is not certain that removing badgers will necessarily result in a further decline of TB in cattle across the North. Given that trends in disease levels here have been downward, I want to ensure that any action we initiate will be of clear benefit and, at the very least, will not make things worse by reversing the current positive trend.

The badger is a protected species and, ultimately, any decision to intervene in badger populations will require both my agreement and that of the Environment Minister.

The Deputy Speaker: Mr Sammy Wilson is not in his place to ask question 8. We move to the next question.

Planting Willow Trees

9. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the assistance that is available to farmers wishing to plant willow trees on their land. (AQO 2919/08)

Ms Gildernew: My Department's Forest Service provides grant aid for the establishment of short-rotation

coppice willow for an energy end use. Short-rotation coppice is a specialised form of forestry plantation, involving the growth of high-yielding varieties of willow at close spacing, and harvesting them at regular intervals every two to three years. Under the short rotation coppice (SRC) scheme, the minimum area for planting is three hectares, and applicants must be able to demonstrate an energy end use.

In less-favoured areas, grant is available for up to 50% of the establishment costs, or up to 60% for young farmers. Outside less-favoured areas, the level of grant is up to 40% of establishment costs, or up to 50% for young farmers. The maximum rate of grant is £1,000 per hectare for all applications, and grants are paid in two instalments: 70% after planting and the remaining 30% when cut-back of coppice shoots is completed after the first year of growth.

Short-rotation coppice willow is also eligible for support under the Aid for Energy Crops scheme, which provides aid for the equivalent of €45 per hectare per annum for crops grown on 70% of non-set-aside land that is put to an energy end use.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Proposed Regional Sports Stadium

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm that the viability and economic sustainability of the proposed regional sports stadium is dependent upon the involvement of each of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Football Association and Ulster Rugby; and to detail his assessment of the annual spectator attendances and expected revenues that would flow from the involvement of these three sporting bodies. (AQO 2840/08)

The Minister of Culture Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The crucial criterion for the stadium is operational viability. Our business-planning process revealed that the chances of achieving viability and economic sustainability will be much slimmer in the absence of any one of the three sports.

With regard to spectator attendances and expected revenues, the outline business case for the multi-sports stadium, which was intended to demonstrate the minimum commitments consistent with operational viability, estimates annual spectator totals at 45,000 for rugby; for football, 95,000; and for Gaelic games, 150,000. In the context of the 38,500-seater stadium, that translates into annual operating revenues of £464,000 from rugby; £821,000 from football; and £938,000 from Gaelic games.

Those figures are considered to be conservative; nevertheless, they provide for operational viability. There is every expectation that the figures will be much higher; and any staging agreement with the sports will include financial incentives for increased numbers above the minimum committed.

The outline business case is publicly available through my Department's website.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the importance of the GAA's contribution, which is approximately one-and-a-half times that of the other two sports, will the Minister confirm that his Department considers that the best return on the investment of public money may be had from a multi-sports facility, used by all three sports; and that only the involvement of all three sports is consistent with one of the primary goals, namely creating "a shared space" to be used by all communities? That will present a unified and positive image of Northern Ireland to the rest of the world.

Mr Poots: Anyone who reads tomorrow's Hansard report will find out that Mr Bradley's economic assessment of the figures which I provided does not stack up.

Nonetheless, there has yet to be made an economic case to demonstrate that operational viability can be achieved with one of those sports omitted.

What we have shown is that operational viability can be demonstrated with a multi-sports stadium involving all three sports — whether viability can be demonstrated for less than three sports is so far unproven.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. As the Minister knows, a number of events have been planned for the new multi-sports stadium in relation to the Olympics. The World Police and Fire Games have been secured for 2013, which 15,000 participants will attend and which will generate in the region of £20 million for the local economy.

Does the Minister believe that the delay in making a decision about the location of the multi-sports stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site is endangering the World Police and Fire Games being held here in 2013 and any chance of us hosting any Olympic events in 2012? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: The Olympic events are still four years away. Should those events take place in Northern Ireland, they will involve six football teams participating in one of the qualifying rounds.

The World Police and Fire Games will not take place until 2013. That is one of the biggest sporting events in the world, attracting approximately the same number of participants as the Commonwealth Games. It is a huge opportunity for Northern Ireland.

One has to weigh up the fact that the investment being made is a 50-year investment. Although short-term benefits must be examined, we also have to look at the long-term benefits. It is important that the right decision is made at the appropriate time.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister indicate the level of public investment that would be required to realise the forward independent business plan of the Irish Football Association (IFA), Ulster Rugby and the GAA without reference to the proposed Maze stadium?

Mr Poots: It would cost £19 million to bring existing stadiums up to the most basic standards acceptable to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and other international organisations, without actually carrying out any improvements. If significant refurbishment were to be carried out, leading to stadium extensions, costs would be considerably higher.

The outline business case examined the enhancement of existing stadiums but was not in favour of that. Therefore, if the outline business case that is with the Department of Finance and Personnel is rejected, one would assume that the "do-nothing" option and the option of enhancing existing stadiums would be rejected too. All of those options are in the outline business case and are available for DFP to examine.

New National Stadium

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the expected completion date for a new national stadium. (AQO 2881/08)

7. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) the recent discussions he has had with the Department of Finance and Personnel in relation to the proposed sports stadium, and (ii) whether he and the Minister of Finance and Personnel agree that the Maze site is the best option. (AQO 2843/08)

Mr Poots: I will take questions 2 and 7 together. The completion date for the multi-sports stadium will depend on how quickly a decision can be reached on the way forward. The outline business case, if approved, will inform a submission to the Executive on the overall Maze/Long Kesh proposal. As this would be a major investment decision for the Executive, the stadium outline business case, together with that for the overall Maze/Long Kesh site, are necessarily detailed and complex.

My officials are engaged with colleagues in DFP on the stadium outline business case, and it is anticipated that a decision on the way forward will be made in the near future. Decisions will be taken by Ministers when they have the benefit of advice from officials. Although the outline business case concludes that the Maze/

Long Kesh option is preferable, all options are being considered at this point.

Mr Lunn: I note the Minister's response and his answer to Paul Butler on the previous question. Does the Minister agree that, due to the Executive's dithering, the original target date for completion of a national stadium — in time for the 2012 Olympics — is already rendered impractical and that the Executive are in danger of sending the wrong signals to potential investors, users and sponsors of the stadium?

Mr Poots: I do not agree that the target of 2012 is impossible; we should still aim for that goal. However, as I said in response to Mr Butler's supplementary question, this is to be a significant investment for the next 50 years. It is more important to get the decision right than to make the wrong decision for the sake of short-term benefits that will have long-term consequences.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister said that Ministers will make decisions, and I await those with interest, because he has also said that the other options are non-viable. Why has there been a delay in choosing the Maze/Long Kesh site? The Minister says that the business case for the Maze/Long Kesh site is the most favourable option because all others have been rendered impossible. Will the Minister therefore confirm that the business case stacks up in favour of building a stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site?

Mr Poots: PricewaterhouseCoopers carried out its assessments and recommended a multi-sports stadium. The Department of Finance and Personnel will scrutinise that recommendation in some detail. I am sure that DFP will have questions to ask, and it is for that Department to identify whether it agrees with PricewaterhouseCoopers' assessments. At this stage, it is not for me to say what is viable and what is not. Viability must be demonstrated. PricewaterhouseCoopers has said that a multi-sports stadium is viable, and DFP must come back to my Department on that. It is up to others to demonstrate whether other options are viable.

Mr Burnside: The Minister with responsibility for sport said that all options were being considered. Is that correct, or is it only the three from PricewaterhouseCoopers that are being considered? It would not be the first time that consultants had got advice wrong. They have done it throughout their history; they do not walk on water.

Next month, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is opposed to the stadium's being built at the Maze, will become the First Minister of the Assembly. Will the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure therefore call the process to an end and accept what the majority of the people wants — the enhancement of facilities at Windsor Park and Ravenhill, and financing for the GAA — in order to ensure that our sports stadia are improved for the betterment of the sporting public?

Mr Poots: I thank Mr Burnside for his wisdom, and for his insight into the mind of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I am not aware of any quotations that would substantiate Mr Burnside's comments.

I do not know what conversations Mr Burnside has had with football, rugby or GAA bodies. Last week, Mr McNarry and I had a conversation with one of those bodies. Perhaps Mr McNarry will advise Mr Burnside why that organisation thinks that it could raise £700,000 more per annum and ensure that professional players — some of whom are leaving Northern Ireland to play for other countries — remain in Northern Ireland and play to the best of their abilities for their local team should the stadium be built on the Maze site.

Mr Burnside would do well to talk to the sporting organisations involved, because they would inform him of the benefits of opting for the Maze site. To choose that option would mean the investment of more money into football, rugby and GAA. All those sports would benefit significantly from that option. However, a decision must be made about how much money the Government are prepared to invest in it and whether we are prepared to invest the money that is required to make the project deliverable. We must make that decision, and it will be based on the best financial detail that is put to us.

3.45 pm

Mr Beggs: I understand that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is examining the business case for the stadium. Will the Minister confirm that that is the case; when he expects a decision to be taken by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and when that business case will be put into the public domain?

Mr Poots: That is the case: senior officials met last week on that issue. All the top departmental economists participated in the meeting, and those meetings are continuing. I cannot predetermine the outcome of the meetings — I have not got the insight into other people's minds that Mr Burnside has. When those outcomes are determined, I will advise this House thereafter.

Assisting the Armagh Observatory

3. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he is taking to assist the Armagh Observatory which is facing a £130,000 shortfall in the next financial year, followed by £160,000 in the following year and £190,000 in the year after that. (AQO 2821/08)

Mr Poots: Armagh Observatory is a valued scientific institution in Northern Ireland and is in receipt of funding from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Department recognised the funding difficulties that

were faced and provided uplifts of 27% from a baseline for each of the next three years.

The Department will continue to engage with the board of governors of Armagh Observatory and Planetarium in support of their efforts to maintain sustainability. The observatory was tasked with examining all options to reduce the deficit and live within the funding limits available. An options paper has been produced and is being considered by the Department.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his initial reply. Given that Armagh Observatory is one of the few institutions in Northern Ireland that could be rightly described as world-class and cutting-edge, does the Minister agree that the important research carried out there needs its certainty guaranteed for the foreseeable future? Will he guarantee certainty in funding for the long term?

Mr Poots: As regards certainty, an uplift of 27% over a three-year period is significant. However, I have to ask why the planetarium and observatory, which are governed by one body, decided to allocate 27% funding to the planetarium and 27% to the observatory when there was a clear need for more money for the observatory. That is something that the board of governors need to deal with.

As regards the importance of the institutions, the worst possible thing that they could have done was to go down the route of “save the Armagh Observatory”. The discussion should take place in a rational environment without the message getting out to the wider public that Armagh Observatory is under threat, because the first thing that will happen is that investors in the people who are coming to Armagh Observatory, and organisations with research investments in the work carried out by the observatory, will question whether such investments should be continued. It is foolish to go down that route.

I am committed to ensuring that every opportunity is given to Armagh Observatory to continue operating at its current level, but there are issues that Armagh Observatory itself has to deal with.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In part, the Minister has answered my question. Given the serious tourism benefits involved, I hope that the Minister will look at ways of providing sustainable funding. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is nothing for the Minister to answer.

Ms Lo: Given that Queen’s University always has a number of PhD students carrying out research in the observatory, will the shortfall over the next three years be detrimental to research and to much needed development in this field that would bring Northern Ireland a lot of economic gains?

Mr Poots: If that is the case, and if research and development are undermined as a consequence, then that would fall within the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning; it is not a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

If the Department for Employment and Learning wishes to assist us in dealing with that matter — and I am sure that Mr Kennedy has some influence in that Department — I am happy to ensure that it can assist my Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Football (Offences) Act 1991

5. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the progress made with the Northern Ireland Office in bringing forward similar legislation to the Football (Offences) Act 1991. (AQO 2873/08)

Mr Poots: I have held a number of meetings with the NIO Criminal Justice Minister, Paul Goggins MP, to discuss the urgent need for public order legislation relating to sports grounds in Northern Ireland. As a result, Minister Goggins has welcomed the broad thrust of my proposals and has agreed to work towards an agreed and effective package of measures. Since then, the NIO has been working on developing proposals for suitable legislation, with assistance from my officials. Work has reached an advanced stage, and I have asked the NIO to urgently consider publishing the proposals for consultation in the near future.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that much good work has been done in recent years to make sporting events, particularly football, more family friendly. I am sure that the Minister will join me in offering particular congratulations to everyone who has worked hard to do that at Northern Ireland international matches. Can the Minister provide details on the current proposals for the legislation? What plans does he have to work with the Assembly on that matter?

Mr Poots: That is a matter for the NIO, but my Department asked it to address the following issues: unauthorised pitch incursion; offensive chanting and missile throwing; bringing bottles, flares and fireworks into grounds; restrictions on the carrying and drinking of alcohol on special public transport on the way to and from designated matches; ticket touting; and a football banning-order regime in Northern Ireland. We can achieve that legislation, and the Assembly can co-operate with the Northern Ireland Office in devising the appropriate legislation for Northern Ireland. That would be a significant boost for local football.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister been in contact with the

IFA and the PSNI about the disgraceful attack by so-called football fans in Belfast city centre just over two weeks ago? If so, will the IFA take action against the individuals concerned when they are identified? Would a football offences Act deal with that type of criminality?

Mr Poots: First, it must be clearly demonstrated whether football fans, or others who were masquerading as people who had attended a football match, were involved in that truly appalling incident. Therefore, it is wholly appropriate that anyone who has any evidence on that matter takes it to the appropriate authority, which is the PSNI.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister recognise that, in the absence of such legislation, hooligans from elsewhere in the UK could be attracted to matches here? That gives such legislation even higher priority.

Mr Poots: That is why my Department continues to press the NIO to take the legislation forward.

Developing Dog Racing

6. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action he is taking to ensure the development of dog racing; and to outline the consideration he is giving to the allocation of betting levy monies to the dog racing industry. (AQO 2839/08)

Mr Poots: Dog racing is not a recognised sport, and my Department has no statutory responsibility for it. Therefore, there are no plans to develop greyhound racing in Northern Ireland. The allocation of betting levies to the dog racing industry is not a matter for my Department.

Mr P J Bradley: Given that reply, it is difficult to ask a supplementary question. However, I will not forgo the opportunity to make some comment. Many people consider dog racing a sport, and I ask the Minister to reconsider his position.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You will not be going to the dogs.

Mr Savage: My constituency of Upper Bann includes the town of Lurgan, whose symbol is Master McGrath, a famous racing greyhound. Has the Minister had any contact with the Minister for Social Development on the social impact of gambling in Northern Ireland?

No doubt the Minister supports all sports, but what is he doing to address some of their damaging social impacts?

Mr Poots: That is a matter for the Minister for Social Development. If the Member wants to raise a particular issue about gambling, he should do so with the appropriate Minister — the Minister for Social Development.

Northern Ireland Events Company

8. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the source of responsibility for the overspend of over £1 million by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQO 2878/08)

12. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to assist organisations and groups that are seeking to access funding to host events while the Northern Ireland Events Company is being wound up. (AQO 2828/08)

Mr Poots: I wish to answer questions 8 and 12 together.

Until the review is complete, it would be inappropriate for me to comment any further on where responsibility for the overspend lies. I have considered in detail the review's findings and I have issued a written statement on the current position of the Northern Ireland Events Company; it was placed in the Assembly Library on 3 April.

I am committed to having a facility that can provide grant funding to support world-class events and to showcase the best of what Northern Ireland has to offer. Recent examples of grant funding include Tennis Legends in February 2008 and the FIM World and European Motorcycle Trial Championships 2008, which were held in Bangor.

On an interim basis, DCAL will manage the events function. A business plan for Northern Ireland events, including grant funding, has been developed, and on 28 March DCAL launched an event grant-funding programme for events in 2008-09 and for the two funding streams — events-growth funding and major-events funding.

Successful applications will be subject to agreed grant-funding criteria. The closing date for applications is 2 May, and letters of offer and agreements with successful applicants will be signed off by the end of June. I encourage Members to tell their constituents that this funding programme is now open for applications.

Anyone who contacted my Department over the past few months enquiring about grant funding has been told about the launch of the grant-funding programme. Up to 10 April, 41 application packs had been issued. Although the Northern Ireland Events Company will be dissolved, the promotion of events to support Northern Ireland's image, tourism and economic development will continue. DCAL is actively seeking to facilitate the transition to a new arrangement that will deliver that service.

Mr B McCrea: I understand the Minister's reluctance to comment in detail on the issue until the review is complete, but when did he first become aware of the

overspend, and what steps did he personally take to ensure that such losses were kept to a bare minimum?

Mr Poots: My answers to that are on public record: I have made a public statement in the House and I went to the Committee. Given that the Member has posed only one, generic, question to DCAL in the past year, I know that he does not possess a great depth of knowledge about my Department. I do not see the point in repeating what has already been said in the House.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Since the Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC) was wound up, what arrangements have been made to pay creditors? Does the Minister feel that his Department will be able to give swift responses to those companies and groups that have events planned for the summer and that need urgent replies to their funding applications?

Mr Poots: A total of 112 creditors have been verified and are owed £635,000. That does not include moneys owed to the NIEC by creditors. However, since 14 April, DCAL has paid 102 of the 112 creditors a total of £617,983. The 10 remaining unpaid creditors have yet to return a letter of assignment agreeing to the debt that was owed to them, which would allow that money to be transferred.

We will aim to get our responses to grant-funding applicants — particularly those who have events planned earlier in the year — as quickly as possible. Most decisions will not be taken until the end of June so that the Department can fully judge the applications against the criteria set. However, if an event is planned to take place before then, we will do our best to assist the organisers.

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Mary Bradley is not in her place to ask question 9. I, therefore, call Mr Pat Ramsey.

Developing Football Stadia

10. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what money is available for the development of soccer stadia for senior football teams; and to detail any joint plans he has with other Departments to consider whether football stadia developments can form part of wider social, health and economic development in local areas. (AQO 2848/08)

Mr Poots: Primary responsibility for making money available for the development of soccer stadia for senior football teams rests with the owners of such venues; the relevant governing body also has a role. The recently announced capital budget for sport is £111.6 million over the next three years. Sport NI, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, is considering how those funds can be

allocated across sport, including funding for soccer stadia for senior football teams.

Recently, I consulted other Departments on the development of a new strategy for sport and physical recreation for Northern Ireland. As part of that process, I presented proposals for implementing the strategy, which will bring together various Departments. Under those proposals, Departments will be expected to consider whether sports stadia developments, including football stadia developments, can play a wider social, health and economic role in their areas.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he will be aware, Derry City Football Club, which is in my constituency, is keen to develop a sports facility that will couple the sporting needs of the football team with the social, educational and economic development of the area surrounding the Brandywell. Bearing in mind that social and economic development around sports stadia requires action by several Departments, will the Minister initiate cross-departmental working to enhance the possibility of success for that project, and will he also outline what is happening on the project's cross-border aspect?

Mr Poots: I am happy to work with other Departments and with clubs and local authorities that wish to develop better sports facilities in their areas — irrespective of who they may be — to produce feasible proposals that will add up financially. It is more difficult to demonstrate the economic viability of stand-alone football stadia. Several groups that are considering building new stadia are examining how they can develop other amenities alongside the sports facilities, and many are coming up with innovative proposals. That is the best means of achieving sustainability for football stadia.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Former Military Sites

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the United Kingdom Government to transfer lands at the vacated military sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh to the Executive, to facilitate the development of the education village as proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group. — [Mr Doherty.]

Which amendments were: (1) Leave out all after “Executive,” and insert

“to be used for the development of the Omagh District, in line with the priorities set by the Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy, including the possible development of the education village proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group.” — [Mr Bresland.]

(2) Leave out all after “village” and insert

“, social and affordable housing and civic facilities, as well as investment in an enterprise centre and the development of the necessary partnerships to realise the economic development potential of the site.” — [Mr Gallagher.]

Mr Lunn: My party welcomes the main thrust of the motion, which is to call for the transfer of the lands at Lisanelly and St Lucia to the Executive. I agree with most of the contributors to the debate, particularly my colleague Kieran Deeny. There appears to be unanimity on the matter, not only with regard to the transfer of the lands but, to a greater or lesser degree, on the desirability of the education village.

The proposal by the Omagh educational campus group represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to move education forward in the Omagh area. It embraces a spirit of collaboration, tolerance, inclusion and the promotion of mutual respect, and it meets the aspirations of the concept of a shared future. Many of the points in favour of the proposal have been mentioned by previous contributors, so I will not repeat them all. However, the notion of up to six local schools from the controlled and maintained sectors coming together on one site to a state-of-the-art facility is a far-sighted one, and it also meets the recommendations on sustainability and collaboration in the Bain Report.

I am not from Omagh, but I understand that the proposal is supported by all the school principals in the area, their trustees and governors, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Western Education and Library Board, local businesses and the wider community. Indeed, it is hard to find anyone who does not agree with it.

It meets the needs of the schools in Omagh, some of which need to be rebuilt. It will apparently make available up to 27 hectares of land in existing sites for whatever use is deemed appropriate. The opportunity for social interaction and the concentration of educational

expertise and specialist teaching is obvious, making this too good an opportunity to miss.

For those and many other reasons, the Alliance Party supports the motion. I hope that the land will be transferred as soon as possible and that detailed work can begin on how to maximise the site's potential. As well as including the education concept, perhaps work will be done on some of the suggestions that are contained in the amendments.

Although I wish the proposal a fair wind, I hope that it does not become a political football, as has happened with the Maze project. There is no reason why the planned development should be contentious. As I said previously, this is too good an opportunity to miss, and I congratulate the Omagh Educational Campus Group and the people of Omagh for their vision and ambition.

It is entirely appropriate that this proposal should come from Omagh. The people of that area have set an example in showing the way forward during the past 10 years, and I certainly hope that they will be given the opportunity to do so again. I look forward to seeing the proposal come to fruition.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion has highlighted the importance of transferring former military bases to the Executive for the provision of an educational village to benefit the community in the Omagh area. This is an exciting concept that is worthy of debate. This is the second debate that we have had on the subject, and I welcome the fact that we are debating it again today. Indeed, the contributions that Members have made today and on previous occasions were positive and helpful.

The Ministry of Defence in Britain is committed to the disposal of the Lisanelly and St Lucia sites. Subject to the satisfactory resolution of several issues, including the terms of transfer, the MOD is fully aware of our interest in the possible acquisition of the sites. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have sought the gifting of the sites with British Government Ministers. The issue was raised some time ago with the British Government and the Executive, but, as yet, there has been no response.

OFMDFM continues to press the British Government strongly about the transfer of Lisanelly, St Lucia and several other military sites to the Executive. The Finance Minister has also written to the chief secretary on the matter. It is important, however, that my Executive colleagues continue to make the case for the transfer of the lands. Individual Members have held numerous meetings on this issue. I pay tribute to them all — particularly to Pat Doherty, the MP for the area — who has been at the forefront of the efforts that have been made.

Caithfidh an pobal anseo tairbhe a bhaint as na láithreáin sin, agus tá sé tábhachtach go n-oibríonn an Tionól le chéile leis an chuspóir sin a bhaint amach.

The community here must benefit from what happens to those sites, and it is important that Assembly Members work together to help to achieve that goal.

The Department for Social Development, with its responsibilities for regeneration, is continuing to work with the MOD on the options that relate to the acquisition.

Bhuail mise le Margaret Ritchie an tseachtain seo caite agus d'aontaigh muid gur chóir forbairt na láithreán a scrúdú, ó tá féidearachtaí forbartha iontu. Tá rún againn an cheist a thógáil leis an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin le gur féidir lenár gcomhghleacaithe aireachta deis a bheith acu an bealach chun tosaigh a phlé chomh luath agus is féidir.

I met with Margaret Ritchie last week, and we agreed on the importance of exploring the development of the sites, given the potential that they present. We are planning to raise the issue jointly with the Executive so that our ministerial colleagues can discuss the way forward at the earliest opportunity.

The availability of funding is obviously an issue in delivering such a significant project. Although the gifting of the sites would remove initial costs, there are also costs involved in securing, maintaining and developing the sites. The costs of site acquisition and maintenance are not affordable in the current educational budget without displacing other priorities, and the extent of the site is such that the land may not all be used solely for educational purposes. I nevertheless believe that this is an important opportunity to create a visionary project that we all should support and work together to make a reality.

The Lisanelly site provides a unique opportunity for education in Omagh. It provides an opportunity to turn a former symbol of conflict into a new source of hope and achievement for future generations of young people and for the town.

There is the prospect of a shared-education campus where schools can co-locate and collaborate. That offers possibilities for new ways of sharing facilities, teaching and learning. That is how we should plan for education in the future. It is an exciting prospect that is shared by many people who are involved in education in Omagh. We have the opportunity to create, plan and develop a vision for the area in a way that involves all sectors that we would not have done before.

Tá an colaiste breisoideachais áitiúil deas don láithreán agus cuirfidh sin le hardcháilíocht an oideachais a fhaigheann páistí agus daoine óga.

The proximity of the local further education college can only enhance the quality of the education experience for children and young people. I welcome Reg Empey's

earlier comments on the site — although he spoke as an MLA, what he said was important, and I agree with much of it. This should be the new way forward for education: take a view on the needs of an area and decide on the most effective way to meet those needs to ensure the quality of education for all.

I met representatives of the Lisanelly schools working group, which comprises representatives from the education sector in Omagh. They were led by co-chairpersons, Reverend Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, and were accompanied by representatives from the Western Education and Library Board and several schools that have expressed an interest in relocation. They explained their views and aspirations for an education campus at Lisanelly, which has the potential to accommodate the combined enrolment at the six schools, which is over 3,400.

The representatives are keen to be involved in the development of the campus, and, from discussing the issues with them, they are excited at the prospect of working across school sectors. They are enthusiastic about the potential benefits of a proposed campus for Omagh. I pay tribute to group members for coming together to develop a vision for education in Omagh. We should admire their commitment to work together to deliver that vision, and we must support them in their endeavours. As I said earlier, they are working closely with the local MP, Pat Doherty, who has played a tremendous role and will continue to do so.

Ní an earnáil oideachais amháin atá ag tabhairt tacaíochta don champas; tá curaidh eile ag an tionscadal, lena n-áirítear an comhlachtas tráchtála agus an chomhairle. Is tionscadal é seo a bhfuil cách ar ar an intinn faoi.

Support for the campus is not confined to those in the education sector: the project is also championed by Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Omagh District Council. There is widespread consensus for the project, and I welcome the contributions that my colleagues across the Floor have made.

Last week, I visited Lisanelly and had the opportunity to visit the extensive site and appreciate its central significance to the future development of the area. I was accompanied by Reverend Herron, Monsignor Donnelly and Martin McColgan, and we discussed the possibilities that the site offers.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister said that she visited Lisanelly last week. I do not know how extensive that visit was, but there is a permanent memorial on one of the buildings for people who were murdered because of work that they did in Lisanelly. If this proposal goes ahead at the Lisanelly site, would the Minister support a permanent memorial to those who worked in Lisanelly barracks and lost their lives?

Ms Ruane: I am not going to get into a debate about memorials or victims — it is not appropriate. Thankfully, we are moving out of a period of conflict in which many people lost their lives. Therefore, rather than creating difficulties for the project, we need to move forward. The best memorial is a shared campus where all the different sectors come together.

Executive endorsement, in principle, for development of the Lisanelly site would be accompanied by the development of a business case examining the options and assessing the overall merits and value for money of the proposal. That would be a necessary step before final commitments could be made and would involve some site-planning work to determine potential usage, identify areas for attention or disposal and examine the quality of the housing stock and other buildings on the site. That could lead to the development of a shared-education campus, a shared-housing scheme and other possible uses compatible with the campus that are linked to nearby Omagh town centre via the St Lucia site.

Chuirfeadh an obair ar ár gcumas roghanna a mheas a chuirfeadh le héifeacht na forbartha. Thiocfadh le forais éagsúla a bheith ag obair le chéile i bpáirtíocht, agus ba chóir dúinn an tsamhail sin a iniúchadh.

4.15 pm

The work would allow us to assess options to enhance the overall development and impact. The possibility of a partnership model, involving different bodies working together, should be explored.

All interested schools would need investment in the coming years, and, for some, moving to an alternative site may not be an option. Lisanelly offers the exciting prospect of planning buildings in a more co-ordinated and effective way. There are strong educational, social and economic benefits from jointly pursuing an educational campus. The relocation of existing schools to Lisanelly would eventually free up key regeneration sites in other parts of Omagh.

Mr Elliott asked whether existing schools' sites would be put up for sale. They would be disposed of as schools move to Lisanelly, with the receipts offsetting some of the cost of acquiring and developing Lisanelly, and replacing the schools.

Such a campus would meet many of our educational objectives. It would deliver modern facilities for teachers and staff and include sharing and collaboration as a central element, which is so important to the future post-primary school system.

It would also underline that there is not a one-size-fits-all system; that joint planning can provide an education facility in which all children enjoy access to a range of high-quality choices at critical junctures in their educational development, the most significant of which is 14. The potential Lisanelly campus provides a

wonderful opportunity for education in the greater Omagh area to be shaped in an innovative way, to suit the needs of all young people in the community.

I know that the schools are keen to be involved in planning the project. The area planning groups, which I announced last month, will be looking carefully at ways in which post-primary provision can best meet education needs.

There was cross-party support for the campus when the Lisanelly site was debated in this Chamber last month. Members highlighted the value of pursuing that option and the prize to be gained. There is strong consensus among 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.

Opportunities such as Lisanelly arise only rarely and need to be fully explored. Rather than looking for stumbling blocks, we need to find a way to make it happen. With the prospect of providing a modern campus for the benefit of future generations of children, demonstrating a new approach for education and for our communities, Omagh could set an example for others to follow. Delivering it successfully, however, will require great commitment and goodwill.

There was a question earlier about a business case. I understand that there is a business case being carried out by the Strategic Investment Board, which has approved £30,000 for that purpose. The Western Education and Library Board and Omagh District Council have each approved £10,000 — so let us get on with it and make this a flagship project.

The efforts of the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister to have the sites gifted to Executive ownership would ease the pressure of meeting site costs, but maintenance and development costs would remain, and we must consider how best to meet them. The question, though, is not whether we can afford the project; more whether we can afford not to go ahead, because the development opportunity embraces more than just education.

Ba mhaith liom go mbeidh páistí sa toadhcháí ag baint suilt as a n-oideachas i gcampas roinnte i dtionscadal ina raibh ról ag an Tionól tús a chur leis. Ba chóir dúinn coinneáil linn ag troid ar son aistriú láithreán agus coinneáil linn ag pleanáil do shamhail oideachasúil an-tábhachtach.

I would like to see future generations of children and young people enjoying their education in a shared campus in a project that this Assembly had a role in initiating. Let us continue to fight for the transfer of sites and let us continue to plan for an educational model of major significance. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: The SDLP amendment addresses not just the development of an educational facility, but the potential for wider social and economic development in the area.

The Minister of Education referred to her recent visit to the site and to her discussions with the Minister for Social Development. I welcome such co-operation, which can have a powerful influence in moving the initiative forward.

I hope that there will be unanimity on this matter. The issue will be brought before the Executive for discussion. This is about the town of Omagh. In any discussions about Omagh, it is never long before the issue of victims arises, and no doubt that will arise during the discussions of the Executive. We cannot sweep the issue aside, regardless of what side of the community the victims came from. However, I hope that any concerns that were expressed about victims today will be left in the hands of the Executive.

Some Members referred to the need for a robust appraisal, and they are quite right. A major project such as the one under debate deserves, at the very least, that type of appraisal. That would be part and parcel of an outline business case, which is one of the next steps.

I look forward to unanimity in the House, to the matter going before the Executive, and to its being clarified to the Assembly in a statement. I commend amendment No 2 to the House.

Mr Buchanan: I declare an interest as a member of the Lisanelly Lands Working Group of Omagh District Council. The importance of the transfer of MOD sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia to the Northern Ireland Executive cannot be overemphasised. Members must recognise the enormous potential of the sites for social and economic development, not only for Omagh town and district but for the wider western region.

In Mr Gallagher's winding-up speech, he said that the debate was about Omagh, but it is really about the wider western region around Omagh. That is why we feel that the original motion is too narrow. It should be expanded to ensure that any development on the site is in line with the priorities set in the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy, including the possible development of an education village, as proposed by Omagh Educational Campus Group. My understanding is that the proposer of the motion has accepted amendment No 1.

I have grave reservations about the SDLP's amendment, which mentions social and affordable housing, as well as investment and an enterprise centre, yet it completely ignores the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy. The Department for Social Development carried out a study into social and affordable housing, and it found

that it is not an issue on the Lisanelly site. On that basis, I cannot and will not accept anything to do with the SDLP's amendment. Therefore, it is important that we take a clear, strategic view on the best possible use of the site. The idea of an education campus has much merit, and it would release lands adjacent to Omagh town centre for economic development, retail outlets, council offices, inward investment, the development of infrastructure and the strengthening of the economic core of Omagh.

However, we must recognise the urgent need to develop the schools estate in Omagh. Omagh High School, in particular, needs new accommodation, yet its board of governors has been told to wait for the development of the proposed school campus. Although the proposal to locate a shared school campus is in keeping with the Executive's commitment to the modernisation agenda, many questions remain about the enthusiasm of all the participants in the process.

In the Adjournment debate of 4 March 2008, the Minister of Education said:

"I believe that this site presents a unique opportunity for education in Omagh ... All options can be envisaged — controlled and maintained, grammar and non-grammar and special schools ... We have a unique opportunity, and we cannot afford to lose it."
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p234, col 2*].

Today, the Minister has again said that this is an exciting concept; let us get on with it and make it a flagship project.

However, I am concerned about the Minister of Education's level of commitment to the project. It is all right to put forward the words for such a proposal and such a concept, but words have to be followed up with commitment. I ask the Minister again, as I did on the day of the Adjournment debate: where is the commitment from her Department? Is funding for this type of campus a priority?

Let us remember that it is down to the Department of Education, and, indeed, to the Department for Regional Development, which would have to construct an entire roads network and infrastructure in order to open up the area. I want some commitment from those Departments about the project. I cannot see where the Minister has made any commitment to the project in the Programme for Government or the Budget. I want the Minister to make some commitment to the House about the project, but none has been forthcoming. It is important to push ahead to secure the future use of the site for the people of Omagh and so that the schools project can progress.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le gach aon Chomhalta a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht. Níl aon dabht ann: ní bheidh an seans seo againn arís go deo, agus mar sin de caithfidimid bogadh gan mhoill.

Dúirt Sinn Féin ón tús go mbeimis ag glacadh le leasú an DUP don rún.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate, and I ask them to support the motion. Sinn Féin is happy to accept the DUP amendment.

Much mention has been made of the fact that this is the second debate on the topic, the first being an Adjournment debate on 4 March. On that occasion, the Minister of Education clearly demonstrated her commitment, which she has also done today by her presence and her words of support; by the fact that she has met the working group; by the fact that senior officials in her Department have been working closely with that group and with the education and library board; and by raising the matter with other Ministers. I appreciate the Minister's support.

We must clearly establish the principle that we are going to secure the transfer of the site. Once that principle is established, there is no shortage of ideas for uses of the land or the redeployment of these expansive lands vacated by the British Army in Omagh.

4.30 pm

Of course, the most developed of those ideas is the plan for an education village. Like other Members, I believe that that project ticks all the boxes as regards the Bain vision for education. Let us revisit the terms of reference of George Bain's review:

"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."

There we have it.

I commend the local leadership for their vision. Leadership has been demonstrated by many people, not least by senior officials in the Western Education and Library Board and its chief executive, Mr Barry Mulholland, and by Omagh District Council and its chief executive, Mr Danny McSorley. Business and community representatives have also played an important part, and MP Pat Doherty has had a central role.

Of course, who do Monsignor Joseph Donnelly and Rev Robert Herron represent? Rev Herron represents the transferors in education and Monsignor Donnelly represents the trustees in this matter. That is why Tom Elliott's fear of domination by the Catholic-maintained sector is way off the mark. His comment was not based on sound evidence and was mischievous.

Political support and goodwill is evident on the part of many Ministers across the political spectrum. The Executive are showing strong support, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I particularly welcomed the First Minister's response to a question that I asked of him in the Assembly on 3 March. He made it clear that he and the deputy First Minister and

their Executive colleagues were prepared to go the whole distance in lobbying on this matter. The Department of Education and the Minister of Education have shown support for this project, as have DSD, the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, while Reg Empey recently visited the site. That gives a snapshot of the level of interest and support for this project that is currently emanating from the Executive.

That support is also evident in the Chamber today. People are working together. Of course, there are differences of emphasis, but there is a great deal of consensus and unity of purpose. There is a desire to send a strong, clear message about the unique nature of this project and about how it should be progressed.

Pat Doherty reminded us of the joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments of April 2003. Paragraph 10 of annex 1 supports the transfer of land in areas that have been adversely affected by the conflict. Omagh is certainly an area that has been adversely affected by the conflict. Therefore, the British MOD strategy of trying to get the full market value for the land is contrary to that joint declaration.

Allan Bresland was at pains to point out the architectural economic value of buildings on the site. He and his colleague Tom Buchanan mentioned the particular capital-development requirements of Omagh High School. Like many other schools involved in the project, Omagh High School has capital-development requirements, and efficiency will drive us in the direction of making this project happen on the site as proposed. Mr Bresland also called for a strategic approach and for details on some of the alternatives.

I was grateful to the Member from Fermanagh Tommy Gallagher for reminding us that Omagh is the county town of Tyrone. He mentioned its strategic importance to the entire area west of the Bann and to the north-west of Ireland in general. He said that the proposal would draw in five or six Departments, and that that involvement strengthens the overall case.

Reg Empey was impressed by the facilities and the potential of the site, and he repeated that the proposal offers us a rare opportunity, although he perhaps regrets that Omagh College of Further Education could not be part of it because of its recent newbuild. Again, there would be a complementarity there; the college would not be far away from the campus and there would be strong working relationships between the campus and the further education providers. He said that if we listen to Des Browne, the portents are not good, but I suppose that is the effort that we all must put in. He reminded us that the forthcoming investment conference presents us with an opportunity to lobby Gordon Brown directly on this issue. I certainly want

Reg Empey and other leaders to highlight this matter at that conference.

Kieran Deeny stressed that the matter was about the future. He reminded us of the urgency of transferring military sites and said that the issue cannot wait for ever to be resolved. If the British Government are serious, they, too, will contribute to building the peace. He also told us that Omagh is the second-largest population centre west of the Bann.

George Robinson highlighted the architectural excellence of the St Lucia building. He is very proud of the site's military history. We diverge at that point, because I do not share his benign interpretation of British military history. However, we shall not go there now.

Claire McGill focused on education and the entitlement framework, and on how, by linking the schools estate to curricular provision, a template of best practice is waiting to happen in Omagh. She also spoke about conflict transformation and the role that the British Government can play by transferring the site.

Tom Elliott said that UUP support for the motion was obvious, but that support was less obvious from Tom than it was from his party leader. He said that the issue had implications for infrastructure and roads. Joined-up government is a challenge for the present and the future. Surely the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Education and other Departments can work together. That is what joined-up government is all about. Therefore, one of today's messages today is: do not be afraid of joined-up government, Tom Elliott. He was also concerned for Dean Maguirc College in Carrickmore; St John's High School in Dromore; and Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh. The proposal would not swallow up all educational provision in County Tyrone; room would remain for rural development and provision. His fear of domination by Catholic-maintained schools was mischievous and way off the mark.

Dominic Bradley emphasised that Omagh has been leading the way, and that it, too, is entitled to a peace dividend. He reminded us that the First Minister has promised to press the issue again with Gordon Brown when the opportunity presents itself.

Trevor Lunn reminded us that all the Bain Report boxes are ticked. He spoke of the visionary nature of the proposal and of the huge amount of work that has already been done in order to secure the current level of agreement.

I am grateful to the Minister and to her senior officials for the high level of support and interest that they have shown. The Minister said that this is an exciting concept, although one on which a response is still to be received from the British Government about transferring the land. Every opportunity must be taken, at MLA and ministerial level, to pursue the issue. One

can but hope that the correct level of thinking is going into this matter and that the boat will not be missed.

The Minister welcomed Reg Empey's comments and reminded us that the business case is being developed by the Strategic Investment Board, Omagh District Council, and the Western Education and Library Board, which are working together. I call on the Assembly to unite behind the motion and this exciting concept.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will then proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the United Kingdom Government to transfer lands at the vacated military sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh to the Executive, to be used for the development of the Omagh District, in line with the priorities set by the Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy, including the possible development of the education village proposed by the Omagh Educational Campus Group.

Adjourned at 4.39 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 15 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the British-Irish Council demography sectoral meeting.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The first ministerial demographic sectoral meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) was held in Edinburgh on 31 March 2008. My statement will provide an outline of the meeting that has been agreed with junior Minister Kelly, who also attended. As Minister for Employment and Learning, with lead responsibility for migrant workers, I was delighted to attend the successful sectoral meeting, which provided an opportunity for useful discussion on a wide range of issues across Administrations. I am grateful to junior Minister Kelly for agreeing to be the accompanying Minister.

As the Scottish Government are the lead Administration on demography in the Council, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing for Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon MSP, hosted and chaired the meeting. The British Government were represented by the Secretary of State for Wales, the Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister of State, Tom Kitt TD. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan AM. The Northern Ireland Executive were represented by junior Minister Kelly and me. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Deputy Minister for Commerce and Employment, Carla McNulty Bauer. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Minister for Trade and Industry, D C Cretney MHK, and the Jersey Government by the Minister for Economic Development, Senator Philip Francis Cyril Ozouf.

A series of four papers was considered: an update paper that outlined the demography work stream's current progress; a paper that compared demographic trends and measures across the Administrations that participate in the British-Irish Council; a paper that compared migration trends and policies across those Administrations; and a paper that outlined possible projects to be included in the work stream in future. The Scottish Government presented the four papers.

The first paper summarised the five meetings held so far. Topics covered at those meetings were urgent policies and research in the different Administrations and migration reform in the United Kingdom. Ministers approved the demography work stream's progress, which includes the sharing of the different Administrations' current policy and research information, as well as information on migration reform in the United Kingdom.

The second paper specifically covered recent population-growth trends; population projections over the next 25 years; the current and projected age structures of the populations; life expectancy; fertility rates; and migration trends. All those were acknowledged by Ministers, who also discussed policy implications of those different demographic trends and measures. They agreed that the British-Irish Council demography sectoral group should develop further work plans on migration issues.

The third paper set out the different migration trends experienced by the Administrations, their existing migration policies, and any planned changes to those policies. Ministers discussed the successes and lessons that have been learnt from the different policies in encouraging or constraining migration. A key point that was highlighted was the need for integration of migrant communities.

The fourth paper outlined the group's future plans, which include investigating healthy independent ageing, and its implications for the provision of care for the elderly; examining the effectiveness of policy interventions on demographic trends; investigating fertility trends and their implications; understanding the impacts of migration; and the implications of wider student flows among BIC member Administrations. Ministers also recognised the need for more reliable information on current and future trends to be made available, and they expressed a common aim of producing flexible migration policy to match job shortages. They proposed to progress work on the impact of opening the EU labour markets on flows of migrants to BIC member Administrations.

Ministers supported in principle the plans set out in the paper and proposed the following work plans: understanding migration and its impact; healthy independent ageing; implications of wider student flows among BIC member administrations; investigating

fertility trends; and examining the effectiveness of policy interventions on demographic trends. Ministers also suggested that comparisons with other countries be made.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that Members hear about the work of the British-Irish Council, especially its work on population trends. Migration, and its impact on the labour market, is a critical issue, and, as the Minister highlighted, that research must continue to inform policy. It is also extremely important that information be shared among participating Administrations. We can learn lessons from one other.

The Minister mentioned a number of research work streams to which the participating Administrations have an input. Has anything unique to our experiences in the North emerged from the population research? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Committee Chairperson for her questions. She asked whether there is anything unique in our experiences. Each Administration has different statistics, and one issue that was discussed at length — and Paul Murphy, who represented the United Kingdom Government, was a key player in this matter — is the need for accurate information. That is part of the difficulty.

Given that people are entitled to benefits after living here for a year, at present, someone who comes to Northern Ireland from, for example, one of the A8 accession countries will probably register voluntarily in order to prove the length of time that they have been here. However, if that person were to leave before that year were out, there would be no record of their stay. The problem is that we do not know how many people we have. Therefore, we must first compile accurate statistics. Work has been done to try to establish how many people we have, because that has huge implications for future policy making.

According to the statistics that we have for each Administration, our unique profile shows a population that is slightly younger than those of GB and some of the islands. As far as we can assess, we have greater inflows of migrants than some Administrations, but smaller inflows than others. Basically, the papers that were provided at the meeting contain tables that rank the different Administrations according to the inflows and outflows of population that they are believed to have. Moreover, an age profile of each population was tabulated, and that was used to anticipate, as I mentioned, a healthy ageing population and any care facilities that we will need in the future. Northern Ireland has a unique population footprint. However, that is accompanied by a health warning, because the

statistics are anything but reliable. That is why we must make an effort to get better information.

Mr Ross: First, immigration will have a huge impact on the student population in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister enlighten the Assembly on the ways in which further-education colleges and universities in other jurisdictions have coped with immigration? What guidance has he given to our further education colleges and universities to ensure that immigrant students have all the facilities that they require?

Secondly, given reports — not least those from my constituency of East Antrim — that some migrant workers have been exploited, will the Minister outline what steps have been taken in other jurisdictions to ensure that such exploitation does not happen? What guidance has his Department given to employers in Northern Ireland to ensure that it does not happen here?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will have heard me refer to student flows within the Administrations. That is a matter of particular interest and concern in Northern Ireland. Members will be aware that the Department for Employment and Learning is proactive in trying to bring back some of the students that we lose. Between 25% and 30% of our students in full-time higher education attend institutions outside Northern Ireland, so it is a big issue for us. It is also a big issue for some of the other smaller Administrations whose choice of further and higher education is limited by their size.

I assure the Member that I am particularly keen on further and higher education, because there is absolutely no doubt that we are haemorrhaging those who have the skills that we need. If, as a result of efforts that are made at the economic conference next month, the chief executive officers of companies seek to invest here, one concern will be whether we have people with the skills to do the work, or whether we can train them. Such a skills base will be one of the key elements in sustaining our economy in the future.

Members have expressed their concerns in the Chamber on several occasions about employers exploiting migrant workers. They will know that we are introducing and strengthening measures to protect people's rights. However, we must go back to basics first and establish who is here, the long term trends, and the implications for housing, health and shared resources.

We must adopt a back-to-basics approach to ensure that the statistics are correct in the first place.

10.45 am

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline the areas considered by the working group on demography?

Sir Reg Empey: Junior Minister Kelly and I returned from the meeting with a proposed work stream. Some issues are cross-cutting and, therefore, I have sent papers to Executive colleagues seeking their agreement. During the meeting, we made a commitment in principle only and made it clear that we wanted the approval of the Executive. If they agree, there will be four main areas under consideration.

We must determine accurate numbers of those involved in each jurisdiction. It is important to anticipate the inflow and the outflow; it is a circulating process that will have huge implications for the labour market. We are relying on anecdotal evidence. Trends can change rapidly, and the biggest example of change in recent months has been the exchange rate. The euro has strengthened against the pound and, therefore, the financial advantage of working in Northern Ireland has decreased. I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will know that figure to three decimal points, but I think that it is approximately 17% or 18%. That has had a huge impact on earnings. Also, other economies are improving, and the Polish Government, among others, are trying to recover people. Incidentally, I notice that the Minister for Finance and Personnel did not outline the exact figure.

We must examine healthy-ageing issues. In many of the jurisdictions, the number of older people is increasing, and, in some areas, the population is not replenishing itself. That has implications for future resources. What will happen to health and care services if people live longer? Scotland has suffered significant emigration in recent years, and the Scottish Administration have a policy to increase the population.

Student flow is another area under consideration that has significant implications here. We must examine fertility trends because, if the population is not being replenished, that might have a major social and economic impact. How would business and industry survive without immigrant labour? All of those factors have a social implication downstream, and, to some extent, it is the elephant in the room, which Members are reluctant to discuss. However, there is no profit in not addressing these issues. If tensions were to develop because people were following the same scarce resources — be it housing or health services — then we could run into difficulties. An advantage of this work is that we can anticipate problems and plan to avoid them.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the report of the first demography sectoral meeting of the BIC. As the Minister has outlined, the progress of this work will be important for the health of the population in all member states.

My question, however, relates to the communiqué issued after the meeting. Under the heading

“Demography Workstream Future Work Plan”, it states that Ministers:

“proposed that work be progressed on the impact of opening of EU labour markets on flows of migrants to the BIC Member Administrations.”

That is a healthy proposal. However, does the Minister acknowledge the tension between all member Administrations progressing that work and an individual Administration independently advancing proposals to deal with the flow of migrants into its state? For example, the Irish Government have introduced proposals — considered by some to be draconian in certain areas — on migrants entering the Republic of Ireland. Their proposals could adversely affect the operation of the border on this island. Does the Minister acknowledge that tension and the fact that the Republic of Ireland’s introduction of such proposals could have an impact on the work stream? Has the Minister had any conversations with the Irish Government about their proposals?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question. He used the term “draconian” to describe the Irish Government’s proposals. The genesis of those proposals was the meeting of the BIC in this Building in July 2007. During a general discussion, the Scottish Administration and the Irish Government raised the issue of demography and migration trends. At that stage, it was clear, particularly from what the Irish Government representative Minister Micheál Martin said, that the Irish Government were greatly concerned about the implications of a future economic downturn.

We must bear in mind that approximately 10% or 11% of the workforce in the Irish Republic is of non-Irish origin, and, therefore, migration is a huge issue. Members will know that when I met my counterparts at the beginning of the school term in September 2007, a significant case was highlighted: in a school that opened outside Dublin, every pupil was black. That had never happened before, and it was causing great concern. Since the summer of 2007, it has been clear that the Irish Government have major concerns.

I take the Member’s point that the unilateral action of an Administration makes the work of the group more difficult. The Administrations agree to undertake the work together but, at the end of the day, each Administration is master of its own house. Thus, there is no binding requirement on Administrations to conform or to constrain their policies.

However, the Member will be aware that in the first three months of 2008, some 28,000 jobs were lost in the Republic — the most rapid loss of jobs there in the past 30 years. That is having an impact and, reading between the lines, the Irish Government anticipated such a loss in the summer of 2007. They are greatly concerned about migrant labour because of the potential social tensions that it may create.

I am acutely aware of the issues that the Member raised, and I briefly discussed the situation with Tom Kitt on the margins of the meeting. He gave a presentation, and, during the free-flowing discussion that followed, some of those issues emerged as matters of major concern.

In Northern Ireland, approximately 5% of the workforce could be deemed to come from non-local backgrounds. Migrant workers make up more than twice that percentage of the workforce in the Republic. Members will appreciate, therefore, why it is such an important issue for the Irish Government.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the work plan on understanding migration and its impact. It is important to get the facts and figures right, because there have been a number of conflicting research reports on the merits of migration. It is important that public-sector bodies are informed of those facts and figures so that migrant workers and their families are not made scapegoats for coming here.

I remind the Minister that a very good report was produced in Northern Ireland through the Racial Equality Forum and its migrant workers thematic subgroup. I understand from the Minister's previous statement that that report, which would contribute to the overall work plan, is with the Executive.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for her contribution. I am aware of the forum's work. One of the reasons why the demography group exists and why the Scottish Government — whose First Minister proposed it at the British-Irish Council last July — were so keen to lead it, is that all of the Administrations involved are concerned that migrant workers should not be made scapegoats. That is exactly what we do not want to happen. I take comfort from the fact that all the Administrations are discussing the issues, because there is no point in waiting until problems occur. The Member is correct in saying that that is why the information is needed.

I want to outline some of the research and data-gathering issues that we are looking at, because it is important that that is done. Questions about public attitudes to, and perceptions of, migrant workers were included in the Northern Ireland omnibus survey and the Northern Ireland life and times survey, which have been published on my Department's website. A contract has been awarded for a survey of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, to discover their experiences of employment, of settling in Northern Ireland and any indication of their intentions.

In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) plans to commission research on the impact of migrant workers on the economy and labour market in Northern Ireland. That is obviously a highly contentious issue, and recent reports will have drawn

Members' attention to that. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, which is involved with the Office for National Statistics and is represented on various national committees, is represented on the migrant workers thematic subgroup, and so provides that subgroup with up-to-date information on national policy and processes regarding statistics and data sources.

The Member can be assured that we are taking steps — independently and with others — to try and obtain that information. We are also trying to assess the experience of migrant workers and their families and analyse that experience from their point of view, to understand how they view their circumstances, and from that of others. We can make a sound judgement only when we have that information.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement. On learning that he was due to make the statement, I was sad enough to spend my time looking up the report from the ministerial meeting of the British-Irish Council on demography. I imagine that, given the content of the various reports, there will be a great clamour from members of the Committee for Employment and Learning to be represented at the next meeting of that group, when it is announced.

Does the Minister share my concern and that of others that the figures in the statistical study of the population are out-of-date and inaccurate? The known extent of illegal entry into the UK is clouded by a great number of issues.

Will the Minister comment on the implications that that will have for his Department's ability to plan for further education and for solutions to skills shortages?

11.00 am

Sir Reg Empey: I do not think that it is sad of a Member to look up details of the meeting of the ministerial demography group. Indeed, it is perfectly natural — what else would one do on a Sunday?

I share the Member's concerns. He has correctly identified the issue: we do not know for certain how many non-nationals there are in Northern Ireland. The rules of the European Union mean that non-nationals register only on a voluntary basis, to prove that they have been here for a year and are therefore entitled to claim benefits and so on if required.

The Secretary of State for Wales, who was representing the British Government, was questioned for some time on the issue of illegal entry into the UK. It was clear that there is huge anxiety in Whitehall about that issue. Indeed, I detected a hardening of attitudes towards immigration, particularly from non-EU sources, and I believe that policies on that matter will become progressively more aggressive.

To some extent, I perhaps missed a point that Mr Ross made earlier about the implications of

immigration for further education and so on. My Department is being forced to spend substantially larger sums of money on, for example, teaching English as a second language. That is something that we cannot accurately budget for, because statistics do not exist. We simply rely on people turning up for such courses. That creates difficulties.

In the past three years the amount of money that has been spent on such courses has increased from £300,000 to £1.5 million. We have had to spend that without the ability to accurately budget for it. The Minister of Finance tells us that we have to make plans and so on, but my Department is unable to do that because we simply do not know how many people are going to show up for those courses, which means that we have to basically pay in arrears. That is one of the weaknesses in the figures. I accept that the figures are out of date.

The issue of illegal entry into Northern Ireland is of great concern — we simply do not know how many people have entered the country illegally. All of the evidence that has been produced nationally has consistently underestimated the number of illegal entrants. Governments are simply fooling themselves if they continue with such practices. We are going to make a genuine effort to improve the statistical information, for the obvious reasons that the Member identified.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the work of the BIC, and I am glad to hear that junior Minister Gerry Kelly attended the meeting and that he is establishing good relations with our Celtic cousins. Does the Minister agree that sharing our experiences and research with our Celtic neighbours on issues such as migrant workers benefits us all, particularly in ensuring that migrant workers are not exploited and paid less than the going rate?

Furthermore, does he agree that the work of the Scottish Parliament, which is reflected in how it is performing, and about which we have all received positive information and reports, shows us what an Assembly can do when it has more control over its destiny and more powers?

Sir Reg Empey: I thought that the Member was going to say that she was supporting Celtic Football Club, but she did not go that far.

It is important to remember that the experience of the Scottish population in recent years has been different from ours. Scotland's population has been falling for a number of years, and there has been a large outflow of people.

The Scottish Government are attempting to reverse that trend. Unless the situation changes, the long-term economic implications are that Scotland's economic productivity will decrease.

The Scottish people sought devolution for a long time, and it is only natural that they want their Parliament to produce results. The Assembly should be mindful of that. All of us will need to raise our game and try to produce more results for our community.

The issue of the exploitation of workers has been debated in the Chamber several times recently. Ms Anderson and other Members expressed concerns about that matter. The legal powers of the Department are being strengthened in order to deal with any employment agency or business that might try to exploit people.

The Department for Employment and Learning now has the power to inspect the books of any employment agency or business. An inspector has been employed and is currently out in the field, visiting agencies or businesses at random, or following up complaints. The legal position is also changing — people can be taken to court and fined very heavily, or could have their licences suspended.

I assure the Member that my Department will continue to take the issue of exploitation extremely seriously. He is not currently in the Chamber, but the Member for East Antrim Mr Sammy Wilson raised the issue of a migrant worker who was being exploited in rented accommodation. The Department now has the power to deal with cases in which employers require people who are seeking work to occupy certain accommodation. Workers can now withdraw from such contracts, and they must be informed in writing by employers that they have the right to do so.

If Mr Wilson or any other Member has examples of — or concerns about — the maltreatment of workers, I would appreciate those being brought to my attention.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement, which was comprehensive and detailed. On behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, does the Minister intend to follow the lead that has been set by the Scottish Executive with respect to encouraging immigration by highly skilled people — particularly graduates and people with specialist skills — who might boost the regional entrepreneurship of Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question. I have received a number of requests from employers for assistance in approaching the Home Office with regard to obtaining appropriate licences for certain workers to come to Northern Ireland. Requests were recently made to the Home Office on behalf of a meat plant to allow a number of Brazilian workers to work here. Some businesses tell us that they do not have enough graduates in certain disciplines or do not have enough people with certain skills at graduate or postgraduate level.

As part of a departmental initiative, DEL representatives will attend a number of job fairs this year,

initially in Great Britain. We will probably eventually attend job fairs in Dublin. That initiative is designed to encourage the private sector to co-operate with us. The Department will attend two job fairs in Scotland next month, together with representative of companies that are experiencing staff shortages. Those companies will be offering real jobs, and we will be attending student fairs in an effort to attract to Northern Ireland people whom employers are seeking. The Department will be supported in those efforts by a number of employment and recruitment agencies.

The programme will be ongoing over the next year or two to see whether the problem can be fixed. However, I stress that it is coming at different ends of the labour market; there is no single pattern. It can arise owing to shortages in a meat plant or shortages of highly qualified researchers. It covers a broad range.

In relation to entrepreneurship, several companies tell me that they would not be able to sustain and develop their businesses without the assistances of persons outwith our current labour force.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU)

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on details of the performance and efficiency delivery unit.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): With permission, I wish to make a statement on the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU). In particular, I want to take this opportunity to provide a little more detail on what PEDU will and will not do, but, first, let me reflect a little on the recent Programme for Government and Budget.

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

When I presented the new Executive's first Budget to the Assembly in January 2008, I stressed two key themes. The first of those is efficiency. Instead of simply increasing the tax burden on households and businesses, we decided to help fund new priorities by becoming much more efficient. That gave householders welcome relief from snowballing rates bills, and it also offered the prospect of additional investment for new and improved public services.

The second theme is delivery. The people of Northern Ireland pay their taxes in the expectation that their locally elected representatives will deliver a return on their investment in the form of visibly improved services. On many occasions in the past, people here had their taxes raised with promises of new or improved services. However, too frequently when the time came to see delivery, the public often failed to see an outcome that lived up to those earlier pledges.

Ministers in this Executive must, and can, do better than that. The Programme for Government set out what the Executive have committed to achieve, and the Budget has put in place record levels of investment to support those targets. The challenge now for every Minister is to ensure delivery against our collective commitments.

Our two themes of efficiency and delivery are central to the Budget and the Programme for Government and, as a result, they are also central to the work of PEDU. In effect, the Budget and the Programme for Government set out the mission statement for PEDU, asking it to have a twin focus of examining the scope for greater efficiencies, while also working with Departments to ensure that the funds allocated by the Executive deliver the improvements promised. That is no different to the current remit of my Department. However, by creating a single unit with a clear and undiluted focus, and by developing a new way of working with Departments, we can bring about transformational change in the delivery of public services and a totally new culture built upon a shared

and relentless focus on delivering better-quality services for the people of Northern Ireland.

The core approach of PEDU will be collaborative in nature, working with Departments and, through them, with the wider public sector to get the best public-service outcomes for our community. The approach will not be one of hindsight and negative criticism, but of working alongside Departments and agencies, in real time, to enhance public-service provision.

That is not to say, however, that the journey will always be easy. Such an approach requires honest and open acknowledgement of problems, and no doubt robust discussions about the best way forward, but that will be in the clear context of a shared desire to improve performance, and not one of protecting established working practices and fiefdoms.

In relation to detail at an operational level, the work of PEDU will, by and large, fall into two broad categories: work focusing on identifying and tackling poor performance and delivery; and reviews focused on tackling inefficiency and releasing resources. I will give a flavour of what that will involve.

11.15 am

Concerning the unit's work on delivery, there will be a link into the Programme for Government's monitoring arrangements. Therefore, for example, if that monitoring system were to indicate that a particular public service was not on track to meet the Executive's targets in the Programme for Government, PEDU could investigate the matter by working with the relevant Department, or Departments. In such a case, PEDU's approach would involve consideration of quantitative and qualitative information to detect the source of performance shortcomings. In collaboration with the relevant Departments, the unit would then seek to identify actions to address the problem and bring delivery back on track.

Incidentally, it is worth recognising that, in many cases, as a by-product of improved delivery, efficiency and productivity will also improve. Ultimately, therefore, as funding is better and more quickly translated into additional and better outputs, resources will be used more efficiently.

On the other hand, a review that focuses exclusively on efficiency is likely to have a somewhat different objective. In that case, the review's intention should be to identify operational efficiencies in processes and organisations by using data analysis or by benchmarking with comparable service providers. Such a review might be employed, for example, in circumstances in which a merger of organisations failed to yield the anticipated benefits, or, perhaps, if a spend-to-save initiative had spent the money but not delivered the savings.

Some people might consider a PEDU review as a threat. Let me be clear; the only threat will be to inefficiency and poor performance. Those who care about public services — and I am sure that all my Executive colleagues are in that group — will welcome PEDU's involvement.

No matter what circumstances lead to PEDU's involvement, the unit will work in co-operation with those responsible for service delivery in the Department or agency in question. That spirit of partnership will be vital in the quest to identify and overcome barriers to delivering improved public services. In essence the Executive, the Assembly and the public simply want good-quality, well-run public services. Ultimately, PEDU will be there to help Departments get services working in the desired manner, deliver what was promised and, in doing so, provide taxpayers with value for money.

It would be unwise to expect instant success on delivery forged as a result of an overnight switch throughout public services to a performance culture. In reality, such a change will not be plain sailing, and will demand much effort and persistence. However, in addition to hard work and dedication, such change will undoubtedly require Members, as public representatives, to contemplate radical options to make tough decisions and to take positive action to deliver public services in the manner promised in the Programme for Government.

I have established a ministerial advisory panel to assist in our mission of reaching a point at which all Government's tools are focused on maximising performance and delivering better services. The small group of individuals on that panel will offer the benefit of their insight and experience in delivering significant improvements in large organisations, overseeing organisational change and driving improvements in performance and efficiency. Authoritative, independent perspectives are always beneficial — particularly if problems are persistent, radical change is required and vested interests are rife.

In respect of the panel's composition, I shall avoid being dogmatic about the number of members, the panel's duration etc. Undoubtedly, as we seek to create a new performance culture, the panel will be most beneficial in the short-to-medium term. Furthermore, I wish to avoid a situation arising in which I might have to forgo an outstanding individual's services just because the set number of positions are already filled.

Bearing those points in mind, I have already secured the involvement of Sir Michael Barber, Frank Cushnahan and Dennis Licence as members of the ministerial advisory panel. They are outstanding individuals, with significant experience and credibility in driving step changes in performance in a variety of organisations at local, national and international levels.

Sir Michael Barber, now with McKinsey and Company, is a leading expert on public-service delivery, and is probably best known for establishing and leading Tony Blair's Prime Minister's delivery unit between 2001 and 2005.

That unit had much success in getting the Government machine in Whitehall to focus on delivery. Sir Michael will provide his support as part of a small McKinsey and Co team.

Frank Cushman, a corporate banker by profession, is known to many Members. He is a former chairman of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, and he spent eight years overseeing a period of change and strong growth in our largest seaport. In addition, Frank brings significant financial and commercial experience, gained in the banking sector. Moreover, he has led a number of public assignments to restructure a range of organisations and industries. I have asked Frank to chair the advisory panel.

Dennis Licence is the chairman of a local accountancy practice. He retired as managing director of the First Trust Bank in 2005 after a long career in banking, during which he held several senior positions. Dennis understands consultancy work and specialises in business restructuring and development, human resource management and strategic development. He has served in a range of other positions, including being a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, chairman of Business in the Community and president of the Employers' Forum on Disability.

PEDU is located in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and it will be led by Richard Pengelly, one of my senior departmental officials. Thus, it will combine public finance skills and expertise with significant knowledge of the outputs promised by Departments when they bid for resources during the recent Budget process. He will lead a small team of PEDU staff, some of whom are already in place. That core team will be supplemented by additional staff on short-term assignments, who bring with them expertise on the particular area under review at the time, or who have specific skills in areas such as organisational audit and review. In some cases, that will include front-line professional staff, whose experiences and insights are particularly valuable, as well as individuals from beyond the public sector.

The head of the unit will report directly to me and through me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to the Executive. It is right that PEDU should report to the Executive, because delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government is at stake. If a key target is in danger of being missed, the Executive not only need to know about it but they require the tools to take direct action to deal with the problems and get delivery back on track. As a result, PEDU will focus

particularly on the Executive's priorities and, where funding is not translating into the desired outcomes, the Executive can use PEDU as a means to take direct action to identify problems and implement solutions.

Where will the early focus of PEDU be directed? The unit will be keen to determine whether the key initiatives set out in the Programme for Government have robust delivery plans that are designed to convert funding into results. That should help to establish whether any of our key initiatives are in need of assistance at this early stage.

We already know that the economy is the Executive's top priority — and rightly so — which often leads me to ask what actions we could take quickly to facilitate economic growth. Planning is a key enabler of such growth, and although that often leads to debates over planning policy, we should not forget that a good-quality planning process is also beneficial. Long-drawn-out processes can increase holding costs and uncertainty and, ultimately, only delay compliant projects. The Minister of the Environment and I believe that we can, and should, improve on performance in that area.

That is only one area of concern: undoubtedly, there will be others. In my Department, I am aware of the concerns expressed by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and other public representatives about the increase in the level of rates arrears and the uptake of housing benefit, particularly among owner-occupiers. In response, I could highlight the challenges faced by the new Land and Property Services agency over the past 18 months in the introduction of the new domestic rating system. However, rather than review the past, I have required the agency to put in place a clear recovery plan, designed to ensure measurable improvements over the next 18 months, and I seek reassurance that the LPS is getting the support it needs to deliver from other parts of my Department. Therefore, I have asked PEDU to work with the Land and Property Services in DFP to ensure that there is an action plan and timetable in place to deal with those problems.

In other Departments and public bodies we should not expect everything in the Programme for Government to be delivered with ease. If that were the case, I could only conclude that we had failed to set the bar high enough at the beginning. In progressing, some areas will struggle. With PEDU in place, the Executive should be better placed to identify who is struggling and be better positioned to do something about it.

When the Executive's agreed Budget was announced in January, I paid tribute to the constructive approach taken by my ministerial colleagues, which had allowed agreement to be reached on financial allocations to Departments for the next three years. Agreeing and announcing plans, programmes and budgets was

relatively easy. The Executive now face the challenge of delivering on their commitments and on their shared ambition to make Northern Ireland a better place for all citizens. We must not fool ourselves, or attempt to fool others, that delivering the changes needed to make public services more efficient and more focused on the needs of our community will be easy.

There will be resistance to change and to making change quickly. I believe firmly that the Executive can deliver on their commitments in the Programme for Government if they can create and maintain a clear and urgent focus on delivering on our shared commitments to the people of Northern Ireland.

The creation of the performance and efficiency delivery unit provides a clear signal that this is our priority and our ambition for the future.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Finance Committee has had periodic updates on the progress of the proposition, which has been well signalled. The Committee appreciates the additional information presented by the Minister.

Members will be interested in how PEDU's success will be measured and the targets that will be set for it. PEDU's accountability and reporting arrangements will also be of interest — how will the Assembly's scrutiny role be factored into those arrangements?

Will the Minister indicate what protocols have been established to ensure positive relationships between PEDU and Departments, and whether those include potential incentives for Departments to co-operate? How will he ensure that PEDU will not contradict or encroach upon the work of the Audit Office or DFP supply? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Chairperson for his questions. The answer to the first question is difficult in that the only measure of PEDU's success will be the delivery of the Programme for Government. I envisage that from this moment on, PEDU will fade into the background in a public sense. Its role is to collaborate with Departments. It is not there to say "PEDU has arrived". PEDU is not the story. The story will be the delivery of the Programme for Government and the achievements of various targets set by Ministers.

Success will probably best be determined by Ministers at an Executive level, because they will have seen the assistance that has been given behind the scenes.

Regarding the reporting role, I have indicated that PEDU will report directly to me. It will be based at my departmental headquarters; it will report to the Executive through me, and because this concerns the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government, I expect

to be updating the Executive on the work of PEDU on a fairly regular basis.

The Committee's role will be important. It will have the opportunity at any stage to raise issues about the work of PEDU, and perhaps the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may also be taking an interest as this is about the delivery of the Programme for Government. Committees as a whole may want to have a role in drawing the attention of PEDU to issues within their Departments where they think that it can be of assistance.

11.30 am

It is an incentive for everyone to have better performance, efficiency and delivery; that is the ultimate goal. We are here to serve the community, to deliver its aspirations and to deliver on the programme to which we have committed ourselves. The incentive, therefore, is the delivery of that programme, and it is hoped that an aspiration to raise their game will be at the forefront of every Department's mind. It is for that reason that I have volunteered an area of activity from my Department that I want PEDU to examine. I believe that PEDU can do a useful task, and, to that end, I will give colleagues a lead.

I remember that the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat put down a question for oral answer about how the Audit Office might become more involved in the running of schemes and programmes, and he followed up that question on several occasions. In response, I said that it was not appropriate, because the Audit Office's role comprised being able to stand back and look at outcomes impartially and independently. If the Audit Office were to be involved at the early stage of a scheme, it would be part of the end problem. PEDU, however, will be involved throughout the process in real time, as I said in my statement. That is the distinction between the two roles. The Audit Office role will not be affected, but since PEDU will intervene in the early stage of a scheme or programme, it is hoped that there will be less for the Audit Office to be critical about.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his statement. What budget has been allocated to PEDU? Has that money been allocated from the DFP budget, or have other Departments contributed? The Department must ensure that PEDU does not add to the structures of bureaucracy that exist in a system that is, already, bureaucratic. Has the Minister set a time limit, after which the effectiveness of PEDU will be reviewed?

Given that there has been a delay, when does the Minister envisage that PEDU will commence meaningful work from which the Assembly will see results?

Mr P Robinson: PEDU has a budget of approximately £0.5 million, which comes from DFP's resources. We are not, therefore, seeking additional funding for its

operation; its budget came about as a reallocation within the Department. I will be pleased if other Departments want to make contributions, but I am sure that it will be difficult to prise resources from them.

I assure the Member that increasing bureaucracy is the last thing that PEDU will do. The function of PEDU already exists in my Department; DFP is not merely taking on some new role and authority. We have the power to do all those things, but it is important that we have a more focused and dedicated unit to deal with the issues. Therefore, I do not believe that we have increased bureaucracy.

We are going through the three-year cycle for the Programme for Government, and at the end of that period, I am sure that the Assembly will want to examine how effective PEDU has been and take decisions at that stage. That would seem to be an appropriate time in which to see the unit's worth within the overall structure.

Mr Storey mentioned delays; I do not recognise delays. As I said previously, the unit has been set up, and it has started work. It is working with OFMDFM on the monitoring arrangements so that we can fit in properly to whatever role is there.

I have mentioned some of the early areas that we are going to look at — planning and the Land and Property Services — so we are in business.

Mr Beggs: I concur with the Minister who, in his statement today, indicated that a spirit of partnership will be vital for PEDU to achieve a successful outcome. PEDU has been developed from the Prime Minister's delivery unit (PMDU), and successful aspects of that unit included working with delivery bodies to seek to improve efficiency and delivery, rather than holding Departments and other bodies to account. Given the non-voluntary aspects of the model that have been outlined by the Minister, how can he be certain that PEDU and the Departments will work in partnership successfully?

Mr P Robinson: To some extent the Member is right; PEDU is a development of Tony Blair's PMDU and, indeed, we have been fortunate to have had the head of Tony Blair's delivery unit, Sir Michael Barbour, involved in our unit. One of the values of Sir Michael's involvement will be that he will bring the protocols that operated in the delivery unit in the UK as a whole to our system here in Northern Ireland.

If anyone wants to read more about that issue, Sir Michael has written a book on his experiences as head of PMDU, which is worth reading, and I am sure that the Library either has a copy or will get one very quickly.

Sir Michael Barbour adopted a collaborative partnership approach; going into the Departments not to expose them or show them up but on the basis that

whatever credit came from better performance by a Department would remain in that Department.

Again, the story was not about the delivery unit itself, and there is a need to understand that. In the early stages, I know there will be — in fact there already has been — concern among officials about PEDU coming into their Departments like storm troopers, causing havoc all around as they lift every stone to see what is underneath it. That is not the role that PEDU will have, and the more that PEDU works in the system, the more collaborative partnerships and working relationships will be created.

I hope that Departments will not see PEDU as something that they should fear, but rather as something that they will want to work with in their desire to have better performance, efficiency and delivery.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his substantial statement and I assure him of my full support for the initiative. I note and support the initial steps and areas of inquiry, including the planning system and rate arrears that he referred to in his statement. I encourage Ministers to join in this collaborative effort.

The Minister referred to the role of political representatives, and I take this opportunity to congratulate him on his election as leader designate of the Democratic Unionist Party, an important role within our political system that, among other things, will give him an opportunity to further the ends referred to in his statement.

As regards the Minister's comments on radical options, tough decisions, and the role of political representatives therein, does he agree that there is not enough awareness of opportunity costs in our political system? There is an assumption that if resources are put to a good end, that is necessarily a good thing. However, every pound spent in one way forgoes the opportunity to spend it in another. The task is to spend that pound in the most efficient and effective manner. Will the Minister comment on whether he thinks that that would call for a significant change in our political culture?

Mr P Robinson: First, I thank the Member for his good wishes — I think. I also thank him for his support for the work of PEDU. I emphasise that when I chose planning and the Land and Property Services as areas that PEDU might want to look at, there was no implication or criticism contained in that choice.

However, it is recognised that they have an important role to play in meeting the targets that the Executive have set. If we were to ask PEDU to work on various areas, we would not want the people who work in those areas to think that that is being done because they are doing a bad job. PEDU will do that work because those people have a major role to play in ensuring that the targets that the Executive have set are reached.

Mr O'Loan a Member for North Antrim mentioned tough decisions. Such decisions may have to be made if the targets that the Executive have set in the Programme for Government are not being met. One of those decisions might be that more funds are required, which may mean that a reallocation of resources around the Executive is necessary to achieve those targets. We will have to make those types of tough decisions, including those on the opportunity costs to which the Member referred.

The reality of public-funding allocation is that when money is allocated to one source of activity, it is denied to another. That is why I get a little impatient when Departments do not spend the funds that they have been allocated. That leads to underspend and to people in other areas of activity being frustrated. Those people ask what they could have done with the millions of pounds that a Department has not spent. Opportunity costs are important, and one critical area to consider is whether best value is being achieved for all the money that is spent in the public sector. That is the imperative that the business cases that are required for significant projects must take into consideration.

Dr Farry: I also congratulate the Minister on receiving the endorsement of his party colleagues yesterday. I wish him well in whatever challenges the future may hold. On behalf of the opposition, I welcome the creation of PEDU. *[Laughter.]* Hopefully, that means that the unit has unanimous support in the House as being a good and welcome initiative.

Before Easter, my party colleagues and I had a constructive meeting with the Minister on the Deloitte report on the cost of division and the wider challenges that are involved with that issue. Recently, the issue was highlighted further by the BBC 'Panorama' programme, which brought it to the attention of a UK national audience. How does the Minister envisage that the cost of division will be addressed through the good offices of PEDU? Does he envisage any particular challenges or targets being thrown down to Departments during the 2008-11 Budget period?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Member for his kind remarks and for his support for the delivery unit.

I said that one of the two key roles of PEDU is ensuring efficiency. If funds are being wasted and squandered because of the cost of division, PEDU will want to deal with that. It is too early for PEDU to identify the areas that it will deal with, but it is within the unit's remit to consider what savings can be made. Efficiency is one of the key areas of activity for the performance and efficiency delivery unit.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the appointment of what he referred to as outstanding individuals with a high level of experience and talent. However, I wonder whether he would be

better off hiring Mr Farry, who clearly feels that he could do the entire job on his own. That would have been much more cost-effective.

Several Members mentioned the attitudes of other Departments. Does the Minister have any concerns about the level of co-operation or resistance that PEDU will receive from other Departments? What role, if any, does he see for the statutory Departments in contributing to the process of PEDU?

11.45 am

Mr P Robinson: Does the Member mean statutory Committees?

Mr Weir: Yes.

Mr P Robinson: First, I am not going to get into the North Down thing. *[Laughter.]* We already have Mr Farry's services; he will have a role as a member of the Finance Committee, and, therefore, we will benefit from his wisdom at no additional cost.

If I were a departmental official, I would be reluctant to resist PEDU's involvement because, to some extent, it would expose me as someone who was opposed to improved performance, efficiency and delivery. If I were Minister of a Department where officials were unhappy about PEDU's being involved, I would be asking what they were trying to hide, and I would be all the more enthusiastic to get PEDU involved. I do not think that departmental officials will show that kind of resistance. If officials have to meet targets for their Ministers, and they feel that there is a major task involved, they will want the assistance of PEDU — particularly if they think that they will need some additional resources. That will be a test, and that will be the message that we will get back.

Obviously, the Finance Committee will play a key role in continuing to monitor PEDU's work. However, Committees will be intimately involved in the operation of their own Departments, closely examining where their strengths and weaknesses lie. Committees will see those before many others will. Therefore, if a Committee feels that its Department is underperforming in a particular area, it can call on PEDU for intervention and support. I, along with my Department and PEDU, will take that very seriously.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister share the concern that because PEDU's main focus will be on efficiency-savings targets, Departments will be forced to cut front-line services for the community? Whenever Departments are told to introduce efficiency savings, services are cut, and that can impact on the local community. How will the Minister seek to alleviate that?

Mr P Robinson: As the name implies, the purpose of PEDU is to improve performance and efficiency and to deliver better services on the ground. Therefore, my

focus is on ensuring that the end consumer gets a better deal and a better service. The purpose of PEDU is not to reduce services but to get better services for the community.

No part of today's presentation has been about reducing front-line services. In fact, it has been quite the opposite — we want to ensure that money is not wasted on bureaucracy but rather that it goes to improving front-line services for the people who need them most.

Mr Hamilton: Like others, I welcome the creation of PEDU. I particularly welcome the securing of Sir Michael Barber's services. I am sure that PEDU will benefit from his expertise, as he pioneered the Prime Minister's delivery unit. It is likely that some Ministers may be concerned that PEDU will take over various functions and, almost, start running Departments. The Minister has admitted that there is likely to be some resistance in the system. How will PEDU affect, or not affect, departmental responsibility?

Mr P Robinson: I join my colleague in welcoming the fact that PEDU has secured Sir Michael Barber's services. He has a high profile and possesses a proven track record, which gives people confidence and adds credibility to the unit. However, the other two individuals whom I have asked to be part of the advisory panel, Frank Cushnahan and Dennis Licence, also come with considerable reputations. They will bring a great deal of experience to the advisory panel, and that experience will ultimately benefit the unit.

Assuming the responsibility for running a Department is the last thing that PEDU will want to do. Let me be clear: there is to be no change in departmental authority. Ministers have the same responsibility for their Departments today that they had yesterday — PEDU does not interfere with ministerial authority at all. Rather, it will be an instrument that Ministers can use in order to improve departmental performance. Ministers, more than anyone else, will look to PEDU to assist them in the long term, particularly if improvements are required in their Departments. Ministerial control is to be as it always has been; neither PEDU nor the Department of Finance and Personnel has assumed additional functions. DFP already has the authority to do everything that it asks PEDU to do.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for dealing with this important issue. Will he tell the House how the Strategic Investment Board's work, as well as the unique role that it plays in Departments, will be monitored? What use will be made of modern management techniques, such as total quality management or continuous improvement?

Mr P Robinson: Were OFMFDU to ask PEDU to do so, Strategic Investment Board's (SIB) activities would be something that it could also consider. No

strand of Government has a fence built around it to indicate that PEDU should stay away. PEDU's role is to examine the performance and efficiency of any area of Government — SIB is not exempt.

Moreover, PEDU will use all available management techniques. As I said earlier, Richard Pengelly will lead the unit. Anyone who knows Richard will be aware that he is a most competent official, who has the added advantage of having been intimately involved at every stage of the Budget process. He knows what Ministers and officials promised they would deliver when they sought moneys. Therefore, he is ideally placed to ensure that they deliver on those promises.

Mr McQuillan: I join others in welcoming the Minister's statement, and I thank him for making it. How will PEDU determine areas of activity for examination?

Mr P Robinson: Several different mechanisms will probably be employed to determine the subjects that PEDU will explore, some of which we have discussed already. One that will be used is OFMFDU's target-tracking mechanism. If one of the Executive's Programme for Government priorities is not being met, PEDU will be involved in getting it back on track.

If a Minister, believing that it will be beneficial, requests PEDU's assistance, the Department of Finance and Personnel may be able to identify, using DFP Supply processes, where PEDU involvement might help.

I have already spoken about the role that the Committees could play. However, if problems are identified and if help is sought, PEDU will be available to give support.

Mrs I Robinson: I also welcome the Minister's statement. One issue to consider is that old habits die hard in the Civil Service and in Departments. That is particularly the case in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety where, as I am sure the Minister knows, several efficiency savings regarding Health Service staff must be made.

There is a mentality of empire building in the way in which Departments are managed. What can PEDU do to help break that mindset — if that terminology is appropriate — to allow for appropriate staffing in the Health Service and to ensure that it is staffed by front-line professionals rather than by management?

Mr P Robinson: I am truly glad that I have the support of the Member on this issue. *[Laughter.]* Through the creation of PEDU, we are attempting to create a new culture of performance and delivery in public services.

Speaking from my own experience in local government, so that I do not appear to be pointing the finger at any Department, I know that local government was seen simply as a service whereby money was

given to every job in order to ensure that it got done. There were no real criteria to measure whether the public was getting best value for money. Only more recently has the concept of value for money come to the fore in the delivery of local government services.

We are the custodians of the public purse. It is not our money that is being spent; we are spending hard-earned taxes and rates. We, therefore, have a massive responsibility to ensure that when we are spending that money, we are spending it wisely. We must also ensure that we are getting the best value for that money and that when people give us their money, we deliver the services that they expect. Given that people have invested in our public services, we must ensure that we deliver the best services for that.

PEDU will attempt to change the culture in Departments so that they perform better and so that we have an efficient, timely delivery of public services.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Cancelled Clinics

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called 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 Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety to introduce measures to reduce the cancellation level of outpatient clinics.

It should be clear by now to all of us who are charged with political responsibility in Northern Ireland that we face difficult times. The looming financial crisis will require us to be effective and industrious in the way in which we do our business in future. The failure of the Prime Minister, Mr Brown, to address the wrongs of the past through his delivery of an inadequate package to finance infrastructural support will create problems for the delivery of central services to the public.

The havoc that was wreaked on our community by terrorists and terrorism during the past 40 years resulted — to the detriment of our physical infrastructure — in a large proportion of available finances being spent on security. Money that should have been spent on hospitals, schools and the physical infrastructure was siphoned away to pay for the security bill. We are now left to pick up the pieces, and we are required to respond to many public demands while being burdened with a significant infrastructural deficit and finite resources.

It is, therefore, incumbent on all Members to ensure that every penny is spent wisely. We must look at every budget and item of expenditure to ensure that we are getting value for money without a penny having been wasted. The budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is a significant proportion of the total Northern Ireland Budget, and we need to be sure that there will be no waste or inefficiencies. In an attempt to make the best use of our available resources, we also need to ensure that no area of expenditure is being left unvisited.

In that context, Members will know that the level of cancelled clinics requires urgent and radical appraisal. Across the trusts in 2003-04, there were 13,065 cancelled clinics; in 2004-05, there were 13,995; in 2005-06, 14,771; and almost 14,000 in 2006-07. The did-not-attend rate for patients in Northern Ireland in 2006-07 was 11.4%. In England the rate for the same period was 10.8%.

12.00 noon

I draw the attention of Members to the amount of money that is spent on using independent-sector providers to reduce outpatient waiting times. In 2005-06, the figure was over £400,000, which jumped to over £6 million in 2006-07. In 2006-07, 43,319 people were seen by the independent sector, and a further 22,417 people were seen in the 2007-08 period. Those people should, and would, have been seen in the Health Service if it were not for the level of cancelled outpatient clinics.

Independent-sector providers were used to achieve a welcome and substantial reduction in waiting times, and the Minister and his Department should be congratulated for that — there is nothing worse than waiting for treatment in the knowledge that a date for an appointment cannot be found in the near future. However, such use of the private sector is similar to robbing Peter to pay Paul or applying a sticking plaster when surgery is required. Subsidising the private sector in that way is an admission that an important aspect of our clinical arrangements requires an immediate and comprehensive overhaul. The crisis in the outpatient waiting times would not have arisen if the problem of cancelled clinics had been properly addressed. The money that is spent on reducing waiting lists through the outsourcing of work to the private sector could be more effectively employed in other areas.

In each of the past four years, approximately 48,000 new referrals did not attend their outpatient appointments as scheduled. A new referral is the first — in some cases the only — attendance at a consultant's outpatient clinic in a hospital. In the same four years, approximately three times that number of consultant-initiated appointments were missed by patients who did not give any notice to the hospital. On average, there were 200,000 appointments each year in which the patient did not turn up, and the real figure could be as high as 390,000. A 4% reduction over a four-year period cannot be considered encouraging.

All of that represents an enormous failure in the system and is totally unacceptable. The potential efficiency savings are considerable, and expensive temporary solutions will disguise the problem without dealing with the root cause. There is also the cost in human terms for nursing and medical-records staff when people fail to turn up without warning, the consequent increase in waiting lists when operations or procedures are postponed.

There are some obvious changes that consultants and other medical staff could make. They should be required to find cover if they go on leave, and no leave should be granted if cover is not found. Clinics should be able to proceed in the absence of a consultant if a senior registrar or another consultant is present to

cover. More efficient management of time is required, with flexibility built into the system, perhaps through more evening and weekend clinics that afford more choice for patients. That happens already, but more flexibility is required. Medical professionals should be discouraged from taking study leave during clinical time, and it should happen only when consultants have no outpatient clinics. Consultants have an important role to play, and they must be forced to deliver.

Ultimately, however, responsibility must be placed on those who abuse the system, and we should consider the penalties that can be applied to discourage irresponsible behaviour by those seeking treatment. Sanctions on those who fail to attend a second appointment could be applied — two strikes and they are out. In any event, a root-and-branch review of every aspect of the appointment system is required until the problem is brought under control. I call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce measures that reduce the level of cancellations in outpatient-clinic appointments, which would create efficiency savings with no reliance on the private sector.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further calls for a holistic, patient-centred approach from the Minister and his department to tackle waiting lists.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House for debate. The Assembly, the Health Committee, the Minister and his Department must get involved in this important issue in order to tackle waiting lists and the level of cancelled clinics.

Waiting lists are a concern for everyone in one way or another. As community activists, elected representatives and family members, we can all highlight cases of cancelled clinics or long waiting times for appointments.

Whether clinics are cancelled or patients fail to show up, waiting lists are, and will continue to be, a problem for the Health Service. More importantly, unless we get serious and try to sort out the situation, they will continue to cost millions of pounds a year. Some figures have been mentioned, and I do not propose to go over them again. I want to thank the Minister for attending the debate. I hope that he tells Members, in simple terms, how he and the Department propose to tackle the issue of cancelled clinics.

In fairness — and I know that Alex Easton has mentioned it — we know that the Minister is doing some positive work. However, I suspect that he has many more pressing Health Service issues to deal with than identifying and using money and resources wasted because of cancelled clinics or non-attending

patients. I accept that there are a number of reasons for this, which I will come back to later.

I have looked at some of the information relating to cancelled clinics and read the excellent report published by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which highlighted a number of reasons for cancellation. However, while we support the motion's call for the Minister to introduce measures to reduce the number of cancelled clinics, we felt that a patient-centred approach was needed.

The PAC report states that in 2005-06, £259 million was spent on outpatient services in the North. The PAC blames inefficiencies on non-attendance and the trusts' cancellation of clinics, both of which waste resources and lead to increased waiting times for other patients. That is why I propose the amendment.

A holistic, patient-centred approach to the issue is key. Scotland's new approach to its waiting lists and non-attendance is a patient-focused system of booking appointments that puts users at the heart of a dialogue process. At the outset, patients are sent a letter acknowledging their referral. As the patient nears the top of the waiting list they receive a further letter, inviting them to telephone to arrange an appointment. The process is complemented by a policy preventing the clinic from being cancelled with less than six weeks' notice.

The patient is then offered a choice of dates and times from which they choose the most convenient. Failure to telephone leads to a further letter being sent to the patient and their GP, explaining that they have been removed from the list.

Patient-focused booking enables the patient to choose an appointment that is more suited to their lifestyle. Information shows that patients are, therefore, much more likely to attend and that less administrative staff time is spent on cancelling or rearranging appointments. A survey of 700 people on this approach found that 98% of patients were happy to telephone and arrange their appointments, while 97% were happy with the appointment that they received. Those figures show that there is an onus on patients to be centrally involved in the process.

The PAC reported that there was a problem with the perception that private-practice commitments of consultants may have some impact on whether clinics actually take place. The PAC stated that, while there is no doubt that the majority of consultants operate to the highest professional standards, it must also be recognised that there can be a potential conflict between the private and NHS elements of consultants' work.

The Minister should comment on that, and on the PAC report in general. I support the motion but also propose the amendment.

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

I wish to emphasise how important it is that of all the people of Northern Ireland work in close co-operation with their elected representatives to build a better future for us all. The process of creating a peaceful, democratic society is still in its infancy. There is much work to be done in the years ahead to build relationships that were severely damaged by the past four decades of community strife and terrorism. We must also rebuild our economy and infrastructure to meet the challenges of living in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

Our future will depend entirely on our ability and determination to make our devolved Government work and to drive our economy forward. Success in making the necessary improvements in education, the environment, regional development and health will depend on how successfully we can develop every aspect of the economy. Those improvements will include reviewing every aspect of the Health Service to ensure that there is no waste, that inefficiencies are reduced, and that every penny spent is spent wisely and accountably.

We owe an enormous debt to those who work at all levels in our hospitals and clinics. Every day, we see the dedication of medical staff, who can be assured of our gratitude. However, it is devastating for health professionals and those in the community who are urgently seeking an appointment to learn that, in 11.4% of cases, people fail to turn up for a scheduled examination, procedure or operation, without indicating their intention in advance. That is a clear and unacceptable abuse of the appointment system. That is demoralising for medical staff and represents a hugely expensive waste of resources, time and money. Such abuse also has the potential to lead to unnecessary suffering for other patients who are awaiting treatment.

In the past four years, approximately 50,000 new referrals failed to turn up as scheduled. Approximately 1,500 consultant-initiated appointments were cancelled because patients failed to attend and gave no warning or notification to the hospital. Some people are quick to criticise health workers and politicians, but this is a clear example of an issue on which we can all pull together to put things right.

The culture of tolerance of those who behave inappropriately must change. We must review the process of cancelled appointments and consider what steps can be taken to reduce the number of cancellations. However, ultimately, people must be held responsible for their failure to provide adequate notice that they are unable to attend a scheduled appointment.

Cancelled appointments lead directly to lengthening waiting lists. Perhaps it is time for the Health Service to consider imposing a charge on people who fail to

turn up for an appointment without giving notice. Some mechanism must be put in place to ensure that expanding waiting lists do not contribute to longer-term health problems for patients who are careful in keeping their appointments, particularly in the mental-health sector, where cancelled appointments seem to be most prevalent.

I call on the Minister and his officials to urgently address that issue, because many millions of pounds are being wasted. We need an immediate response from the Minister. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the debate, which I hope will go some way towards tackling the problem. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety states that around 345,000 clinics are held each year, with almost 2·7 million attendances. Those are sizeable numbers. Departmental figures show that, over the course of a typical year, around 300,000 outpatients are not seen. Those figures represent a combination of patients who had their appointments cancelled by trusts, who cancelled their own appointments — which were not subsequently filled — or who failed to attend their appointments. It is a matter of great concern that people with mental-health issues are the most likely to fail to attend appointments, and specific improvements must be made in that area.

12.15 pm

Those overall figures make up 10·2% of the total number of outpatients. Although I appreciate that, due to recording anomalies, there are often discrepancies between recorded statistics and actual attendances, the figures are still significant. Cancellations have consequences. First, those that have not been seen either will not receive their treatment, or will have to wait to do so, and that can have clinical and health implications. Secondly, the potential cost to the Department of Health — and, ultimately, the taxpayer — of non-attendances and cancellations is estimated at £11·6 million annually. In a period of fiscal tightness, that is a substantial amount of money that could be used for front-line services.

I understand that the Minister has inherited a difficult situation. For a long time, Northern Ireland has lagged behind its regional counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, I appreciate that the Department has introduced measures to tackle the problem, and a major programme of service reform to improve outpatient waiting times has seen substantial success. A significant component of that is the introduction of partial booking of outpatient appointments, whereby, shortly after their referral, patients are advised of the probable wait for an appointment. Six weeks before the end of that wait, they are asked to contact the hospital to agree a convenient date. Such

an approach has been successful in Wales, and I hope it will bring further reductions in cancellations and non-attendance in Northern Ireland.

Given that a reduction of 1% in non-attendance or cancellations could save up to £1million, the need for further success becomes apparent. The Minister has had success in reducing outpatient waiting times: today no one will wait more than six months for a first outpatient appointment. I appreciate, however, that more can be done.

Although the Ulster Unionist Party will support the Sinn Féin amendment, I was initially worried that it would take some of the focus from the issue of cancelled clinics. However, party members are happy to accept both the motion and the amendment.

I understand that achieving goals in non-attendance and cancellations will take time; however, policies that tackle both the cancellations by trusts and the non-attendance of patients are required. Patients must be made aware that they have responsibilities to hospitals, health professionals, other patients, and — above all — to themselves. An environment of respect must be fostered between patients and the Health Service, so that the best care can be provided for those most in need.

We are taking meaningful steps. Cancellations and non-attendance figures are heading in the right direction, but more can be done, and I am confident that more will be done.

I shall listen with interest to what the Minister has to say, and I welcome any update that he can give regarding the current situation and any actions that he is taking. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion and the amendment and thank those Members who tabled them. Unfortunately, the consequences of missed appointments, which are a common occurrence in outpatient clinics, are not particularly well known. They include the cost to the Health Service, and to other patients, who are bumped back each time. When I examined the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland's report on missed appointments, several points became apparent. Patients sometimes cancel appointments at the last minute, and some just do not show up. Others persistently do not show up, and sometimes the trusts cancel appointments. Patients who miss appointments tend to cite such factors as forgetfulness as the main reason.

They must bear their share of the responsibility; it really must be brought home to patients that missed appointments have monetary consequences for the Health Service. It must be explained to patients that they must cancel their appointments if they decide not to attend because they are feeling better. They must appreciate the importance of doing so.

The auditors also pointed out that it is time to improve on current arrangements and to create a more comprehensive service that meets users' expectations of the appointments process as regards booking, changing and cancelling appointments, and more flexible opening hours. When walking down the Lisburn Road and the Malone Road, I have observed that the private clinics are open at all hours, including weekends and evenings. We could consider changing the opening times of clinics to suit people's lifestyles.

Some patients are concerned that private-practice obligations may impact on the times at which clinics are held. The merging of private healthcare with the National Health Service always raises anxieties, and those anxieties cannot be dismissed. Some consultants spend a large proportion of their time in private practice, and it is valid to argue that that may have a detrimental effect on the National Health Service. We know that consultants also cancel clinics, sometimes at very short notice. Patients must be told in advance whether they will be able to see their consultant. Some patients may be particularly worried about a health concern and turn up religiously for appointments, yet never get to see their own consultant. Patients often do not get to see the named consultant.

If we are to restore confidence in the National Health Service, we must reduce waiting times to an acceptable level. People should not have to scrimp and save for private treatment because they are worried about a condition or are in pain. Although the targets have led to improved waiting times, I still believe that the waiting times are not acceptable — if somebody is worried or in pain, they might still have to wait up to six months for an appointment.

Although it is possible that improved technology could result in better booking systems, it is unlikely that one solution will work right across the National Health Service. Although the non-attendance rates are higher in some areas than in others, we need a more patient-centred approach, as Sue Ramsey said. Many patients fail to attend their appointments without phoning ahead to cancel them. As I said, it is vital that patients take responsibility for their appointments. As someone who has attended outpatient clinics, I know that it is not always clear whether one will be given a new appointment. Sometimes the process is hit or miss. A patient could have a serious illness, but unless they remember to stop at the reception desk to ask for a follow-up appointment, they will not get one.

We know that people sometimes have good reasons for not taking up their appointments, and that the Department has set targets and met them. Although that is welcome news, we must further reduce the number of missed appointments. The majority of people are responsible and notify clinics, but there are particular issues in relation to attendance at mental-

health clinics, and there is a special onus on personnel to ensure that the patients are well aware that they are expected to attend appointments.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's proposals for reducing the cancellation level of all outpatient appointments.

Mr McCarthy: I support this important motion and thank the Members who tabled it for bringing it to the House.

The Health Service should be our number one priority at all times. As the Alliance Party's health spokesman, I acknowledge the high standard of work that is carried out by so many people right across the Health Service: consultants, surgeons, doctors, nurses, cleaners, the Ambulance Service and every single person who is involved in the delivery of a first-class Health Service to all our population.

Unfortunately, there are times when, for whatever reason, the Health Service does not deliver in the way in which we want it to. In those cases, lessons are learned and improvements made, and so we all strive for better results. The motion raises real concerns for both health administrators and patients. Regardless of who cancels the appointments, the end result is a drain on scarce resources. That is the problem that we are trying to overcome.

Information to which I am privy states that some 13,500 clinics were cancelled in 2006 at a cost to the Health Service of £11.5 million — a staggering figure, and one that must be reduced. Many reasons exist for clinics being cancelled, but it is in everyone's interest to ensure that some form of procedure be put in place sharply in order to reduce that anomaly. It is not only in patients' best interests but health officials' that that happen.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is present. I have no doubt that he will take on board the genuine concerns that have been expressed and make every effort to get on top of this serious problem.

Genuine reasons exist for many cancellations. However, pressure must be applied, encouragement must be given or whatever is required must be done to ensure that patients understand the importance of attending appointments. Surely common courtesy tells patients that, if they cannot attend appointments, they should at least telephone the hospital or clinic as early as possible to advise of their non-attendance and to give their reasons. If that were to be done, and done early, new appointments could be issued and another patient seen without wasting the precious time of consultants and others.

As Sue Ramsey mentioned, patient-focused booking has been introduced in Scotland to some good effect. If

patient-focused booking is considered a success in Scotland, Northern Ireland may be able to repeat that success. Anything that greatly reduces the number of cancelled clinics and saves Health Service costs is to be welcomed. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I also support amendment, which enhances the motion. Most people dislike nothing more than the thought of having to go into hospital, having to share a ward, and being able to see their family and eat only at certain times. That being the case, many patients, in an attempt to get home, will play down how ill they feel. For those patients, outpatient care is essential. It is of the utmost importance that aftercare be properly administered and that checks on progress be made in order to ensure a patient's health and safety. For those reasons, the outpatient clinic is a vital part of the healthcare system. Any problems that arise there directly affect constituents' health.

The NHS has some of the most intelligent and progressive doctors in the world, and our patient care should be second to none. As it stands, however, patients are waiting too long for care, because of inefficiencies in the system. No one factor is entirely to blame. The cancellation of clinics can be caused by numerous factors, such as staff illness, and unavoidable problems may arise that result in an outpatient clinic's not being held. However, cancellations that are down to, for example, staff holidays cannot be accepted, and changes must be made to ensure that that does not happen. People are entitled to their holidays, and no one is suggesting otherwise. However, holiday leave should be noted down in advance so that administrators then can get adequate cover in place to ensure that patients do not lose out on healthcare.

One reason why one in 10 people is not seen at an outpatient clinic as soon as they should be seen is because patients themselves sometimes forget about an appointment or cannot get time off work to attend it. The Minister's strategy must include a publicity campaign to ensure that people are made aware that missing an appointment could be detrimental to their health. Such a campaign would also make people aware that others who could have made use of that appointment are missing out, too.

I shall give one example from the doctor's clinic in Kirkcubbin — not that I attend the doctor, because I am very fortunate in not having to. However, just after Christmas, I was at the clinic and saw a sign on the wall that highlighted the number of missed appointments. That sign focused the minds of those sitting there that appointments are important and not to be overlooked. Therefore, innovative ways exist to draw people's attention to the issue of cancelled outpatient appointments. The public must be made aware that they have to play their role. However, with respect, the

onus is on the Minister to clarify and improve the current situation.

I fear that, sometimes, we examine figures and statistics and forget that it is not simply a matter of crunching numbers and ticking boxes, but of having the right number of clinics and staff. Those clinics are instrumental in saving lives. Staff can spot the early signs that illness is returning or worsening, and can ensure that treatment is dispensed. Although a two-week cancellation may not seem much of a setback in some people's diaries, for others it can mean the difference between life and death, such as when a developing heart problem is discovered early and treated.

I want to make it clear that my remarks are not an attack on staff in any way, shape or form. They are the people who are most aware of patients' needs. I simply wish to remind the Minister that he cannot allow the system to fail staff and patients. Therefore, I join my colleagues in urging the Minister to ensure that problems that are evident in the system are rectified urgently.

I read the Comptroller and Auditor General's report 'Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics' and discovered that there has been some improvement among trusts, which must be commended for their work and efforts. The problem is that, although the number of cancelled clinics throughout the entire Province dropped from around 14,700 to 13,800 — a drop of approximately 900 — during 2006-07, it is clear that more must be done. That could be achieved through a co-ordinated effort by the Minister and his Department.

I urge the Assembly to join me in calling on the Minister to deal with this issue through a proactive strategy that begins at the top level, works its way down, and takes into account not only the successes that have occurred in Northern Ireland, but the systems that are in place on the mainland. Rather than see a total of 924 cancelled clinics by April 2009, the Minister must aim to reduce the number of cancellations to 5%, which is a more acceptable level. We ask the Minister to take action immediately in order to make a difference to patients who are waiting for appointments and who will benefit from a more efficient system. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension of the sitting. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be Dominic Bradley.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Some worrying changes are taking place at my local hospital in Newry. Staff at Daisy Hill Hospital who arrange appointments for ear, nose and throat (ENT), antenatal, surgical, and other outpatient clinics have been told that — under the review of public administration (RPA) — their work will be centralised to a call centre at Craigavon Area Hospital.

Many people believe that that move has the potential to impact adversely on the care of patients as, under those proposals, GP referral letters would initially go to Craigavon Area Hospital before being returned to Daisy Hill Hospital. There is no guarantee that those letters would arrive back in Daisy Hill Hospital in time for consultant clinics and, indeed, that has been the experience in other areas.

Consultants, therefore, could end up being faced with patients for whom they have no GP referral notes. Such a situation would play havoc with outpatient appointments, and could lead to urgent treatment being delayed. Ironically, therefore, the system itself could produce missed appointments. The intention behind RPA is to give patients better care and better services. I doubt whether this change will guarantee that.

The relevant professionals are also worried about the potential impact of the change. Consultants at Daisy Hill Hospital were not made aware of the changes, and they have written to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to communicate their anxiety. The staff at the hospital also had little warning. The proposal was sprung on them on 20 March, with only two weeks of consultation time, including the Easter holiday period. Such undue haste does not allow sufficient time for the effects of the change to be properly assessed.

Furthermore, medical staff — consultants and GPs — are far from convinced that the proposals are for the benefit of patients. Trade unions at the hospitals involved have told me that they were not consulted about the changes and that equality impact studies of the proposals have not been carried out.

The further a service is moved away from the local area the less personal it becomes. The excellent local knowledge built up by staff over many years will not be used to its best effect in a call centre at some distance from the residence of the patients. I am very concerned about the impact that the changes will have on patients' health and care and on the smooth running of outpatient clinics and appointments.

I am glad that the Minister is here today. I ask him to investigate the situation and to examine the ramifications of the changes, especially considering the deep reservations expressed by the consultants and GPs involved. I welcome a response from the Minister on that issue in due course. A LeasCheann Comhairle, sin deireadh a bhfuil le rá agam. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome and support the motion proposed by my colleague Mr Easton. In doing so, I hope to help achieve what every politician wants — to save the Health Service money that is currently wasted, so that it can further develop the programmes that benefit all in society.

It was shocking to read in the Public Accounts Committee report that £12 million of an already stretched health budget is wasted each year due to the cancellation of clinics, or non-attendance of patients.

All Members would agree that that money could be put to much more beneficial use. To achieve systematic change, we must examine the way in which hospitals cancel clinics and why patients fail to attend appointments. Although I accept that the exact reasons behind patient non-attendance might be difficult to establish, I ask the Minister to consider using modern communication methods, such as emailing or text-messaging patients — only with their written permission — in an effort to ensure that the number of missed appointments is reduced.

As for hospital-cancelled clinics, I appreciate that staff sickness or bereavement cannot be easily taken into account when making plans, but annual leave can be programmed in effectively. I urge the Minister to ensure that procedures are in place to deal with that issue effectively. Although it may inconvenience staff, I am sure that they will appreciate that it is frustrating for patients to have appointments cancelled by the hospitals, sometimes at very short notice. It should also be remembered that many patients work and might have to arrange leave in order to attend appointments. Despite those and other problems, improvement can be achieved in that area. The question is how we should go about it.

The model adopted by NHS Scotland appears to be a valuable example of the way in which improvement can be achieved. Patient-focused booking has reduced the number of hospital-cancelled clinics or missed appointments by about 2%. If the Health Service in Northern Ireland were to reduce its figures to that level, it would save approximately £10 million. It is worth remembering that the patient is at the centre of the process and should be the priority consideration in developing any new appointments system.

I am sure that the Minister could find good use for the money saved, such as keeping acceptable levels of out-of-hours services in Limavady, in my constituency.

However, achieving change will require commitment from National Health Service staff and patients and, no doubt, foresight on the part of the Minister. I encourage him to have the foresight to implement workable, adaptable changes that will benefit patients, Health Service staff and the Department's budget.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to commend all the healthcare workers, who do a magnificent job. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the steps that my Department is taking to reduce the cancellation of outpatient clinics and the number of missed appointments, ensuring that patients have timely access to high-quality, safe services. That is a priority that we all share.

As recently as two years ago, 110,000 people in Northern Ireland waited more than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment — some people waited for up to 10 years. Today, apart from a handful of patients, no one waits for more than 13 weeks. I am committed to reducing that waiting time further, to nine weeks, by next March. Similar progress has been made in relation to the time patients wait for a diagnostic test, such as a computerised tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, and for inpatient or day-case treatment. Today, no patient waits more than 13 weeks for a diagnostic test, and only about fifty patients have waited more than 21 weeks for treatment.

Furthermore, I will seek further significant reductions in waiting times in those areas, over the next year, to nine weeks for diagnostic tests and 13 weeks for treatment. To illustrate that point, the current waiting-time targets are 13 weeks for initial appointments, 13 weeks for diagnostics and 21 weeks for treatment — 47 weeks in total.

I plan to set the target for the end of this year to reduce waiting times from 47 weeks to 31 weeks in total. That will allow up to nine weeks for initial appointments, nine weeks for diagnostic tests and 13 weeks for treatment. That bears significant comparison with previous figures. For example, in March 2005, the target was 18 months for treatment, and that was routinely missed. In March 2006, the treatment target was one year, and that was often missed. We can demonstrate significant improvement in performance as far as treating patients is concerned.

I assure Members that I am by no means complacent about our current position.

A transformation in waiting-time performance was achieved through the introduction of a comprehensive reform programme, the key elements of which ensure that patients of the same clinical priority are attended to in strict chronological order. Consultants must determine the clinical priority of patients, and urgent

patients will always be seen as a matter of priority. Patients who have been assessed as a routine clinical priority will be seen in a fair and clinically appropriate manner, with the earliest appointee being attended to first. The Department asked specialist consultants to pool their lists to ascertain how waiting times could be equalised. In the past, some specialist hospital consultants may have had lengthy waiting times, while others — perhaps the more recently appointed — had shorter waiting times. By equalising those times and by pooling lists, we have ensured the even distribution of patients across all consultants. That has had a major impact in reducing waiting times.

Sue Ramsey, George Robinson and other Members mentioned the patient-friendly booking system that has been introduced, and there are new booking arrangements whereby patients can choose the date and time of their appointment. That provides a better-quality service to patients and recognises that people lead busy lives and need to be able to choose a time that suits them. It also reduces the number of patients who fail to attend outpatient appointments.

The Department reviewed outpatient clinic schedules, and trusts are required to ensure that sufficient time is set aside for new patient referrals. In addition, we have introduced ICATS, which is a range of new integrated clinical assessment and treatment services. ICATS is a term that is used for a range of services that will be provided by integrated multi-disciplinary teams of Health Service professionals in a variety of primary- and secondary-care settings. It includes assessment, treatment, diagnostic and advisory services. Under traditional outpatient arrangements, GPs have no alternative other than to refer to hospital consultants those patients who they are unable to manage in the primary-care sector. That led to a significant number of patients who are waiting to see a hospital consultant.

In such cases where the patient does not see the consultant, that consultant will often be able to do little for the patient as surgery is not required. Indeed, not all patients require a consultant's level of expertise. ICATS ensures that patients are referred to the most appropriate next step of the care pathway as quickly as possible and that those patients who need to see a hospital consultant will do so after the completion of all necessary diagnostic tests. If a primary-case referral is assessed as not being clinically urgent, it will be directed by ICATS to the next appropriate step. Again, that reduces the patient's journey time.

There are five possible next steps. First, a referral to diagnostics — including the various modalities of imaging — all forms of scoping, as well as pathology and other physiological measurement services may be considered. Secondly, a patient may be referred for direct treatment to an inpatient or day-case schedule. Certain indications imply that direct treatment, rather

than further specialist opinion, is necessary. Thirdly, a patient may return to primary care for discharge with advice or a request for further information. Fourthly, a patient may be referred to tier 2 outpatient services, which is the name that is given to the new clinical services that should typically form the core of the ICATS. Those services will take referrals that are not initially indicated for consultant-led clinics and will carry out face-to-face assessments and examinations and commence treatment where appropriate. Finally, some patients may be referred to a hospital outpatients clinic, because even with the introduction of those new services, there will be a significant remaining stream of non-urgent patients for whom a traditional outpatient appointment will be the appropriate next step — in other words, they will need to see a consultant.

The ICATS model offers considerable benefits to patients by ensuring that they are seen by the most appropriate healthcare professionals as quickly as possible and that limited consultant resources are reserved for those patients who have been assessed as requiring that level of expertise. New ICATS services have already been introduced for orthopaedic referrals across Northern Ireland, and they are now being introduced in urology and ophthalmology.

There are also plans to introduce ICATS for ear, nose and throat; dermatology; and cardiology. In relevant specialties, ICATS are expected to resolve at least 50% of all referrals from GPs, without the patient having to see a hospital consultant. In 2008-09, it is expected that ICATS will manage some 30,000 orthopaedic referrals, which will significantly reduce the pressures on hospital services.

2.15 pm

As many Members pointed out, the cost of cancelled clinics is significant. The Northern Ireland Audit Office estimates the cost to the taxpayer of cancelled clinics and missed appointments at £11.6 million. That significant sum could be used to benefit patients by allowing them to be assessed and treated more quickly.

However, it will never be possible to eliminate waste totally. A small number of clinics will always be cancelled because of unavoidable circumstances, and, similarly, some patients will fail to attend appointments.

Mr McCarthy: Mention was made of the possible introduction of financial penalties — similar to those imposed by dentists — on patients who fail to turn up for their appointments. Although I do not agree with the idea, will the Minister consider any such penalties to encourage patients to turn up or give clinics early warning when they cannot attend?

Mr McGimpsey: Financial penalties could be administered only at a disproportionate cost, and, in any case, I do not want to go down that road.

The cancellation of clinics at short notice is wasteful, and it is disruptive to patients. Typically, a clinic lasts for half a day, and, depending on the specialty, involves up to 20 patients a session. Therefore, when a hospital cancels a clinic, a considerable number of patients who may be anxious, or in pain, are affected, and they must wait for another appointment.

Outpatient clinics must, therefore, be cancelled only in exceptional circumstances. In Northern Ireland, a relatively low proportion of outpatient clinics is cancelled, and that must be viewed in the context of the large number of patients who are seen each year. In hospitals and other healthcare settings, over 1.5 million outpatients are seen. The vast majority of them are seen quickly and experience no difficulty with cancellations.

A detailed census was undertaken after discussions with the Northern Ireland Audit Office. It found that, in September 2006, only one in 35 consultant-led clinics was cancelled — less than 3% of the total. In the week of the census, 3,680 of the planned 3,791 clinics took place, and the remaining 111 cancelled clinics equates to only 2.9% of the total. Most cancellations result from staff being on sick leave. There will always be occasions on which doctors fall ill and are absent from work at short notice. Therefore, it is inevitable that some clinics will be cancelled.

The impact of such cancellations is more problematic for smaller hospitals. When a consultant in a larger hospital falls ill, a colleague routinely takes over his or her duties, whereas smaller hospitals, in which a greater proportion of single-handed clinics take place, may have no one available to take over at short notice.

My Department has placed a requirement on trusts to ensure that clinical staff, including doctors and nurses, give at least six weeks' notice of their planned annual or study leave. George Robinson made a point about the planning of clinics; that requirement is designed to minimise clinic cancellations, facilitate the proper planning of clinics and guarantee as far as possible that when a patient is given an appointment, the clinic takes place. As employees, the trusts must enforce that requirement and intervene should any pattern of short-notice cancellations emerge. Trusts have confirmed that staff compliance is closely monitored and that the cancellation of any clinic with less than six weeks' notice is investigated.

Although we do not compare unfavourably with England, Scotland and Wales, it is normal for those countries to measure cancelled appointments rather than cancelled clinics. To illustrate the point: in Northern Ireland, if Doctor Brown is booked to do a clinic in a particular hospital at 9.00 am on Monday morning, and Doctor Green does the clinic instead, that would be recorded as a cancelled clinic because Doctor Brown's clinic has been cancelled, even though

the same patients are seen by Doctor Green. Therefore, as our counting has a degree of correctness that results in slightly skewed figures, cancelled appointments will be recorded instead. That is more relevant because each cancelled appointment involves a patient not being seen.

As I have noted already, cancelled clinics are only part of the problem. Another part involves patients cancelling, or failing to attend, their appointments. If patients give adequate notice when cancelling appointments, their slots can be allocated to others. However, when patients cancel their appointments at short notice — or worse — fail to attend without giving any notice, their slot is wasted and they deprive someone else of being seen. In 2006-07, 11.4% of patients failed to turn up for their appointment and did not give any notice. In the first three quarters of 2007-08 the percentage of patients failing to attend their appointments, although it had fallen, was still 10.6%. There is a cost of £54 for every patient who does not turn up for an appointment. Per annum, 1.5 million patients are being seen, so 11% of that is approximately 160,000 patients. Therefore, of the £11.6 million that is being lost, approximately £8.5 million of that is the cost of patients not turning up for appointments. The number of patients not turning up for their appointments is still too high.

The introduction of more effective and responsive systems for booking outpatient appointments is a key reform that will help to address that problem. In the past, patients received a letter months in advance with a fixed time and date for their appointment. Under that system, hospitals could not be sure that a clinic would take place, and there was no consideration of convenience for patients. As a result, patients often needed to cancel their appointment because it was unsuitable, or else they simply forgot about it. In addition, hospitals occasionally needed to cancel the clinic because key members of staff were not available. My Department now requires all trusts to implement new partial booking processes to deal with that issue.

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

Mr McGimpsey: I have gone somewhat over my time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Much good work has been done — long waiting times are now a thing of the past and that is welcome, as we continue to improve our performance.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. First, I add my support to the motion. I apologise for my colleague Sue Ramsey, who has to leave, and for Michelle O'Neill, who is elsewhere.

It is very encouraging to hear about the reduction in waiting times for patients from 26 weeks to 13 weeks, with a view to that time being reduced further. That is a success story, as it is an example of locally-elected representatives being held to account and taking a patient-

centred approach. I also acknowledge the work that has been done by Assembly Research and Library Service (RLS), which has provided very extensive information in advance of the debate.

Throughout the debate, the vast financial cost of cancelled clinics and missed appointments to the health and social care services was mentioned. During a Public Accounts Committee evidence session, it was stated that approximately £259 million is spent each year in providing outpatient services in hospitals and community clinics. Alex Easton mentioned the cost of that, and the Minister outlined how, of the £11.6 million that is being lost, approximately £8.5 million of that is the cost of patients not attending their appointments.

We all took part in the debates on the draft Budget and the Budget. Although we had different perspectives, many of us argued, as Alex Easton did today, that decades of underinvestment in the Health Service have left gaps in provision. We have all argued for the need for efficiency, and this is one area in which we could all do better and be more efficient.

The reasons why clinics are cancelled and the reasons why people do not attend their appointments have been factored into the debate. The main reason for our amendment, which I thank the DUP for accepting, was to ensure a more patient-centred approach. I was encouraged by what the Minister said about reducing waiting times and about consulting with patients on the issue of suitability, because that will lend itself to an increased uptake of appointments.

We are all mindful of low morale among staff in the Health Service. I do not want to call for a review for the sake of it, but somewhere along the line we need to review how the system works and how we could do better. We all have a job to do to ensure that patients are put first, which will involve better time management and better management of people.

The reduction of waiting times from 26 weeks to 13 weeks, or even further, will be no mean feat. However, the continued practice of the overbooking of clinics — and I am sure that all Members have heard about it in their constituencies — has to be addressed. We all have a lot of work to do in getting that message out.

A distinction has to be made between cancelled clinics and people who do not attend their appointments. There is also an issue about appointments for some people being unrealistic. For example, I dealt with a case in which an elderly woman from Fermanagh was given an appointment in Belfast for 8.30 am. That was not patient-centred, and everyone would agree that we would be doing well to get such practices eradicated.

It is good that in debates about health issues there is a lot that we can all say. One element that Alex Easton and others referred to was about the amount of money that could be saved and used for other services. However,

it is also important to point out that patients are losing out because of consultants' conducting private work. That can be exaggerated, but it does happen. The perception of the public is that consultants who are paid through the NHS are using that time to undertake private work. That needs to be investigated. It would be appropriate for an answer to be brought to the House at some stage on that matter.

It is imperative that trusts make their consultants accountable. It is also imperative that we, as elected representatives, do our best to ensure that people get the message that missed appointments and cancelled clinics cost a lot of money. It is good that we now have locally elected representatives who are accountable and who are ensuring that we are doing well for our own people.

Kieran McCarthy raised the possibility of penalties being imposed. Any penalties should be equality-impact assessed, because there are reasons why people do not attend appointments, including mental-health issues, which was discussed during previous debates.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I ask Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Easton: It appears that all Members are of the same point of view on this issue; therefore, I am happy to accept the amendment. Obviously, a huge problem exists: 14,000 cancelled clinics each year, according to my calculations, equates to approximately 280,000 missed appointments. An extra £6 million is being spent to bring in private-sector providers to try to reduce the waiting lists. If the problem is addressed, that money could be put to better use as part of an efficiency drive.

The £11 million cost of cancelled clinics, staff issues and so on have been talked about. Therefore, there are huge efficiency savings that the Minister could consider as he drives that programme forward. I hope that he will take on board what we said.

2.30 pm

All of us try to do the best that we can for patients. It is hoped that this motion will be able to offer a better, value-for-money service to patients. Consultants have a vital role to play, and it is important that the Minister ensures that consultants work to reduce the level of clinic cancellations.

I praise the trust staff right across the board; they do a fantastic job for outpatients. Furthermore, I praise the Minister for reducing waiting lists: that is a big plus.

Many Members contributed to the debate. Sue Ramsey mentioned the costs and the need to get serious about dealing with cancelled clinics. She talked about the Scottish model, as did other Members, increased communication with patients, by letter and by phone. Iris Robinson mentioned getting rid of waste and looking

for efficiencies. Furthermore, she talked about the 11% did-not-attend rate, and about the penalties that could be arranged for patients who miss appointments.

John McCallister referred to mental-health patients as being the most unlikely to attend appointments. He also mentioned the costs of non-attendance; and the £11.6 million that is wasted. Carmel Hanna talked about patients who persistently do not attend their appointments. It is important that patients play their part in resolving the issue — it is not simply a job for the consultants, the Minister or even for this Assembly. Mrs Hanna mentioned that she wanted a more comprehensive, patient-led arrangement, and she, too, talked about the Scottish model.

Kieran McCarthy said that the Health Service numbers were a priority for him and, possibly, for his party. He also mentioned the drain on resources and the £11.6 million that is wasted. He said that patients should advise if they cannot attend appointments — that is common courtesy. He, too, referred to the Scottish model. Perhaps the Minister should evaluate that and come back to the Assembly with his decision.

Jim Shannon mentioned that numerous factors were responsible for cancelled clinics, one of which was staff taking leave. He believed that staff should give notice of their intention to take leave, so that administrators could arrange cover for clinics. He mentioned that it was up to the Minister to make sure that that happened.

Dominic Bradley talked about how some of the work of Newry's Daisy Hill Hospital was being referred to Craigavon Hospital. He was concerned that that could lead to havoc, with patients' notes perhaps not being available to consultants. Perhaps the Minister should address that issue as well.

George Robinson mentioned the waste of money, staff leave, and the Scottish model — which seems to be quite a popular theme.

The Minister then talked about the 13 weeks' appointment waiting time, which he hopes to reduce to nine weeks. He also mentioned the booking system for appointments. Before I left the Health Service, that system had just been implemented, and it seemed to be doing quite a good job. The Minister also referred to the ICATS model.

Mr McGimpsey then mentioned the £11.6 million wasted on cancelled clinics, and that he looked to staff to ensure that they gave six weeks' notice to their managers before going on leave. He also made reference to the rate of non-attendance, and the £55 cost of someone's not attending an outpatient appointment. That is quite a large amount of money.

The Minister went on to outline the improvements that he wanted to make; unfortunately, however, he ran out of time.

Carál Ní Chuilín acknowledged the good work that has been done to reduce waiting lists. She, too, mentioned waste, and the use by consultants of National Health Service facilities for private work. The Minister could perhaps investigate whether valuable time is lost by that.

It is clear that there is a comprehensive attitude across the Chamber, and I thank Members for their contributions. It is a good way forward, which satisfies everyone. I am happy to accept the amendment.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce measures to reduce the cancellation level of outpatient clinics; and further calls for a holistic, patient-centred approach from the Minister and his department to tackle waiting lists.

Private Finance Initiatives

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the concerns about local Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) raised in recent reports; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarification on the role and scope of PFIs across all government departments.

After 30 years of conflict and the decades of underinvestment that we are all too aware of, we now have an opportunity to make progress and catch up with neighbouring economies. It is true that in the past we have had some new hospitals and schools, small investment in roads and very little investment in other parts of our infrastructure, such as water and sewerage. Our infrastructure is in poor shape and badly in need of repair or, in some cases, replacement.

The Programme for Government and the investment strategy set out some of the actions that need to be taken to improve the infrastructure so that we can develop a more competitive economy and, it is hoped, a more prosperous future for the people here.

Private finance initiatives are one way of drawing in private investment to progress some of the large capital projects. The Government then repay their private partners — the investors — usually over a period of 25 to 30 years, which is a long time. If circumstances change — for example, falling enrolments in schools or school closures — the repayments must continue. The same situation applies to hospitals, where it is often difficult to predict future patient patterns.

The success or failure of a private finance initiative will depend on the terms negotiated and the controls put in place when the deal is signed.

A recent newspaper article about Victoria Square, written by a well-known commentator, stated:

“When the developers of the new Victoria Square shopping centre submitted their initial planning application they promised Belfast City Council that the building would contain a public library. Once the plan was approved this promise was quietly dropped. However, when pressed on the matter, the developers said the building would still contain a ‘cultural dimension’ in the form of a cinema and a bookshop. Visitors to the centre ... will notice that the cinema is an Odeon multiplex and the bookshop has not materialised at all.”

Some other projects have been subjected to detailed reports by both the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. As Members will know, in many cases scathing criticism has been levelled against the public authorities who negotiated the PFI arrangements.

We all know about the Royal Victoria Hospital's car park, which is a PFI disaster that has left the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust badly out of pocket. How a project with the potential for generating such good revenue was put out for private tender remains a great surprise. Instead of that revenue going back into the Health Service, it now goes into the private partners' bank accounts.

There were serious flaws in the contracts for Balmoral High School and Wellington College, which, as we know, resulted in the handover to the development partners of a prime piece of development land for their own use. Last week, there were revelations about how Invest Northern Ireland sold, for little money, a piece of land that was later valued on the public market at close to £300,000.

The Strategic Investment Board is a professional body with links to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and its role includes helping people who are developing large projects to sort out problems and progress the developments as quickly as possible. Furthermore, its role is to work with private consortia to seek out people who are interested in advancing developments and to strive to provide efficiency, competitiveness and value for money.

The final stages of the biggest contract that Northern Ireland has yet seen — the £260 million PFI project for the new Enniskillen hospital — will soon be completed. Although the project is at an advanced stage, the views of people who work in our hospitals are still worth hearing and, given that much has happened and there has been little information, I am sure that the public also wishes to know more.

The British Medical Association (BMA) opposes the use of PFIs in the National Health Service, and its members consider PFI to be an expensive borrowing mechanism that drains funds from the Health Service and stores debts for the future.

In England, there have many mistakes in hospital development. The Queen Elizabeth Hospital NHS Trust in Greenwich has a debt of almost £20 million and, since getting into that arrangement, it must pay £15 million per annum to its private partner.

Big money is involved in hospitals, and predictions about future patient patterns are difficult and risky. Therefore, one must be careful about getting involved in Health Service private finance initiatives.

In addition to the BMA, the unions have aired genuine concerns. Staff at the new Enniskillen hospital are still uncertain about their future. For example, catering arrangements are a matter for speculation, centring on the possibility that a successful consortium might fly frozen food in from England. What about carbon footprints, which are mentioned in the Assembly from

time to time? What about yesterday's agriculture debate? There should be incentives for local food producers.

The protection of staff's terms and conditions must be a high priority in all future PFI contracts. The Department of Finance and Personnel — which is handling Workplace 2010 — indicated that there will be no compulsory transfers for its support staff, such as porters and front-desk staff. In the interests of fairness and equality, that right should be afforded to all support staff in the sector, whether they work in schools or hospitals, and the Executive should carefully consider that matter and pledge that, under any future PFI arrangements, there will be no differential treatment between people who work in the Civil Service and those who work in the wider public service.

2.45 pm

Another inconsistency in the hospital plan for the west has emerged. The Western Health and Social Care Trust allows private bidders the option of including cleaning and catering services in the contract, whereas the Belfast Trust has removed those services from PFI negotiations altogether. Both staff and unions have welcomed what should be standard practice in all public bodies and authorities during negotiations on PFI contracts.

Members need clarification, as the motion states, on the "role and scope" of private finance initiatives. Members must bear in mind all the concerns that I have raised.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is the second debate today that originates from a Public Accounts Committee report. That stands to the credit of the Committee, which has investigated a variety of fields since restoration of the institutions.

One of the Committee's reports that investigated PFI was on the transfer of surplus land in the PFI education pathfinder projects. Read together with the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, 'Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects', it is a most important document. The Committee's report made 16 recommendations as to how future PFI and PPP contracts should be approached.

Sinn Féin is not in favour of either the PFI or the PPP approach to provision of public-sector facilities, but we are faced with economic realities. Insufficient funds are available in the current block grant and in British Exchequer allocations to the Executive in order to pay for the required projects. We are faced with a future that contains PFI and PPP arrangements, but we must ensure that they are properly managed. From the start, contracts must be copper-fastened to protect the public purse and public services.

The Public Accounts Committee report is therefore vital. I welcome the fact that the Department of Finance and Personnel accepted more than 90% of the Comm-

ittee's recommendations as to how PFI contracts should be implemented.

We learned from pathfinder projects that the private sector had the ability, skills and financial backing to run rings around the public sector in negotiations. In some cases, contracts allowed millions and millions of pounds to be made from public resources. With the benefit of hindsight, those loopholes should have been identified straight away. Lands sold for building turned out to be prime development sites but were not identified as such. Public-sector negotiators were more interested in hastening the signing of the contract, in ensuring that buildings were constructed and in providing for public services. However, they should have taken care, in the first instance, to protect the public purse and to ensure that any excess profits that such schemes generated were shared with the public sector. All those lessons must be learned.

Public-sector workers can also find themselves caught up in PFI and PPP contracts. Those workers, and their position in the public sector, must be protected in future contracts. They should not be allowed simply to slip into the private sector. In the report into the PFI project at the Enniskillen hospital, confidence in hospital cleaning services rose not only among staff but among patients when responsibility for those services was returned to the public sector. We must ensure that jobs are protected and kept in the sector.

Furthermore, we must ensure that our civil servants have the necessary resources, skills and experience to undertake such negotiations. They must be sufficiently skilled in order to protect the public purse in all instances, because it is important that they secure the best possible deal in future PFI and PPP negotiations.

Private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships should not be the first option. Although it has been acknowledged that the current economic climate is dire, senior civil servants should not automatically look at the PFI option. Other dynamic ways of providing public services should be examined, and contracts should not always be given to the private sector. There are times when the community and voluntary sector can also be involved in the provision of such services. Those areas should also be examined.

In conclusion, this is clearly not Sinn Féin's first option for the development of public services, but we are faced with harsh economic realities. When civil servants and Ministers reach the point of signing-off on such contracts, lessons from the Public Accounts Committee's 'Report on the Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects', must be learnt, and we have to ensure that the public purse is protected. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I wish to make it clear that the Ulster Unionist Party has no difficulty in principle with the

idea of public/private finance initiatives. In the present constrained climate of Government spending, PFIs may be the only way to realise important and necessary capital expenditure projects which are otherwise unrealisable, no matter how important they may be to the infrastructural base for economic progress. The problem with all such projects is that the devil is in the detail.

Difficulty often arises in the awareness level among public sector workers and civil servants of the complexities of commercial and banking practices. Many issues that have arisen and have incurred criticism after the event have centred mainly on the terms of PFI agreements — they have often had their origin in the lack of commercial expertise among those public servants who were charged with the intricacies of negotiation in a field which was alien to their experience.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) is designed to play a key role in providing advice on a public sector investment strategy for Northern Ireland. It is meant to work closely with the Northern Ireland Departments in the development of strategically important PFI projects. The SIB should be assisted in this role by a new public private investment unit (PPIU). PPIU is charged with advising the central finance group in the Department of Finance and Personnel on PPP policy matters through the economic policy unit in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I welcome the presence of junior Minister Kelly.

PPIU will consult the Central Procurement Directorate regarding general procurement policy issues. Although that looks like a fail-safe mechanism, it also looks exceedingly complex. The danger in the involvement of so many Government bodies is that responsibility and accountability will be lost in the morass of competing authorities. One can almost imagine oneself reading a highly critical Public Accounts Committee report in the future condemning the complexity and lack of clarity in the system.

I wish to draw attention to the current commercial practices of private equity funds which have recently occasioned public comment and criticism. The Government need to be alert to the commercial practices and complex financial operations of these funds. Many PFI contracts fail to provide real risk transfer from the public sector to the private sector.

I believe that transferring debt from the Government's balance sheet often comes at a cost of billions of pounds. PFI revenue commitments are often entered into by the Government, limiting the spending options of future Administrations. PFI contract failures can also lead to public bodies paying more for service delivery, even though they may not be to blame for failure.

I sound a note of caution about the operation of the proposed emerald fund. I welcome that vehicle for American investment in Northern Ireland — as have

most people and most Members. However, we must ensure that the fund remains money from America and does not become money to America. We must be careful about the disposal of publicly owned assets as part of any deal that involves infrastructural improvement and property-based investment.

I remind the House of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's findings on Balmoral High School and other projects. The Audit Office said that four out of five contracts contained clauses that resulted in the transfer of surplus land from the public sector to the successful operator. That transfer of land received great criticism and scrutiny. The report concluded that the transfer of surplus land brought with it risks to the value for money obtained, especially in light of the volatile nature of land values. The negotiation of clawback clauses in contracts that protect the public sector's interest will be a vital component of all future arrangements.

Dr Farry: I welcome and support the motion: it is timely. The Alliance Party takes a pragmatic approach to issues regarding private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships — a view shared by other Members. The party has no ideological difficulty with such initiatives, but they must be judged case by case, and great care must be taken to ensure that whatever is implemented is in the public interest.

There is much to be said for the increasing involvement of the private sector in the delivery of some public goods. The private sector brings with it a market discipline and creative market solutions. For too long, the thinking in Northern Ireland has been that the public sector is good and the private sector is bad. We must overcome that mentality and recognise that there is nothing wrong with companies seeking to make a profit, so long as it falls within a particular framework. We must accept that as we seek to develop the economy in Northern Ireland.

However, there are a number of issues about which we must be cautious when considering matters relating to private finance initiatives. Contracts — especially long-term contracts — must be flexible. As other Members have said, we must ensure that mistakes are not made in the early stages of the establishment of a contract because, once a mistake is embedded in a contract, one can end up paying for something over a long time. Many people are uncomfortable with that, and it is, perhaps, the greatest fear that people have about PFIs.

Measures to deal with clawback and situations in which companies are making super-profits that are above the initial negotiations' expected profit line must also be introduced.

We must be conscious of changing circumstances. Members have talked about schools where the demographic downturn means that 50,000 empty school

places are forecast for 2012. We must avoid a situation in which we will be locked into the provision of school facilities when the school population is declining; that will mean that we will end up paying for empty classrooms in the future.

We must also be conscious of changing technology and patterns of work. I am mindful of the radical changes that have taken place in offices over the past 20 years through the use of computers and other forms of information technology. The scale of that revolution was not anticipated in 1990, and, today, we cannot anticipate the changes that will take place over the next 20 years and beyond.

We must also protect our ability as an Assembly to set and change policies. To use another example from the education sector, I am mindful that we are waiting for a formal policy for sustainable schools from the Minister of Education. That may have a radical impact on how we manage our schools estate. If a number of our schools are locked into PFI contracts, policy flexibility may be constrained.

What appears to be good practice in public policy today may in a very short period of time, in two or three years perhaps, be regarded as out of date and in need of change. There might then be a possible solution in which we can deliver services in a much more cost effective manner.

3.00 pm

The point has been made regularly in the Assembly about the embedded cost to society in trying to manage divisions as oppose to building a shared future. Long-term savings can be made, and there are dangers to the public purse if we end up locking ourselves into the provision of public services on a segregated basis.

Having fixed payments for service charges creates a tight budget and a need for savings to be made. If the costs in PFI contracts are fixed, savings have to be made elsewhere over a much narrower range, and that could lead to a loss of front-line services.

Community planning needs to be examined to ensure that non-economic benefits from investments made in the public estate are captured. Schools, for example, are not just for education; they can also be for community provision. It should not end up that communities are charged at the market rate for something that is of social value.

Finally, there is a lot of fear that Northern Ireland businesses are being locked out of not just local PFI contracts but of broader public-sector procurement. I know that there are European rules in place but the concern remains that it is not quite a level playing field.

Mr Hamilton: Most Members have already acknowledged that PFIs are part of the public sector way of life now whether we like it or not. I am glad that the

motion has been brought forward in its present tone and that it is not a complete repudiation of PFI.

I have noted that Sinn Féin, in the persona of Mr O'Dowd, despite constant opposition previously, has acknowledged that in the face of harsh economic realities PFIs are part and parcel of public-sector procurement and will probably —

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member accept the important analogy, once used by Margaret Thatcher of all people, which references the parable of the Good Samaritan? The Good Samaritan was only able to provide medical attention for the injured man because of his wealth — the generation of wealth is not in itself a sin.

Mr Hamilton: I have long supported increased private-sector involvement in Northern Ireland and I could not agree more with Dr Farry on that point. I also agree with Mr Kennedy that the private sector should be encouraged. That is the nub of the economic problem Northern Ireland faces: the private sector cannot be encouraged to get involved if it is not also encouraged to make money. Making money is what drives the private sector, and that is what we should be encouraging now. I support that sentiment and I welcome Sinn Féin's conversion — its Damascene conversion, to extend the biblical analogy.

I am glad that the motion has not been a repudiation of PFI and is instead focused on improving the public sector's performance when dealing with the private sector.

My party and I have no ideological objections to PFI. I support PFIs, having seen investment occurring in my own constituency, following co-operation with the private sector, which would not have happened without PFI. Comber has a brand spanking new secondary school, Nendrum College, which was built through a PFI contract. Like many people in my part of the world, I wonder how long we would have had to wait for that school had it not been for PFI.

The A20 southern distributor road in Newtownards is another example. At the official sod-cutting ceremony recently, Minister Murphy described the road as an excellent example of how both public- and private-sector bodies can work in partnership on a project that will ease congestion and improve journey times and safety for all. Indeed, a DRD official at a public consultation meeting about the new road said that if it were not for the private sector contribution the road would not have been built and we would have been left waiting a hell of a long time for it.

There are many lessons to be learned, and in my short time in the Assembly I have been involved in two Committees that have produced two reports touching on this area. One is the aforementioned PAC report and the other was a report by the Committee for Finance and Personnel into Workplace 2010. Certainly, lessons have been learnt from the PFI experience, and that was

initially what some of that process was about. The term "pathfinder project" says it all: it was about finding a path for the best way forward.

Mistakes were made in the past, some of them monumental. For example, an acre and a half of land was sold for the value of one acre because it had not been measured properly. The proposer of the motion and other Members trotted out some of the classic cases, including Balmoral High School and the Royal Victoria Hospital. We could concentrate on those all day, but we should not bypass some of the mistakes that have been made with traditional procurement. Recently I heard that, compared with PFI, conventional procurement is frequently over budget and over time. When dwelling on the past mistakes of private finance initiatives, the successes of PFI and private-sector involvement are not mentioned. The Westlink, for example, is well ahead of schedule; that project has heavy private-sector involvement.

As was mentioned by other Members, the PAC report recommended that the public sector be much more commercially minded when dealing with the private sector. It said that the public sector should be skilled in areas such as the valuing of land and the drawing up of contracts. Those are good lessons, and we should strive to see them enacted throughout the public sector. In every aspect of the public sector's dealings with the private sector, it should be just as good and just as tuned into the issues as the private sector. If that were the case, our eye would not be wiped in some of the ways that have been suggested.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. The issue of PFIs and PPPs is a controversial one. I note that successive reports from the audit authorities in Britain, and in Ireland, North and South — including the Six Counties — have concluded that PFI does not represent value for money. That is the position of my party, and that is the position that I represent.

I acknowledge that Departments are now considerably more cautious when entering PFI contracts than they were initially. We must still be exceptionally careful and prudent. As private projects generally cost the Executive more in the medium to long term, the ability of future Executives to deploy their Budget resources will be compromised by that effective mortgaging of Executive money to the here and now. Some of the major criticisms of PFI reflect that it is an expensive and wasteful method of financing public investment and that it will damage public services now and for generations to come.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that PFI and PPP contracts escalate in scale and cost, leading to an affordability gap that is met from other parts of the

public sector and by reductions in services and capacity. Those critics point out that PFI and PPP reduce standards of pay, conditions and employment prospects and that they represent a huge increase in the privatisation of economic and social life, including the determination of public services by, in many instances, unaccountable commercial criteria, rather than social need. The use of such funding creates serious democratic dynamics.

Those arguments are accurate and relevant, even to those who support PFI. As MLAs, we must take account of that in our representative capacity. That advice also applies to those with ministerial authority. The continued use of PFI projects will result in a substantial drop in the overall annual spending Budget that is available to the Executive in 10 or 20 years' time, as we are effectively front-loading investment. Therefore, there will be a longer-term political cost of being associated with PFI decisions, if the cake, which is already too small, will be smaller as a result of the decisions that are made today.

In the North, PFI deals have tended to involve the permanent sale of public assets.

I support the establishment of the capital realisation task force. It is arguable that in certain cases it makes sense to sell off assets, because the public sector is flabby; it carries and stockpiles assets that it has no resources or immediate intention to deploy. In those circumstances it is possible to make a rational argument for creating resources or meeting pressures that other Departments face in delivering on their duties and requirements under the Programme for Government.

Where those arguments can be identified, Sinn Féin will not oppose the disposal or redeployment of those assets to produce sensible outcomes. However, in the North, the inclusion of significant asset disposals as part of PFI deals has led to poor-value returns. In fact, the Public Accounts Committee has reported on significant examples where that has already happened.

In many instances, private-sector negotiators and their legal advisors are sharper and more able operators than the Departments. That is understandable. However, it also highlights why people need to be exceptionally careful when addressing those issues and engaging with people who are much more experienced and who have a clear and driving ambition to maximise their profit.

We must address the reality of PFI. The Assembly is not yet in a position of agreement on either a preferred option or a preferred alternative option; until such time that there is agreement, we must be careful.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the motion. I also welcome the constructive tone of the debate, from which I hope lessons can be learned and passed on to officials and civil servants for the benefit of the community.

Whether we like it or not, private finance initiatives are an established part of Her Majesty's approach to public procurement and have been used in Great Britain for many years. That means that there is insufficient money released through the block-grant mechanism to enable us to build schools and hospitals.

In Northern Ireland, the PFI policy was set out under the policy framework for public-private partnerships, which was first published by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in 2003. It may be time for a review, and I hope that the OFMDFM Committee and the Ministers will examine that. There have been many changes since then, and new practices have been developed. There may well be a need for a review of official policy in order to learn from those changes.

As my colleague Danny Kennedy said, the Ulster Unionist Party's approach to PFI is not dogmatic or ideological but based on the pragmatic assessment of individual cases: do we and the public benefit? Due to Northern Ireland's massive infrastructure deficit, we must consider the best way to deliver major capital projects — across all Departments — including schools, houses, roads, hospitals and water.

Will the method develop the project in an efficient manner that represents the best value for taxpayers and allows more projects to be developed, and more schools and hospitals to be built? That should be the real test of any decision — not some rigid approach.

There can be a tendency among some politicians to think in the short term; they would say that private finance initiatives are best. However, we must look at the long-term implications. I share the view that we must examine the long-term cost to ensure that any financial arrangements that we are being tied in to benefit the public in the long term, and are not just a quick method of getting something built.

3.15 pm

Several Members mentioned Balmoral High School, and there are fundamental questions to be asked about that project. It was not just a PFI disaster; it was a Department of Education (DE) disaster. Whether the school was built through PFI or directly with public money from the block grant does not matter; it was a waste of money. There was no need for the school; the fundamental fault occurred at an earlier stage, and the PFI project did not help. Projects can go wrong whether they are funded by PFI or by direct public funding.

The Audit Office has highlighted good practice in the development of the renal unit of Antrim Area Hospital through a PFI scheme. The Audit Office recognised that value for money was achieved by bringing in experts in the field who won the contract, and:

“the project objectives were clear, focusing on what United Hospitals wanted having regard to what the private sector could

supply; ... an outline business case ... showed that a PFI approach could deliver value for money; and ... a suitably qualified and experienced Project Board”

had oversight of the work, which is in line with best practice and is another essential requirement of any such scheme. We have learned from some of the pilot projects that the limited experience of the public sector has allowed the private sector to wipe the eye of the public sector and make good money out of public funding.

We must learn the lessons of those experiences. The new gateway process includes independent review at various stages so that the work can be double-checked to ensure value for money for the public. PFI has advantages and disadvantages; we must take a balanced approach to ensure the delivery of value for money and good public services.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Mr Gallagher for proposing the motion. It is important that we debate this issue; it has been a good debate, and Mr Gallagher has done a great service to the House. I support his motion, which notes the concerns about local private finance initiatives that have been raised in recent reports. Those reports were mentioned by Mr O'Dowd, who is the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

It is important that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister take on board the sometimes scathing criticisms of PFI projects involving the local Administration. The SDLP has no ideological objection to PFIs or PPPs, but the party takes a politically cautious approach to their application. PFIs were introduced in Britain in 1992 by the then Conservative Government because they had, apparently, proved successful in the United States. The Government regarded this new initiative as a way of easing the burden on public finances. Of course, it does ease the burden — at least temporarily — on public finances.

PFI provides a short-term gain and a short-term solution to the pressures on public finances, but the problem that lies behind the constant and repetitive use of PPPs or PFIs is that they can add to the long-term financial burden on public administration. That has not really been addressed in the debate. I urge the Executive to examine the situation, because there will come a point when the numbers of PFIs in existence will overburden the capacity of the local exchequer to deal with the financing and repayment of the debt incurred.

I concur with the remarks that other Members made about being careful about the contracts for such initiatives. It is important that we get value for money and that the contracts are transparent and offer some form of accountability.

Despite the complexity of the contracts, it is important that the public and the Assembly know about them. We should also be reassured that they are for the public good. It is important that the terms and conditions of

public-sector employees who work with PFI projects are effectively protected and guaranteed. It would be wrong for us to permit a situation to develop that allows employees who worked in the public sector to be disadvantaged as a result of moving into the private sector. That is an important point to consider.

One further aspect is that the moneys that are expended on PFIs should effectively be additional to public finances; they should not be a substitution. Additionality should be built in if any real benefit is to be gained from such initiatives. With those qualifications, the SDLP broadly supports PFIs and, of course, Mr Gallagher's motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. The use of PFIs to develop and progress Government projects has been criticised in several recent reports. Although it is hailed as a means to save the taxpayer money and as a way of providing good value for money, PFI can often cost more — a lot more — to the public purse than other more traditional means of procurement.

There is little doubt that there is a need for efficiency and effectiveness in the way that public services are developed and delivered. However, PFI involves public bodies entering into long-term contracts with private developers where changes in what is needed can occur during the lifetime of the contract. That, in effect, means that if a project or a service that is provided by a PFI changes or is no longer needed, it must still be paid for from the public purse. That results in the taxpayer funding guaranteed profits for private-sector companies.

We are being forced down this route as a result of the approach of the previous Finance Minister, who was from the SDLP, and that of the current DUP incumbent. A lack of money and a lack of financial independence lie at the heart of the issue. Until we move further towards fiscal independence and take greater financial control, we will not be in a position to develop our own long-term solution to the deficits that were delivered by the British Exchequer.

Several reports into PFIs have already been discussed. The report into the education pathfinder projects, which saw public lands being given over to private developers as part of the contract to build new schools, found that the land in question was sold for far less than its market value.

Those reports, including one from the British Medical Association, have been critical of the way in which PFI contracts in the Health Service are not delivering an adequate level of patient care, but are, in fact, increasing debt levels in the Health Service. For proof of that, we need only look to the Royal Victoria Hospital in West Belfast where the car park has already paid for itself through charges to visitors and patients, yet the private

developer still benefits from current and future profits. Those profits could have been directed into patient care at the hospital had it not been for the existing PFI contract.

Several reports on Workplace 2010 have been critical of the way in which the Government are considering and entering into PFI contracts. A report by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has been debated already today, raises several important questions about the efficiency of PFI schemes, particularly at one of the pilot projects at Clare House.

The report also raised important questions about how the Department of Finance and Personnel has assessed the long-term impact of PFI projects on the public purse. It has been claimed that, in order to justify PFI options, Departments have relied too heavily on public-sector comparators, and that there should be a wider examination of all the alternatives before a value-for-money assessment is made.

The successful management and delivery of PFI projects in recent years has also caused concern. The Clare House project is an example of how problems can arise that cause disruption to staff and to the service that they provide to the public.

Sinn Féin believes strongly that PFI represents poor value for the public sector, and that public-service provision under PFI will create problems.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No. I have only five minutes.

The net result of setting PFI contracts will be that the Executive will progressively take on more long-term debt and that a larger proportion of the finances that are available to Ministers in the future will be taken up by the repayments under those contracts. Ministers should make it clear to their Departments that PFI contracts are not always the preferred option, and they should instruct their civil servants, and those responsible for designing projects, to put equal or greater effort into seeking alternative funding models to PFI.

Project schemes should encourage incentives for managers to supply better services at a lower cost to the public. Under no circumstances should they reward managers for making a bigger profit for a private provider at the expense of the public.

Those who manage or benefit from PFI must be made to follow transparent practices, be open to public inspection of their activities and be held strictly accountable for any irregularities that are uncovered. Private partners must have no say in the management of schools or hospitals, nor any power to affect levels of public-service provision.

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

Dr Deeny: I welcome and support the motion.

As Mr Hamilton is, I am delighted that there is a college in Omagh that is funded through PFI.

However, before we get carried away with the notion that PFI is the funding solution for all future projects, it is worth recalling what it involves.

Under PFI a facility such as a hospital or a school is built by a private company or consortium, and we taxpayers pay for it over the next 30 years. That means that our children will also pay. It is worth remembering that PFI is a 30-year commitment, and that it is similar to a mortgage because we pay back four, five or even six times the initial sum that was spent. However, PFI is worse than a mortgage because we have no say over any amendments that are made. PFI projects are a big commitment and must be well thought out, well costed and — as highlighted by the case of Balmoral High School — sustainable and built in the correct place.

A report carried out by Manchester Business School estimates that PFI hospitals cost the National Health Service £480 million a year. Across the water, PFI charges remain fixed at 12% of a health and social care trust's income. Therefore, before other services are paid for, 12% of the money that is available to a trust is spent on PFI projects. The headline of an article on the 'Building Design' website from July 2007 states:

"Leicester axes PFI hospitals as costs soar".

The article continues:

"A huge PFI hospital project in Leicester by BDP Architects has been scrapped after costs rose from £711 million to a staggering £921 million."

Similarly, a new project at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary was costed at £180 million for a Government-financed build. However, the PFI build was calculated to cost £990 million. That hospital has already lost 200 beds and 890 staff.

3.30 pm

A side effect of PFI is job losses, including among front-line staff, as seen in hospitals across the water. A few years ago, London hospitals were poised to enter PFI projects when they realised the pitfalls and bought themselves out of the deals before they started, at a cost of more than £10 million.

University Hospital Coventry was told that it would have to lose 25% of its beds and 20% of its staff in order to make the profits needed for PFI payments. A refurbishment contract would have required a one-off payment of £30 million, but it was not considered because it was too cheap to attract PFI companies. The local primary care trust loaned the hospital £27 million towards the payment, but it cannot repeat that gesture. In Coventry, two operating theatres and 60 beds were closed, 45 more earmarked for closure, and 250 staff are being laid off — all in an effort to pay the rent.

Hospital spending in Manchester hit £422 million — a figure similar to that proposed for the Tyrone and Fermanagh projects. What is planned for us in Tyrone — at a cost of £190 million — is not a hospital but a building with no life-saving services. By the time the hospital in Manchester is paid for, it will have cost at least £3 billion over 30 years. Members, that is the sort of money that we and our children will have to pay back over 30 years.

The only thing that health trusts can do to service a debt created by PFI hospital projects is to lay off staff; hence doctors and nurses are emigrating in droves. It is estimated that for every £200 million spent on PFI, 1,000 medical and nursing staff are lost to the service. Can we afford to sink so much money into hospital buildings when we need services rather than buildings?

Health economists and market analysts predict that PFI has had its day, as the Government move towards smaller-scale, localised services.

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

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am here to defend the whole Executive. *[Laughter.]* This has been a good debate and Members have raised issues on which I will touch. We will be taking cognisance of all the points that were made.

The motion calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarification on the role and scope of PFIs across all Departments. I will summarise how the Administration view PFI as an approach to new investment.

Members need not be reminded — indeed many spoke of it — that this part of Ireland has suffered from years of underinvestment. That is reflected in the state of our aging hospitals and schools, the inadequacy of our social and affordable housing stock and the deterioration in our roads, sewerage and water systems, all of which we must now address.

The renewal and development of our infrastructure is a tangible aspect of the wider political and economic transformation that must take place if our community is to prosper. The commitment by the Executive and the Assembly must be underlined by Departments translating investment strategies into timely, delivered projects — opening new roads, schools, health facilities, and delivering social and affordable housing on time and to meet people's needs and expectations.

In the meantime, the Executive need to fulfil the needs of our people and keep our options open for how we deliver new investment. PFI is one of several options. We must consider where and how the private sector can best play its part. Our programmes are ambitious, but our needs are great. We must do everything possible

to maximise the results that we achieve for the community within the resources available to us.

The Executive do not specifically prefer PFI as a funding mechanism; they expect that most of the investment strategy will be delivered by conventional funding, as in Britain and in the South. As some Members said, PFI should be used only when it demonstrates better value for money than a conventional option over the lifetime of a contract. Safeguards should be built into any PFI projects to protect public finances and the rights of workers.

Private finance initiatives have been in operation locally for more than 12 years. Most local projects were initiated before the restoration of the institutions and the Executive in May 2007. Indeed, PFI was introduced by the previous Executive.

Some Members referred to reports on PFI projects elsewhere. Much of what has been said therefore concerns decisions to which this Administration was not a party. Experiences of PFI projects reflected in reports by bodies such as the Audit Offices here, in Britain and in the South have been mixed. We must learn from what works, such as the roads package 1, for example. We must avoid the past mistakes mentioned by some Members, such as Balmoral High School and the Royal Victoria Hospital car park.

Early local PFIs have tended to attract the most criticism here. They were generally small-scale health and education projects covering the provision of accommodation, equipment and information technology. Realistically, the majority of those older projects would not be undertaken today using PFI, as it now tends to be used in large-scale infrastructure projects. PFI is a more complex approach than conventional procurement. There is a high initial overhead for procurement, affecting the public and private sectors.

Since 2003, PFI has been considered as an option only for larger projects with a capital value of more than £20 million. It was decided not to use PFI for the delivery of information technology. Those changes were designed to help focus effort on areas where PFI appeared to have the potential to be most effective in delivering benefits to the public sector. That in itself indicates that there is a continual review of the use of PFI. That issue was raised by Roy Beggs. In response to concerns, a more detailed approach to PFIs has been adopted, reflecting the experience gained and lessons learned.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB), which was conceived during the previous Executive, has a crucial role in helping the Executive to mobilise effectively the substantial resources available for investment, which amount to approximately £20 billion over the next 10 years. The Strategic Investment Board's expertise is available to Departments to help them to decide on the most appropriate methods of procuring and delivering

major investments. That includes a range of procurement methods, including conventional procurement and PFI.

It is critical that we use our unprecedented opportunity for new investment wisely. That means creating the right infrastructure to meet the present and future needs of our people and acquiring it at best value for money over its lifetime.

It is important to note that SIB is not a policy-making body — it is a delivery body, which operates within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It was established by the Executive to help the public sector to deliver major value for money infrastructural programmes. This Administration are responsible for more than £720 million worth of PFI contracts. A full list of current PFI contracts is included in the response to AQW 5104/08, as asked by Mr Gallagher. I take this opportunity to apologise to the Member for the delay in providing him with that information.

Initial evidence suggests that recent deals have resulted in savings for the public purse. For example, the Water Service has acknowledged a 25% saving on the original capital estimates for project Alpha, which will provide us with clean water. In the case of roads package 1, which has seen — among other improvements — major redevelopment at the Westlink, the saving is estimated at 15% on the original capital estimates. Those figures represent substantial savings that are available to fund other priority projects.

Some PFI projects have had a better track record in delivering projects on time and on budget. Designing the detail of contracts to a high standard is crucial in ensuring that the initial benefits are not diluted by excessive costs arising during the operation of contracts. The motion raises concern about PFI projects, and we understand those concerns. We can all cite PFI projects that did not provide value for money and that were not in the public interest.

Finally, one of the key areas highlighted in the Programme for Government and in the investment strategy is a growing opportunity to build socially beneficial outcomes into public procurement and public contracting. Mitchel McLaughlin mentioned that issue.

New Government guidelines for embedding quality and sustainability into public procurement have been agreed and will be published in the near future. PFI projects, in line with other methods of public procurement, will be subject to those guidelines. PFI is only one of a range of procurement models available to Ministers and to the Executive, and I assure Members that PFI projects are subject to rigorous analysis to ensure that they deliver value for money before they are approved.

Such analysis covers the full costs over the entire lifetime of the contracts — which is typically 25 to 30 years — not just initial contract costs. Final decisions on PFI rest with Departments and their Ministers, but it

is right that such decisions are properly taken on the basis of objective evidence and analysis. The Executive intend to do their utmost to provide the best possible service to our community at best value for money. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the proposer of the motion for introducing it; it has been a useful debate. If nothing else, it may have encouraged people like me to read up thoroughly on the subject. I would like to praise our Assembly research staff for the excellent documentation that they put together, which I read from cover to cover. I thank all those who participated in the debate, particularly the junior Minister for his attendance and response.

We should not take an ideological view on PFIs. I think, with some variation in words, that that was the stance taken by all Members and all parties, particularly the lead Members to speak for their parties: Tommy Gallagher, John O'Dowd, Danny Kennedy, Stephen Farry, and the junior Minister on behalf of the Executive. PFIs are not a zero sum game — if the private sector gains, the public sector does not automatically lose.

Major public capital projects can be funded in three main ways: we can pay the bill outright from taxation already acquired, although we cannot often do that; we can borrow, usually over the lifetime of the asset; or we can use PFI and enter into a partnership between the private and public sectors. PFIs are not all bad, as some suggest. An analogy can be made with mortgages, which enable huge investment in property that would not otherwise happen. However, sub prime mortgages are bad — they are based on those who simply cannot afford them; they have done colossal damage to international confidence in banking and construction. Likewise, badly constructed PFIs do not serve the public, but well-constructed PFIs may do so. They lead to investment and construction that may otherwise not happen.

Several Members, including Simon Hamilton, referred to PFI projects in their constituencies. The question remains whether PFIs provide value for money in every instance. Roy Beggs referred to the value for money issue being tested in the long term, whereas Jennifer McCann was more pessimistic, essentially saying that PFI simply does not give value for money at all.

A case can be made in favour of PFIs, which fundamentally involve a sharing of the risk and the reward between the public and the private sector. The private sector is good at certain things; the Treasury and NIO say that PFI deals are much more likely to be delivered on time and on budget. There is an argument that the detailed working out of a specification can create greater visibility of the long-term consequences of decisions. In the conventional processes, those may be obscured or only become apparent afterwards at

greater cost. However, whether the PFI process provides greater visibility to the democratic process is open to question, and Alban Maginness referred to the lack of accountability and democratic control.

The case against PFIs is also clear. There have been many fiascos, with huge unanticipated cost to the public sector and profits to the private sector that have been totally out of proportion to its risk and investment. Some of those problems have been illustrated locally: several Members cited Balmoral High School as an example of a PFI project that has to be paid for long after the school closes. However, as Roy Beggs pointed out, we should not forget that there would have been a problem even under conventional financing.

The basic mistake was to build a permanent school that would not be needed six years later. The car park at the Royal Victoria Hospital was also cited as an example of such a project.

3.45 pm

In the case of a multi-school PFI, a problem such as planning approval at one site can hold up work on all the other sites. Many problems have been exposed: the inclusion of surplus land under bad terms for the public sector; the lack of good clawback terms in the event of higher-than-expected profits; weak legal drafting; the difficulty of getting a sound project in place when it involves new technology, including IT; weak project management; and poor budgetary control of the project-delivery stage. Stephen Farry outlined a number of other potential problems with PFI, and it would be useful to note and address them. Such problems include the inability to adapt to new technology in future — we could be locked into a type of contract that may not turn out to give good service down the years.

A major concern is the structuring of PFI contracts, which restricts local firms' ability to bid successfully for them. That may be because of the size of the contracts or because of rules on employment and other matters that may rule out local firms, even though they may be well capable of performing the work. That crucial issue must be addressed. We must not build in obstacles to the growth of our own businesses. Several Members, including Tommy Gallagher, John O'Dowd and junior Minister Kelly, mentioned the need to protect our existing workers.

The consequences of the long-term financial burden may appear acceptable at the outset, but, as the years go on, they may become unacceptable or unaffordable. That point was made by several Members, including Mitchel McLaughlin and Alban Maginness, and Kieran Deeny specifically mentioned the consequences for the Health Service.

A big question is whether enough has been learned from past mistakes in PFI. Most of those errors now date back a number of years, as the junior Minister

mentioned. Much has been learnt, and the level of expertise and knowledge is now greater. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has heard a lot of evidence on Workplace 2010. There are no certainties, but I take some reassurance from what I have heard.

I note the comments made by Mitchel McLaughlin and Roy Beggs about the ability of the private sector to wipe the eye of the public sector. That is a serious concern, and it is right to say that the level of expertise in the Civil Service has grown substantially. The support that SIB has given has also been mentioned.

Roy Beggs mentioned the gateway review process, which provides for ongoing scrutiny of major capital projects. It is of the utmost importance, and the process must be fully observed in all cases. It can identify warning signals at a stage when something can be done to address them.

In summary, PFIs are with us for the moment. They are a vehicle that may deliver value for money — but since most of the projects have many years to run, that remains to be fully examined. Our main task is to identify those projects that best lend themselves to PFI and then manage them well. Once again, I thank all the Members who have contributed to this useful and constructive debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the concerns about local Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) raised in recent reports; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarification on the role and scope of PFIs across all government departments.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Cancer Services in Foyle

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le hábhar na díospóireachta seo a mholadh, agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Choiste Gnó as an deis seo a thabhairt dúinn.

I was hoping to preface my remarks by acknowledging the presence of the Minister. I am sure that he is on his way.

Mr Kennedy: The business of the House has rolled forward slightly, I believe, but I am assured that the Minister will be here very shortly.

Mr McCartney: Does the Deputy Speaker wish to wait for a couple of minutes, or shall I proceed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We should proceed.

Mr McCartney: I accept that the Minister is on his way and that the business of the House has run ahead —

Mr Brolly: You have just wrecked your speech.

Mr McCartney: I have just wrecked my speech is right, Francie.

I wish to thank the Business Committee for allowing the time for this debate. It is an important subject, especially for those of us who live in the north-west, because we are only too aware of the need for a comprehensive and dedicated cancer facility in the region. That assessment is based on the opinion of those who work in the Health Service and those who work with cancer patients. The health experts have made the case for such a facility in the region, and the arguments are overwhelming.

If we are to claim that we have a modern Health Service that puts the needs of patients and the public first, a dedicated cancer facility, with related services, is a must. Anything less, and we are failing in our public responsibilities. In addition, hardly a week passes without the human aspect of this situation reaching us, through personal contact or through the media; stories of people having to travel the long distances to Belfast or Dublin for tests, surgery and post-operative care. However, one of the most damning aspects of this situation is people saying that they often forgo treatment because of the physical and fiscal demands of what is unnecessary travel. The Minister is aware of the lack of facilities in the north-west and, to his credit, he has acknowledged that in the Assembly and on a recent visit to Derry.

This call, which is based on critical and objective analysis, has wide support throughout the north-west. Last year, our party presented the Department with a petition containing names that were gathered from Dungiven to Omagh and from Derry City to Gaoth Dobhair in County Donegal. A regional cancer facility is a key demand of the Stand Up for Derry campaign. It is also one of the key issues identified by the Derry Well Woman Centre at a recent conference in the city. The centre asked us for political support and a commitment to lobby publicly for the provision of such a facility. This debate is part of that process.

The issue of a cancer facility in the north-west featured in the general election in the Twenty-six Counties and prompted a number of mass rallies in Letterkenny. I wish to acknowledge the work of Pádraig MacLochlainn, a party colleague who has been at the forefront of the campaign.

This issue will not go away, because it is vital to the health and well-being of thousands of people in the region. On its establishment in 2004, the regional cancer services framework group had the aim of:

“providing a cohesive structure for the provision of a uniformly high standard of care.”

In order to achieve that uniformity, a high standard of care must be provided in the north-west.

The cancer control programme acknowledges that there should be a dedicated service in the north-west. It is contended that such a facility requires a population base of 500,000 people. The north-west — covering Derry, Tyrone, Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Fermanagh and other counties — provides that critical mass. This issue has featured at the North/South Ministerial Council, and the signals coming from both Ministers are positive. That is welcome; however, the purpose of this debate is not only to highlight the need for a dedicated facility and related services, but also to ensure that we, as public representatives, fulfil our task of keeping the issue on the agenda until it comes to fruition.

I now acknowledge the presence of the Minister in the Assembly. In light of the media speculation of the past 24 hours, perhaps we might hear some definite word about the future. The realisation of a cancer facility in the north-west is something for which the Minister will need support. I offer him that support on behalf of my party, and we will continue in our efforts. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: I support the retention and expansion of any and all cancer services, not only in Foyle but in the north-west in general. The services in Foyle draw their patients from throughout the north-west and other regions. Therefore, the services are also used daily by constituents of East Londonderry.

Recently, there was speculation about the future of cancer services at Altnagelvin Hospital. When I asked

the Health Minister for reassurance about those services, he replied, to his credit, that the hospital's cancer unit will continue to provide a range of high-quality comprehensive care and treatment services. That was a welcome and well-received assurance from the Minister to the people of my constituency of East Londonderry.

I am sure that, in common with me, many other Members are thankful that such services are available in Northern Ireland. Those services must be supported unanimously by all Assembly Members, because cancer does not discriminate between religious or political differences. My only concern is to ensure the continuation of the provision of cancer services in the north-west of Northern Ireland. There can never be a service that suits everybody's needs and individual requirements. However, the cancer-treatment centres and their excellent staff provide care in difficult circumstances that saves and prolongs lives.

I hope that the Minister appreciates that I will support him in every proposal that he makes to ensure the provision of all cancer services, from diagnosis to surgical intervention, and other treatments. However, I ask him to be mindful that new developments are regularly being made and that investment in those new treatments will, at times, be required. I ask him to remember that the north-west deserves new treatments and investments as much as Belfast or any other region. Of course, if the Minister overlooks the north-west for new treatments, he can be sure that I will remind him of that requirement.

Foyle's cancer services are used far beyond the geographical boundaries of that constituency. I want to ensure that the current level of service is enhanced and developed in the months and years to come.

Mr McClarty: I congratulate the Member for Foyle Mr McCartney for bringing the motion before the House. Everyone will be aware of the anguish and stress that cancer causes those who suffer from the disease and, indeed, their families. Thankfully, through the blessing of medical research and the dedication of healthcare professionals, successful treatment of cancer is increasing in society.

The key to quality cancer care must surely be local availability — at least, as local as possible — in view of the stresses and strains that cancer can bring to all. Local care, rather than care that is provided at a long distance, is crucial to reducing the physical and emotional suffering and upheaval that people undergo.

Members who represent areas of Northern Ireland that are outside greater Belfast can, at times, be left with the impression that provision of key public services in Belfast is all that Northern Ireland requires. That is simply not true; indeed, nothing could be further from the truth. The constituency of East Londonderry, which I am proud and privileged to represent, and my neigh-

bouring constituency of Foyle, deserve the same access to world-class facilities as anywhere else in Northern Ireland. On that basis, I look forward to the Minister's comments later in the debate.

Finally, the debate highlights why devolution is important and why local politics, despite all its faults, can connect people for the common good. Members from a range of parties are gathered in the Chamber to debate the improvement of cancer services in Foyle and the surrounding areas. The Assembly's ability to deliver for individuals and families who are afflicted by the tragedy of cancer is of the greatest significance. I trust that the Minister's comments will reflect that.

Mrs M Bradley: First, I thank the Minister for his attendance and patience at the meeting that he facilitated in Derry last week, which I had requested on behalf of Derry Well Woman and the cross-border Action Cancer group to discuss cancer services in Foyle. I was heartened and pleased to hear that he has already been working hard on the north-west's cancer-care agenda.

4.00 pm

The Minister heard at first hand last week that Derry Well Woman and its cross-border cancer-care group have carried out Trojan work. It is to that group's credit that the issue has been kept in the public eye, and to the forefront of decision-makers' minds and diaries.

I feel a sense of déjà vu — I am sure the Minister does, too — because we covered this ground less than a week ago. However, the issue is such that it is worth reiterating at any given opportunity.

Cross-border cancer services have been at the top of my political and general wish list for some time now. Unfortunately, cancer is a reality for an ever-increasing number of people in Northern Ireland, particularly in the north-west. Approximately 1,300 people in the north-west will be diagnosed with cancer this year, and approximately 2,500 people will be treated annually.

It is essential that we politicians work to the best of our capabilities to deliver an efficient and supportive service for patients and their families. I appreciate that there is a state-of-the-art cancer facility at Belfast City Hospital. However, a strong, interdependent need exists for a similar facility in the north-west to service the many hundreds of people who make daily journeys to Belfast, often in an emotionally and physically fragile state.

Cancer treatment is often rigorous and physically debilitating, and is made even more difficult by having to travel for hours to reach the point of treatment. The site at Belfast City Hospital will reach saturation point in 2015, so a new site must be up and running before that date.

I ask the Minister again to consider the plight of many people in the north-west. I appreciate the groundwork

that he and his Department have already done in assessing how feasible it is that we have a second dedicated cancer unit in Northern Ireland, and I am confident that he will make his decision sooner rather than later. In conjunction with his counterpart in the South, Mary Harney, I am confident that he will deliver a service that will be beneficial and accessible to people in the north-west, on both the Northern and Southern sides of the border. I promise the Minister that I will give him all the support that I can.

Dr Deeny: I am delighted to participate in the debate. I support Mr McCartney on the matter and thank him for tabling the Adjournment topic. A dedicated cancer service is needed at Altnagelvin Area Hospital to look after people in the west and north-west.

Cancer is a devastating disease. I have had to tell people — some younger than me — that they have cancer. Such news is tough for individuals to receive, and people often take a long time to accept it. When those people then must make excessively long journeys for all sorts of tests and investigations, their levels of distress increase. Indeed, such long journeys affect their mental health and, in turn, worsen the physical disease.

I am delighted that the Minister is present. Political representatives, as well as the medical profession, must strive to bring services to people rather than to expect people to travel to avail themselves of those services. That is never more relevant than when the patients concerned are suffering from a life-threatening illness such as cancer.

I am originally from the east of the Province but have lived in the west for the past 22 years. As Mr McClarty said, we must move away from the Belfast-only mentality. The Minister has indicated that that will happen. Not before time, because patients who suffer from cancer have had to, and continue to have to, travel to Belfast regularly. Some of those people have since passed on, among them my mother-in-law. Often it can take an entire day to travel to and from Belfast, and transport must be arranged. It is totally unacceptable that seriously ill people are forced to make such long journeys to Belfast for a 10-minute appointment, or a five-minute blood test.

We must press the issue. Altnagelvin Area Hospital in Derry should be the main provider of cancer treatment in that area. I ask the Minister to look to the future and to having Altnagelvin as the north-west provider of cancer treatment. Other services should also be made more local.

For example, I hope that many of the blood tests and investigations will be carried out in the new primary-care centres. Speaking as a doctor, there is no reason why fit and healthy doctors and nurses cannot travel to outpatient clinics in Omagh and Enniskillen

or why they could not carry out tests in the future primary-care centres.

I support Mr McCartney's arguments. He mentioned that we need a population base of 500,000 people to justify a cancer centre; the last time I checked there were only 410,000 people west of the Bann. However, my figures refer only to the Six Counties, and taking into account the other counties that he mentioned would give us the required population base.

It is only fair that the services be provided. No one knows who will be diagnosed with that terrible disease next. As elected representatives and as professionals, we should not add to patients' distress and misery by forcing them to endure unnecessary journeys to receive treatment and investigations.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank my colleague Raymond McCartney for securing this adjournment debate. Although everyone can understand the merits of the Belfast City Hospital Cancer Centre as a centre of excellence at the leading edge of treatment and care, surely there is no reason why cancer treatment and care services cannot be provided locally at either Altnagelvin Hospital or Letterkenny General Hospital. It is intolerable that local cancer patients must undergo long journeys and prolonged stays far from their homes when either of those hospitals could easily house an oncology unit that would meet the present demand for the full range of cancer services in the north-west. Unfortunately, that demand is projected to grow in years to come.

Many people perceive that, for too long, healthcare has been considered to be a tradable commodity that ignores the loop between patients and the conditions in which they are treated. In securing treatment, we can no longer afford to ignore patients' personal travel conditions as something beyond the overall monetary cost of healthcare provision. Social cost cannot be ignored if we are to provide adequate standards of healthcare across the island.

Given the prevalence of all forms of cancers in the north-west and the fact that it has the highest cancer mortality rates in the western world, the local provision of oncology services should be a priority for everyone. Some form of new all-Ireland configuration — as suggested this week by Sinn Féin in its meetings with Health Ministers, North and South — would justify an oncology unit for the entire north-west, serving both west Ulster and north Connaught, instead of very ill patients from this region being forced to undergo the additional burden of repeated, prolonged journeys to the only existing units in Belfast, Dublin, Cork and Galway.

The argument for a dedicated regional centre in the north-west has been underscored by new research, which reveals that a person is more likely to die from cancer in Derry than anywhere else in the North.

According to a new report from the North's Cancer Registry, Derry has higher than expected levels of cancer cases and deaths. In fact, the region has the highest incidence of lung cancer in the Six Counties. The report concludes that that is likely to be linked to the higher levels of deprivation in the area and the associated high levels of tobacco usage.

The provision of cancer services is one of the five key demands in the Stand Up for Derry campaign. Thousands of people have signed the petition supporting that campaign. Everyone from the city knows someone who has had to travel daily, in the depth of winter, from Derry to Belfast for cancer treatment. They must travel when they are at their lowest ebb. At times, they must queue for treatment and recover enough to make the journey home—a journey of between 75 and 100 miles for those who live outside Derry. I am sure that the Minister would not want his partner, sister, brother or child to endure that. That intolerable situation must be addressed urgently.

Furthermore, financial assistance and recognition should be given to community groups such as the Pink Ladies and the Derry Well Woman, which support and comfort patients who are treated so appallingly by the health system. It is appalling that cancer patients are faced with the additional trauma of travelling so far to access cancer services.

If the political will exists in the Administrations, North and South, the provision in the Good Friday Agreement for seamless healthcare means that no constraints should stand in the way of a regional cancer facility in the north west. I ask the Minister to support this demand and provide the healthcare service that is desperately required. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Raymond McCartney for proposing the topic for the Adjournment debate, and I acknowledge the Minister's hard work, determination and responsiveness since taking up office.

As Dr Deeny said, telling someone that he or she has cancer is no joke and must be a difficult task. We can all relate to cancer — family members, neighbours, and so forth.

There was a young mother of four from Derry — I will call her Margaret — who was terminally ill with cancer and required palliative radiation treatment. She was fortunate to be able to get that treatment because it increased her comfort and allowed her time with her family. Unfortunately, she had to travel to Belfast to receive it. That meant that, in the last few weeks of her life, her husband had to leave their children with relatives while he made the journey to visit her. That took a terrible toll on him, their children and their family. Margaret's case is similar to that of so many people in Derry and the north-west. It happens regularly.

Similarly, people in Donegal must travel to Belfast and Dublin for treatment. Poor health and economic disadvantage go hand in hand, and, therefore, it is not surprising — as other Members remarked — that the north-west of Ireland has the highest occurrence of cancer on this island. In fact, last year, as Mary Bradley said, around 1,300 cases of cancer were diagnosed at Altnagelvin Hospital, which indicates the scale of the problem.

The border cuts off the natural hinterland of Donegal, which artificially reduces the population and leaves Donegal without a city and accompanying public services. That disadvantages everyone. Together, Derry and Donegal have the critical population mass that is not present when segregated by the border. Partnership is the answer to that segregation, and it is good that a range of ongoing projects integrate services across the north-west region for the benefit of all.

Therefore, major opportunities exist for the Minister, working with his counterparts in Dublin, to provide an enhanced range of treatments in the north-west. The Minister met a delegation from the north-west, led by my party colleague Mary Bradley, and that meeting was positive and productive. The Minister gave positive signals that a good business case is being prepared for a radiation unit to be located in the north-west, in particular, at Altnagelvin. We anticipate good news on that front today, making cancer services available to the whole population.

I assure the Minister that such a development will be strongly supported in the north-west. That service will add to the existing cancer provision at Altnagelvin, providing desperately needed treatment and reducing the pressure on the Belfast cancer service. The range of cancer services at Altnagelvin Hospital is not extensive; however a high level of expertise provides a good basis for growth. It is important to develop a major cancer centre of excellence in the north west, without compromising the quality of treatment for patients in the north-west or across the network of hospitals in Northern Ireland.

The SDLP congratulates the Minister on his work thus far and urges him, in partnership with his counterparts in Dublin, to remain focused on the development of health services in the north-west, to supply the range of facilities that one would expect in a modern society, and to enable access to them.

4.15 pm

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate Raymond McCartney on securing the Adjournment debate and bringing a matter of great importance to the people of the north-west to the notice of the House. People who have cancer are already demoralised by all that it entails, as are their families and everyone around them. The last thing that they need is to have to travel by bus from Derry to Belfast

for treatment. Often, that deepens their demoralisation to such an extent that they almost want to give up, which is the last thing that any patient should do.

When I was a young boy in years gone by, people did not talk about cancer. It was a rare and inevitably fatal illness, and the care of cancer patients amounted to no more than providing pain relief. Those who used the term “cancer” at all whispered it, and people where I come from called it the “bad thing”.

Nowadays, cancer is, relatively speaking, an epidemic. People use the word “cancer”, and they talk freely about who has cancer and from what type they are suffering. However, the fear and family heartbreak caused by cancer remains the same. People are crying out for research to find a great answer to end the terrible scourge that cancer has become.

In the meantime, and until some way of halting the disease can be found, the care that is now available must be made accessible to everyone. However, as I mentioned, such care is not accessible to people in the north-west, but it should be, and within range. The community in the north-west generally earns low wages, and some may never have had the opportunity to travel far from home. Some people do not understand that, but the community in the north-west consists of ordinary people. They are happy to go as far as Derry, but travelling to the big city of Belfast and having to wait to be seen in its large hospitals is a strange experience for them. As they experience such terrible times, their minds are constantly plagued by worry and fear, and their bodies are racked with pain.

It is the job of Members who represent the north-west to secure cancer services at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, and we must ensure that that happens soon. I am aware of media speculation that the Minister is about to make an announcement about Altnagelvin. The only announcement that MLAs from the area want to hear is of a dedicated, comprehensive cancer facility at Altnagelvin Area Hospital for people in the north-west.

I thank everyone who supports that objective, and I am grateful to Members from the north-west, particularly from my East Derry constituency, who stayed on today to drive it forward. Their presence demonstrates to the Minister the seriousness with which we regard the matter, and I hope that he has listened. The Stand Up for Derry campaign highlighted the issue, and I ask every Member, particularly the Minister, to stand up for the cancer facility at Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Raymond McCartney for the opportunity to debate this important issue. As Members know, cancer is a leading cause of death in Northern Ireland. Every year, cancer causes 3,600 deaths and approximately 8,500 new cases are diagnosed. Northern Ireland has an ageing population,

and, as people live longer, their chances of developing cancer increase.

It is possible that, by 2025, cancer levels will have increased by over 50%, with 13,000 new cancers being diagnosed each year. Those who do not develop the disease will, almost certainly, have a family member or close friend who will be affected by cancer. Cancer is a real concern for everyone, and it will have an impact on all our lives. To control and fight cancer represents a huge challenge, and our efforts must be equal to it. Therefore, I remain committed to ensuring the highest possible standard of cancer services in the north-west and throughout Northern Ireland.

Dr Henrietta Campbell’s report ‘Cancer Services – Investing for the Future’ was important in identifying shortcomings and instigating the necessary reforms to bring cancer services in Northern Ireland up to the standard expected of a modern, high-quality health and social care service. That report recommended the establishment of a single regional cancer centre of excellence and four cancer units, each of which should be linked with a larger acute hospital. Those reforms are now in place, and we have a state-of-the-art regional cancer centre in Belfast, at a cost of £70 million, which is recognised as one of the best of its type in Europe. There are also four subregional cancer units at Altnagelvin Hospital, Antrim Area Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital and the Ulster Hospital.

The cancer unit at Altnagelvin Hospital was established in 1999 and provides a wide range of cancer services to the population of the north-west, including services that are aimed at early detection and screening, imaging, surgery, and chemotherapy. Pathology services to support cancer care are provided from a superb laboratory facility at Altnagelvin, which opened last year and which cost £18 million. In December 2007, I announced that services there would continue unchanged, following the findings of the latest review of pathology services. For nearly a decade, the cancer unit at Altnagelvin Hospital has provided to the local community the full range of treatments and therapies for more common cancers.

The management of the treatment of children with cancer from the area is another matter of concern. Evidence suggests that children with cancer do better when they are treated at a regional centre, where expertise in that specialty can be developed and maintained at a high level. I know that parents of sick children always want the best possible care for their child and there will always be a need for some children to travel to the regional centre for treatment. However, I want to ensure that the routine elements of children’s treatment can be — and are — delivered locally.

Altnagelvin Hospital has been doing well in working to achieve the highest standards of safety and quality. The Western Health and Social Care Trust is on target

to meet the new access standards for patients with suspected cancer. Those standards state that, by March 2008, 98% of patients diagnosed with cancer will begin treatment within a maximum of 31 days from the date of their diagnosis, and 75% of patients with suspected cancer who have been referred urgently by a GP will begin their first definitive treatment within a maximum of 62 days. In addition, latest figures indicate that women who are referred to Altnagelvin Hospital for a specialist assessment for breast cancer are all seen within the two-week target. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of the considerable range of cancer services that are already available in Foyle, and which are delivering real benefits to patients.

All radiotherapy services in Northern Ireland are located at the Northern Ireland Cancer Centre, and there are sound clinical reasons for that. The centre was planned and built to meet the radiotherapy needs of the population of Northern Ireland until 2015. However, the time has come to plan the scale and location of provision beyond that date. An initial assessment of projected cancer incidence and demographics suggests that a combination of radiotherapy services in Belfast and Altnagelvin would best meet the needs of the population of Northern Ireland beyond 2015. That would ensure that 90% of the population is within one hour's travel of radiotherapy treatment.

I have discussed that issue with a range of public representatives and community groups from the north-west. As Mrs Bradley mentioned, I met her last Wednesday, along with representatives of Derry Well Woman, Co-operating for Cancer Care North West and clinicians from both sides of the border, and I acknowledge the excellent work that those groups do in supporting people who are affected by cancer.

The possibility of locating additional radiotherapy capacity at Altnagelvin Hospital raises another opportunity for consideration, and that is the potential for cross-border co-operation in the development of that resource. Last November, I discussed the issue of radiotherapy services in the north-west with the South's Minister for Health and Children at the North/South Ministerial Council health and food-safety sectoral meeting, which was held in Dublin. We agreed that our Departments should assess the potential for co-operation on that specialty.

I want the planning process to be informed by the continuing discussions between our Departments, and that will be the case.

Taking all of those issues into account, and after careful consideration of my Department's assessment of the optimum location for additional radiotherapy provision, I am pleased to announce that the new satellite radiotherapy centre will be established at Altnagelvin Hospital. I have instructed the health

boards and the Western Health and Social Care Trust to develop a business case for that development as a matter of urgency so that the new centre will be up and running by 2015. I expect to have a timetable for the delivery of that project by June 2008.

When planning a public investment on such a scale, it is important to get it right. Any new development must provide sufficient capacity and supply high-quality services and standards. We also must ensure that the tendering and procurement processes demonstrate value for money and comply with EU and national legislation. Inevitably, that will take time, but it is necessary in order to ensure that we have the right services in the right place with the right mix of skilled staff to provide them.

My first commitment is, and always will be, to ensure that sufficient radiotherapy capacity exists to treat the people of Northern Ireland in the most effective, safe and efficient manner. However, I am keen to ensure that any mutual benefits that can be gained from cross-border co-operation are fully exploited.

Today's announcement will mean that, by providing radiotherapy services in Belfast and Londonderry, the needs of the population of Northern Ireland will be met beyond 2015. That is proof of my commitment to providing high-quality and accessible cancer services to the entire population.

I will continue to ensure that all health and social care services are provided to the highest possible standards on a fair and equitable basis throughout Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 4.27 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 21 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order that you, on the eighty-second birthday of Her Majesty The Queen, on behalf of the House, pass to her the best wishes of the Assembly and of her loyal subjects in the Province, as well as our thanks for another year of service to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: The Member's point has been well made, and I will discuss it with my colleagues.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] do now pass.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] do now pass.

Local Government (Boundaries) Bill

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I beg to introduce the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill [NIA 14/07], which is a Bill to provide for 11 local government districts in Northern Ireland, for the division of those districts into wards, for the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to recommend the boundaries and names of those districts and wards and the number of wards in each district; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Local Government (Boundaries) Bill

Accelerated Passage

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

That the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill [NIA 14/07] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Assembly on the motion. The review of public administration (RPA) was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2002, which is almost six years ago. The path to agreement on the number of councils and the functions that they should initially exercise has, I accept, been long and arduous.

On 13 March 2008, the Executive reached agreement on those matters. I am keen that there be no further delay in the establishment of the new local government districts and wards, or in setting up the councils to deliver services on behalf of those districts. With that in mind, I have taken every opportunity to ensure the prompt introduction of the Bill.

After the Executive made their decision on 13 March, I made a statement to the Assembly at its first plenary session after the Easter recess, on 31 March. In that statement, I announced that the current configuration of 26 local government districts would be rationalised to 11 new districts and indicated my intention to implement the agreed structural reform package by 2011. I also highlighted the need for a local government boundaries Bill to be urgently introduced so that the first elections to the 11 new councils could be held in 2011, as well as the need for the Bill to be progressed by accelerated passage.

On 3 April, I attended a meeting of the Environment Committee to explain — as required by Standing Order 40(3) — why it is necessary for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage and the consequences should it not be granted. I also promised to ensure that any future request for accelerated passage would only be made if absolutely necessary. I thank the Committee for recognising the need to expedite the process and for its support for the accelerated passage motion.

Under Standing Order 40(4), where it is thought that a Bill requires accelerated passage, the Member in charge of that Bill shall explain to the Assembly when moving the motion for accelerated passage:

“(a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;

(b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,

(c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure.”

With regard to Standing Order 40(4)(a) and 40(4)(b), we aim to hold the first elections to the 11 new councils at the same time as the next elections to the Assembly in May 2011. That timetable is challenging and contains a number of steps that are in the gift of the Secretary of State, not that of this House. However, the immediate priority is the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to review local government boundaries. That commissioner must be in place by 1 July 2008 because, without that first step, none of the other steps can fall into place.

The Local Government (Boundaries) Bill contains only two substantive clauses, which provide for the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and change the numbers and broad boundaries of the new local government districts to 11. The procedure for a review by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner includes periods for consultation and public hearings before final recommendations are made. The final recommendations should be submitted by the end of June 2009.

I will lay a copy of the commissioner’s report, together with a draft Order giving legislative effect to the recommendations with or without modifications, before the House early in autumn 2009. Only when that Order is made can the District Electoral Areas Commissioner, who is appointed by the Secretary of State, conduct a review of the district electoral areas (DEA) prior to the first elections to the 11 new councils.

If accelerated passage is not granted to the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill there will be a high risk that it will not complete its passage and obtain Royal Assent before the summer recess. In that case, the Bill would have to be carried forward to the next session, which would delay the appointment of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner by several months. That would affect all subsequent events — such as the review of the district electoral areas — and mean that it would not be possible to conduct elections to the new councils by May 2011.

Standing Order 40(4)(c) requires the Member who moves the motion for accelerated passage to explain to the Assembly:

“any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage motion.”

My officials are examining the legislative programme for the Department and liaising with colleagues in other Departments, where appropriate, to expedite the development of policy and promote the timely drafting of future Bills. Any future requests for the use of the accelerated passage procedure will only be made when it is unavoidable. With that in mind, I seek the support of the House for the accelerated passage of the Bill, and I look forward to hearing Members’ comments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Environment Committee welcomed the Minister of the Environment to its meeting on 3 April. At that meeting, the Minister briefed Committee members on the reasoning behind her request for Committee approval for accelerated passage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill.

The Bill sets out the broad boundaries of 11 new local government districts for Northern Ireland and sets out the remit for a review of local government boundaries. The Bill provides for 11 new local government districts in the North, compared to the current 26; for the division of those districts into wards; and for a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to be appointed in 2008. After this initial review of local government boundaries, future commissioners will be appointed within eight to 12 years of the date of the previous commissioner's final report.

At her meeting with the Committee, the Minister of the Environment emphasised the importance of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner being appointed by July 1 2008 in order to recommend the boundaries, and the names, of districts and wards. The Committee was told that the Minister intended to hold elections for the 11 new local government districts in May 2011 — potentially at the same time as the next Assembly elections. For those reasons, the Minister subsequently sought the Committee's support for accelerated passage of the Bill before the Executive finally decided on its content and its introduction to the Assembly.

The Committee debated the Minister's request. Some Members said that proper Committee scrutiny could lead to an improved Bill. However, the Committee decided, by a majority vote, to support the accelerated passage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the introduction of the Bill.

I now want to speak as an MLA, and to outline my party's position. The fact that we now have pressure of time — and the Minister herself said that it was a long and arduous path — can be attributed mostly to Provisional Sinn Féin, which dithered between seven and 11 local government districts. The matter could have been resolved long before now, allowing us to give the Bill full and proper scrutiny instead of its being subject to accelerated passage. Our party's position was well articulated by Minister Margaret Ritchie in earlier communication with Minister Foster. The proposed move to 11 councils — while clearly not our party's preference or choice — represents significant progress from the original prescription of seven local government districts, although our preference was for the 15-council model. It is important that that be clarified.

I thank the Minister for bringing this Bill before us today, and I assure her of the support of the Committee.

Mr Speaker: Members are reminded that the subject matter for today's debate is whether the Bill should be granted accelerated passage. I will not permit any detailed discussion about the merits of the Bill. That is a matter for the Second Stage, when the principles of the Bill will be debated. Members at various times, and especially when debating accelerated passage, feel that they want to go into the merits of the Bill, but that will not happen today.

Mr Ross: I will do my best to behave myself. As others have pointed out, today and in relation to previous accelerated passage motions, this is not the preferred way for legislation to progress through the House. From time to time, however, it is essential in order to ensure that legislation is in place within a required time. I am content that the Minister has clearly explained why she is seeking accelerated passage and outlined the potential difficulties if accelerated passage is not granted. I welcome the Minister's proposals for reinvigorated local government. This motion is necessary to ensure that everything is in place for that process to occur and for a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to be appointed as soon as possible.

As has been said, the Environment Committee has already voted to support the Bill's accelerated passage. I am grateful to the Minister for coming before the Committee to answer members' questions about the detail of this short Bill. As the Minister has explained in this House and to the Committee, the Bill is being introduced under the accelerated passage procedure to ensure that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner can be appointed as soon as possible to allow elections to the new councils to be held in 2011, and to enable those councils to go live at that time. I hope that the Assembly will support the accelerated passage motion so that there are no unnecessary hold-ups that might cause the process to stall. As the Speaker said, the Assembly will have the opportunity to discuss some of the content of the Bill during the Second Stage tomorrow. I look forward to that. Today, however, I am content that we should proceed under accelerated passage.

12.15 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Now that you have issued that warning, Mr Speaker, I will be brief. Sinn Féin recognises the need for the Bill to be accelerated; the process must move forward, rather than be further held up. Equality and fairness must be enshrined in any future legislation for the new structures. Therefore, I welcome the Bill, and I hope that it is the first step towards delivering real change for the years to come. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: The issue is of huge importance to the people of Northern Ireland, and it will impact on them for decades to come. Experience shows that the local government electoral boundaries that will be established under the review of public administration will be with us for decades. Local government was the bastion of democracy in the Province for almost 40 years of the Troubles, during the absence of accountable, devolved Government. Therefore, it is extremely important for the people of Northern Ireland to have the best framework for local government and maximise its potential effectiveness and accountability. Local government is at the front line of democracy in this country, and the people of Northern Ireland deserve the best from local government.

Given those points, I do not believe that the Bill is suitable for accelerated passage. The matter is of such great importance that it requires the fullest possible scrutiny by the Committee for the Environment and the House. Accelerated passage should be reserved for emergencies in which swift and decisive action is called for, such as an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.

Standing Orders require us to consider the consequences of not granting accelerated passage and the problems that that would create. No emergency surrounds the introduction of RPA and new local government boundaries. It is vital that the necessary time is devoted to the subject in order to get it right. The DUP and Sinn Féin only recently outlined their policy that there should be 11 local authorities. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that Northern Ireland would be better served by 15 local authorities, which would reflect the current parliamentary boundaries.

Proper scrutiny and accountability is required during the rest of the process of setting the boundaries for local government. Any Boundaries Commissioner must have the correct powers to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are appropriately represented and, as far as possible, decisions are taken in line with their wishes. That will increase the buy-in time for local government, and the effectiveness of local government will increase. It is of the utmost importance to get the Bill right. Accelerated passage would hinder, rather than help scrutiny. The Bill is one of the most significant to come before the Assembly because it will dictate our local government arrangements for decades to come.

The Ulster Unionist Party has no desire to unduly delay the working of government or cause any type of obstruction, but parliamentary process should be respected. We are strong supporters of reform of local government, and we will ensure robust, accountable and responsible local government. It is because we are supportive of that reform that we recognise the need for proper scrutiny of the Bill.

The people of Northern Ireland elect MLAs to legislate on their behalf and to ensure that legislation is properly scrutinised. For too many years, there has been little accountability in Northern Ireland. We complained about the unresponsive nature and lack of scrutiny that came with direct rule, yet we now refuse to provide anything much better than that. The parliamentary process is the backbone of democracy and, by pushing the Bill and other pieces of legislation through the Assembly, we are in danger of setting a harmful precedent. We would be failing in our duty to the people of Northern Ireland if we were to permit accelerated passage of the Bill.

Mr Ford: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, although, if the Minister has her way, that may not be the case for long — in a number of respects.

I have a horrible sense of déjà vu. Yet again, we have a significant Executive Bill accompanied by a motion for accelerated passage. It is similar to the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill, discussion of which will occupy a lot of time in the House tomorrow.

Mr Kennedy: It may.

Mr Ford: As my friend reminds me, the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill may require a lot of time; whether that is inside or outside the Chamber depends on the attitudes of the two dominant parties in the Executive. That example has demonstrated the wrongs of accelerated passage.

I am grateful that the Minister of the Environment came to the Committee immediately after the Easter recess to outline her plans, and to explain why accelerated passage might be required. Indeed, some of her officials attended a special meeting during the Easter recess.

However, I am afraid that she failed to convince me of the merits of that case, just as she failed to convince Mr Gardiner. I have a number of concerns about the Bill, which are made worse by the motion for accelerated passage.

As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I have seen the Bill. However, it is bizarre that none of my party colleagues have seen the Bill, given that they will shortly be required to vote on whether or not it should have accelerated passage. I am not in the habit of giving blank cheques to anyone, I do not encourage my friends to give blank cheques to anyone, and I certainly would not give a blank cheque to any member of the Executive — not even the Minister of the Environment.

Clearly, there are issues that merit — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Ford: The proposed numbers and boundaries merit more detailed consideration and taking of evidence by the Committee. Some mathematical genius in Sinn Féin or the DUP has discovered that seven plus 15 divided by two equals 11. There is little evidence to convince us that there is anything more meaningful to the number 11 than that sum.

Similarly, can Members who represent Newry and Armagh, such as Mr Kennedy, tell me whether the people of Newtownhamilton really believe that they live in the same local community as the people of Saintfield or Killyleagh?

Those issues cannot be easily dealt with in the Committee Stage of a Bill. They require detailed examination and evidence-taking by a Committee. The process does not need to be extended. However, if we are to be convinced that what is being done is right, there should be an opportunity for the Committee to discuss and take evidence over two or three meetings.

As Mr Gardiner said, the Bill will set the pattern of local government for a generation. To do that in a rushed, ham-fisted fashion is almost as bad as the direct rule procedures that Members of the House would have complained bitterly about a few years ago. Because the Bill is being rushed, we are maintaining the procedures — dating from 1962 and revised in 1973 — for drawing up single-member wards. However, we all know that there will not be single-member wards of any practical electoral value.

That creates difficulty, and also takes an extraordinary length of time. If there had been discussion with the Secretary of State — about joining the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner process with the district electoral areas process — more coherent boundaries could have been established, significantly quicker. The gains of accelerated passage would have been more than made up for by shortening the process.

I accept that there is a timescale in which to meet current procedures. Indeed, I questioned the Minister about that when she came to the Committee. The expectation is that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will complete his, or her, work in a year. That is a totally unreasonable length of time in which to draw up a new set of appropriate and coherent boundaries, with proper time for local consideration and hearings. It would have been far better to have had a detailed Committee Stage — in order to get the Bill right — and shorten the subsequent process.

I accept that there are reasons why, after a lengthy delay, we need to move on with the local government process. However, granting accelerated passage — as opposed to taking time to getting the Bill right and then taking the procedures through more quickly — will not benefit our society.

Visitors to Parliament Buildings — such as the school groups that we all speak to — are constantly told of the importance of Committees. Sometimes, they are even told that there is no opposition in the Assembly, although some of us are attempting to correct that. Those visitors are told that a Committee in the Assembly is the equivalent of both a Standing Committee and a Select Committee in Westminster. They are told that Committees get the opportunity to examine topics in detail and build up expertise, so that they can make useful comments and help to get Bills passed more effectively, and that they can deal with other matters.

However, on this occasion, a Committee is being sidelined completely. The same thing happened to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Victims and Survivors Bill was granted accelerated passage. There is no logic to that.

Mr Campbell: The Member referred to the Committee being “sidelined”. Does he not accept that the Committee voluntarily and democratically voted on the matter? The fact that he was in the minority does not mean that the Committee was sidelined.

Mr Ford: I accept the Member’s point, and I have no difficulty being in a minority. Members are aware of what happens when the Executive Whip is applied in Committees — and that is another problem that is unique to this place. When Ministers are sure that their party colleagues and Members from the other side of the House will support them in Committee, it amounts to the voluntary sidelining of the minority by the majority. Given the political system here, that is not a healthy situation.

I agree with the Minister that there is a tight timetable. However, if Members were to take a few weeks now to get the procedures right, it would result in a better Bill. Accelerated passage will create difficulties, because there has been no opportunity to carry out a consultation exercise, and the Committee has not had the required detailed discussion. Therefore, at Consideration Stage, it is simply not possible to deal properly with the amendments that the Alliance Party deems necessary.

I say that as one of the few Members to succeed in getting an amendment through the House at Further Consideration Stage and against the wishes of a Minister. Assembly procedures make it impossible to do that easily or properly. Therefore, accelerated passage is wrong, and my colleagues and I will oppose it.

Mr S Wilson: As my party colleague Alastair Ross emphasised, it is better for Committees to deal with legislation. However, the Minister outlined why accelerated passage is required in this case.

I listened to Members from the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party, both of which are intent on opposing accelerated passage. Their arguments are thin, and their opposition again smacks of the determination of those two parties to oppose what comes before the House. It does not matter to them what the subject is or what arguments are made. The Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party regard their role as being to oppose everything, so that they can say that they are the opposition. However, their arguments against the motion do not stand up to scrutiny.

Mr Gardiner said that this is a matter of:

“huge importance to the people of Northern Ireland.”

He said that it is “of such great importance” that we must get the boundaries right, because everyone will have to live with them for many years to come. It is not the Bill’s job to get the boundaries right. After holding discussions with local people, the commissioner will make recommendations.

Dr Farry: Does the Member agree that the question of whether there should be 11 or 15 councils is also significant? Members can discuss how to arrange the deckchairs in respect of 11 councils, but it is surely important to debate what happened to the option of 15. At the last election, the DUP stated its preference for 15 councils, but it now supports the move to 11. The people of Northern Ireland would be interested to know why the DUP has changed its position.

Mr S Wilson: At the risk of being struck down by the Speaker and losing points for deviation — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr S Wilson: I am no deviant.

[Laughter.]

I would be happy to engage in a discussion about whether there should be 11 or 15 councils, but the Speaker made it clear that that is not the Assembly’s job on this occasion. Members will have the opportunity to do that tomorrow, and I look forward to that.

Mr Gardiner outlined that we will have to live with the boundaries for the next 40 years or more, and, therefore, it is important to ensure that they are correct. The commissioner will draft those boundaries and, whether we like it or not, we must work to the 2011 deadline. Every day that the Bill spends in the Assembly will be one day less for the commissioner to consult local groups, parties and individuals to reach decisions on this important matter.

12.30 pm

Therefore, accelerated passage and the appointment of a commissioner by 1 July 2008 will allow Mr Gardiner’s wishes to be realised and allow the commissioner maximum time to get the boundaries

right. For that reason, I cannot understand why the Ulster Unionists will not support accelerated passage.

The second argument involves the delay in introducing the Bill. Like the Ulster Unionists, the Alliance Party and the SDLP — and at least the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment had the decency to admit it — the DUP was unhappy with the system that was imposed during direct rule; the seven-council model was not the answer. Given that the Assembly must reach agreement to make changes —

Mr Kennedy: You wanted 15 councils.

Mr S Wilson: Mr Kennedy chitters, from a sedentary position, about the 15 council areas. The House will discuss the issue of 11 or 15 council areas tomorrow. The Ulster Unionist Party needs to learn that, in an Assembly where agreement is essential, working with other parties is sometimes necessary. Although the UUP may not always get its own way, sometimes the solution will be better than what was imposed in the first place.

If the Assembly did not reach agreement, it would be stuck with the seven-council model. I will be careful now because a new Deputy Speaker has taken the Chair, and he might have a go at me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kennedy: He is an Ulster Unionist.

Mr S Wilson: He is an Ulster Unionist and, therefore, is likely to strike me down. One of the reasons for the delay is that the Assembly and the Minister were working towards a better solution than the seven-council model that was imposed by direct rule Ministers. We had the option either to accept the seven-council model or to debate the model in the Assembly and reach agreement among the parties. The delay was partly due to the fact that the Minister was reflecting the wishes of the Ulster Unionists, the Alliance Party and the SDLP.

Mr Kennedy: The Member misses the point; the new deadline — and it is rather artificial — of 2011 was agreed between his party and Sinn Féin in order to maximise electoral support by, allegedly, holding dual elections for the Assembly and local government. That is not a reason to rush legislation through.

Mr S Wilson: Given that the point was raised in an intervention, I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you will allow me latitude to respond. Mr Kennedy comes from a party with a history of plotting, so perhaps he sees plots in every decision. Although it makes economic sense to hold elections on the same day, the 2011 deadline has nothing to do with a DUP or Sinn Féin Machiavellian motive. Those of us in local government know that a deadline is necessary to put an end to the uncertainty; we cannot continue to extend the deadline.

Mr Weir: Does not the Member agree that it is rich for the Ulster Unionist Party to complain about the possibility of Assembly and council elections being held on the same day, when, in 2001, that party pushed to ensure that council elections —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have allowed some latitude in the debate for fear of being accused of acting from party-political motives. I remind Members that the motion concerns accelerated passage and that they should stick to that.

Mr S Wilson: My remarks were pertinent to the issue of accelerated passage. I made the point that since we are working towards the 2011 deadline, a local government boundary commissioner must be in place to see that the boundaries are sorted out in time for the 2011 election. The introduction of the Bill was necessarily delayed to try to achieve some measure of agreement among political parties, and to address the concerns of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party. As ever, those parties are totally ungrateful for the efforts of my colleague the Minister of the Environment, who worked tirelessly to undo the injustice cited by the two parties that are now complaining.

I turn to the Alliance Party, which has a number of concerns. Its representatives say that they have not seen the Bill, and, therefore, they refuse to give the Minister a blank cheque. Given that party's reputation, people might not accept cheques from it in any case — only cash in hand. On the one hand, it makes a promise; on the other, it breaks it.

We are told that we should not permit accelerated passage and that we should instead consider and take evidence as to whether the appropriate number of councils is seven, 11 or 15. That was Mr Ford's first objection. He said that we now enter a scenario whereby there will be 11 councils, the boundaries of which are to be set, yet we do not know that that is the best option. However, there has been extensive consultation on the number of local government units — Mr Ford should know, because his party responded to that consultation. My party, Mr Ford's party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP disliked the outcome of that consultation and the decision that was made by the then Secretary of State. Nevertheless, we know the consequences. To say that we must return to first principles on this issue —

Mr Ford: The Member fails to distinguish between the original wide-ranging consultation process, carried out under direct rule, and a Committee's taking evidence for a limited period on a Bill during the Committee Stage. They are very different.

Mr S Wilson: From what I can remember — I do not have the documents before me — the "wide-ranging" consultation nevertheless set out the implications of the models for seven, 11 and 15 councils, and it

banded councils together. Tweaks were then made by the local government boundaries commissioner.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will not give way — the Deputy Speaker will accuse me of straying from the terms of the debate. However, there will be ample opportunity to raise those issues tomorrow, and on other occasions.

My next point about accelerated passage is that, somehow or other, the leader of the Alliance Party gives the impression that, because a Bill proceeds by accelerated passage, there is no chance to give it any consideration. Over the next three weeks, there will be opportunities for the Bill to be discussed by the whole House. Some might argue that accelerated passage gives a better opportunity for all Members, not just for members of the Environment Committee, to consider the Bill. This matter affects all our constituencies. Bearing in mind that coterminosity of council and constituency boundaries — or the lack of it — will affect the work of all Members, one can argue that a wider debate, on the Floor of the Assembly, is better than a restricted debate among the anoraks of the Environment Committee. I am not going to say who the anoraks are, but there are anoraks on that Committee.

Not only will there be discussion of the Bill, there will be an opportunity for amendments to be proposed. Mr Ford quoted the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill as an example of accelerated passage. However, that is a very bad example for Mr Ford to cite, because the Consideration Stage of that Bill — which was still due to be held, even under accelerated passage — was postponed last week due to an indication that some of the fundamental amendments proposed by his party were going to get support. Sinn Féin requested that the Consideration Stage be postponed for that reason. Therefore, Mr Ford should not run away with the idea that accelerated passage means that Members do not get a chance to change, discuss or improve a Bill. Over the next three weeks, accelerated passage will provide opportunities to do that.

The Local Government (Boundaries) Bill is fairly short, and I suspect that the amendments that will be proposed are fairly predictable and will not require a great deal of evidence to be given to any Committee. Therefore, there should be an opportunity to make whatever amendments are necessary.

The last point that Mr Ford made was that the Committee for the Environment had been sidelined. I sympathise with Mr Ford's point that Committee members should be allowed a wider degree of expression, rather than being whipped on decisions. The Committee for Education, which I chair, has not yet scrutinised any legislation, but I am aware that Committee members usually have quite wide-ranging views on different issues. On one occasion when the

Minister of Education accused me of whipping the whole Committee against her, I pointed out that I sometimes find it difficult to whip members even of my own party. Therefore, I believe that Committee members often express their own views.

However, Mr Ford cannot claim that, just because a Committee makes a decision that is contrary to what he believes, that Committee has been sidelined. He may not have won the argument in the Committee, but he cannot claim that the Committee has been sidelined. I do not believe that anyone would accuse the current Minister of the Environment of failing to keep the Committee informed, explain issues to its members, and attend when requested. Therefore, I believe it is unfair to say that that Committee has been sidelined.

The Minister has given good reasons for supporting accelerated passage of the Bill. The arguments that have been made by the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionist Party as to why they oppose accelerated passage — most of which I have tried to address — are fairly thin and transparent, and are another case of opposition for opposition's sake. Their arguments do not stand up to much scrutiny, and I hope that the sensible Members of the House will support the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Wilson, and thank you for your deep and heartfelt consideration for the sensitivities of this Deputy Speaker.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Earlier, the Speaker enjoined Members to be brief when speaking, and my colleague Cathal Boylan was very disciplined and spoke for only about 30 seconds, to acknowledge Sinn Féin's support for the proposed accelerated passage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill. However, I want to make several points.

Any accusation that has been levelled during the debate that Sinn Féin and the DUP are rushing to reach some kind of a deal with any other intention than getting the RPA right is obviously false. Having listened to them, I am not sure whether the Members from the parties objecting to accelerated passage are actually objecting to it or are simply trying to put down markers. That indicates to me that a certain degree of confusion exists within those parties.

12.45 pm

Members will be aware of the strategic leadership board, which is chaired by the Minister of the Environment. All parties are represented on that board, either as party representatives or through membership of Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). David Ford's party colleague Councillor Tony Hill is a member of the board, and I have never heard him articulate any of the arguments that David Ford made during the debate.

When Patsy McGlone — who has left the Chamber, momentarily I presume —

Mr McGlone: I am here.

Mr A Maskey: Fair play to you, Patsy. It is good that the Member is still here, because I want him, in particular, to hear what I have to say. He talked about provisional Sinn Féin — whatever that may be — but I assure him and other members of his party that Sinn Féin has not been remotely interested in how many councillors it will retain on those bodies, and certainly not in how many councillors that Sinn Féin may have. Sinn Féin had more important matters to deal with, including the nature of the functions to be transferred and the way in which various checks and balances will work in local government in the future.

Patsy should refer to the Hansard report of the previous debate on this issue, during which his party colleagues Alban Maginness and Tommy Gallagher talked about nine, 10 or 12 councils — anything beyond seven. The SDLP and other parties are still in a bit of a tizzy, because they are not sure what they want out of local government. Their first priority is more of their members' bums on seats — that is for sure. Perhaps that is understandable in that they are looking up the road at their electoral fortunes, but that is a separate debate entirely.

Patsy McGlone mentioned Margaret Ritchie, so it is appropriate that I respond. At one point during the deliberations, Margaret Ritchie was not prepared to transfer any functions to local government. My understanding is that it took some discussions, bilaterally and at Executive subcommittee meetings, before she was prepared to transfer certain functions. Therefore, Patsy may want to talk to his party colleague, who may have been part of the delay because she, as a Minister — rightly or wrongly — was unsure about what functions it would be appropriate to devolve to local government.

Patsy made accusations about parties making private deals, and so on. All my remarks today, and all the discussions that we had with the DUP — bilaterally and at the Executive subcommittee — were about ensuring that future local government is based on solid foundations of fairness and equality and that the appropriate level of functions are transferred. All that is a work in progress.

All those issues will come before the House, the relevant Committee and, ultimately, the Executive before coming back to the House. I am confident, and Sinn Féin is confident, that we can get to the point of local government being fair and more reflective of the communities.

I really laugh when I hear Sam Gardiner talking about local government being a bastion of democracy. He should waken up. Craigavon Borough Council, on

which he serves, leaves a lot to be desired. I repeatedly made that point at meetings of the strategic leadership board and at the previous local government task force. I listen to some of those parties, and to people representing other parties, particularly Sam's party colleagues, who almost give lectures about local government being fair, and so on. They say that they want a gentleman's agreement, which is why the deliberations have taken time; there is no such thing as a gentleman's agreement. Sinn Féin made strenuous efforts in discussions with other Ministers to ensure that proposals on the reform of local government are progressed.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, at least for giving way.

The Member heavily criticised Craigavon Borough Council. He chose not to highlight the less than impressive record of bigotry and discrimination on Newry and Mourne District Council.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That point is not relevant to the subject matter of the motion.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. For the record — and I have repeated this on numerous occasions at all those meetings — Sinn Féin wants to ensure that the checks and balances that will be built into future local government structures apply across the board. Regardless of how the North of Ireland is cut up through councils or any other structures, there will always be minority communities that believe that they are trapped in another majority.

That will happen no matter how the cake is cut. These proposals will ensure that, in the future, no community in any part of the Six Counties will feel discriminated against. If any council is guilty of discrimination, that is disgraceful and scandalous. Sinn Féin is determined to ensure that discrimination does not, and cannot, occur and that there are sufficient checks and balances in the proposals to counter discrimination. I am pleased that the Minister made absolute commitments, and that should be welcomed by all Members.

Some parties made bogus arguments and claimed to be against accelerated passage. What they are really opposed to is the situation in which the DUP and Sinn Féin have been able to formulate a set of proposals that make sense for the majority of people here. Those proposals will be implemented before the 2011 elections. If Members opposing the motion are honest, they will admit that a number of their colleagues who serve on councils panicked when they thought that local government elections would be held next year or that they might have to serve beyond 2011. Many councillors want to get out early, with a few quid in their pockets. That is fair enough, because some councillors have served for many years.

Some parties made bogus arguments about being opposed to accelerated passage, when, actually, they just wanted to say something. Not one of the parties in opposition was consistent about how many councils they wanted or even why they wanted those councils in the way in which they argued.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council and also as vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. I support accelerated passage because I want strong, modern local government as soon as possible. As the Minister indicated, if changes are to be implemented by 2011, the motion must be agreed.

Opponents of accelerated passage offered a range of arguments about why the motion should not be agreed today. They talked about the danger of rushed measures, yet the Minister mentioned that the Executive discussed a review of public administration in 2002. If memory serves me right, initial proposals about the RPA were made even before the 2001 election. It was announced by the then Minister of the Environment, Sam Foster, at the Ulster Unionist Party conference. I vividly remember a number of councillors —

Mr McNarry: Was the Member there?

Mr Weir: No; that was probably during one of my periods of suspension from the party. *[Laughter.]*

I was unable to hear the Minister in question, but I understood, from press reports, that an announcement was made. That happened before the 2001 election, because I vividly remember there being rumours among local government councillors in the Building about the 2001 election perhaps being postponed.

If the timetable outlined today is met, the process will have lasted approximately 11 years. To put that in context: children who were born on the same day that Sam Foster made that announcement will be preparing for secondary school in 2011.

Mr Kennedy: Will that be a grammar school?

Mr Weir: Fortunately, if those children are academically able, they will be able to avail of the grammar school system for which the DUP has fought and has preserved. I must leave that discussion, because I appreciate that the Deputy Speaker does not want me to deviate too far from the subject of the motion. This has been an 11-year process, so the idea of measures being rushed smacks of nonsense. If that is the Ulster Unionist Party and Alliance Party definition of "rushed", one hopes that they have no role in selecting our athletes for the Olympic Games.

The process has dragged on for far too long. We want the development of strong, modern local government. Rather than that happening in 2012 or 2013 — or, if some of the parties here have their way,

some stage before the next ice age — we need to get on with the task of delivering such government. Indeed, as I said, a wide range of issues must be tackled besides the matter of the new councils' boundaries.

The lack of opportunity to put forward amendments was also raised. Again, that issue has been exercising most parties in the Assembly for the guts of a decade. We will have opportunities at Consideration Stage — and even at the Bill's Second Stage, tomorrow — to discuss fully the Bill's general merits. There will be an opportunity at Consideration Stage to propose a plethora of amendments. Proposing a long list of amendments will be well within the leader of the Alliance Party's capabilities. Whether they will make any sense will be another issue, but he will not be denied that opportunity. As debate on points of legislation is unlimited, that debate might last one or two hours, or it could go on all day. There really will be plenty of opportunity for all 108 Members to give their views on the Bill.

We have also been told that there has been a lack of consultation. However, I presume that the old Executive consulted on the issue. The late, unlamented Lord Rooker carried out consultation before he made his announcement, and there was consultation after that. The current Executive's consultation led to the emerging findings report, and there was consultation after that was published. The issues of numbers and boundaries were up for discussion during all those consultations. This debate is not being driven by a lack of evidence or a lack of consultation.

Mr Ford: Will the Member tell me at what point any Executive issued for consultation option 11b as the preferred model?

Mr Weir: The Member will find that, when the emerging findings were discussed, restrictions were put on the three models of seven, 11 and 15 councils. There was specific consultation on the number of councils.

Mr A Maskey: Does the Member recall that, during the initial consultation, the direct rule Administration put nine options on the table, including 11b?

Mr Weir: That is correct. As I said, the Executive's most recent consultation restricted the choice to those nine models. Therefore, the idea that there has been no proper consultation does not hold up to scrutiny.

We have also been told that there should be discussion with local people and that that important discussion will be endangered in some way by the Bill's receiving accelerated passage. However, as Mr Sammy Wilson said, the purpose of having a Boundary Commission is to ensure that such proper consultation occurs. One Member mentioned that Saintfield and Newtownhamilton might be linked, and that those two places might not gel together well. I have some

sympathy for that argument, but that is the purpose of a Boundary Commission. For example, Saintfield might have much more in common with Ards and north Down. However, that will be a matter for the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, and the Bill will establish that structure.

I would have some sympathy for the arguments against accelerated passage if the Bill were novel legislation that had not been considered in any way by the Assembly or by previous Administrations. However, as the leader of the Alliance Party said, the legislation is a variation on a theme that has been ongoing since 1962. We have had a range of Boundary Commissioners.

I have news for the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party: the wheel has already been invented, and there is no need to reinvent it. The Bill is a concise piece of legislation. The areas that it deals with have been outlined time and again, and there will be opportunity for a degree of scrutiny.

Finally, although it is important that legislation be scrutinised properly, we must remember that the downside of that is that constituents become frustrated when much-needed legislation is held up by the slow process through which it must go. The Department of the Environment has a wide range of legislation in the pipeline, some of which cannot proceed until this blockage is removed. For instance, the proposed Northern Ireland contracts Bill will be vital to local government. Indeed, some members of the strategic leadership board — even those who are connected to the parties that have been complaining about accelerated passage — have expressed disappointment that that Bill will not have accelerated passage. The contracts Bill will give power to local government fairly quickly.

Legislation will also be required to allow the modernisation of local government. Again, if we delay such legislation unduly by refusing to allow accelerated passage for this Bill, we will delay that much-needed modernisation. Among other things, there is the clean neighbourhood agenda, and the longer that we delay, the more difficult that it will be to introduce legislation for that in the Assembly.

That agenda contains a wide range of issues, which, as Sammy Wilson said, makes for a certain degree of anorak debate. However, it relates to issues such as graffiti, high hedges and dog fouling, which are of genuine concern to local people and are simply being delayed.

1.00 pm

The Bill is a relatively straightforward piece of legislation; instead of the point scoring and grandstanding that has come from the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party, let us get on with the business of giving it accelerated passage. There will be an opportunity for

full scrutiny on the Floor of the Assembly. Let us develop that strong, modern local government that I assume that all of us want, and ensure that it meets the target date of 2011 rather than be postponed indefinitely.

Mr Kennedy: At the outset, I want to declare my membership of Newry and Mourne District Council in case that is relevant.

Reform of local government has been a priority for all of Northern Ireland's political parties for a considerable time. Recognition of the compelling case for reform led the first Executive to initiate the reform of public administration. When we were overtaken by direct rule, and Westminster took control of the RPA process, many, if not all, of us in the House quite rightly criticised the lack of accountability and scrutiny. It is therefore deeply ironic, to say the least, that the first piece of legislation regarding local government reform brought before the House since the restoration of devolution, is to be in the form of accelerated passage.

Although mindful of the time pressures that the Minister has previously indicated and others have referred to, I find it frankly staggering that instead of ensuring that the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill — which is of vital importance for the reform of local government — is carefully scrutinised by the Assembly and by the Committee for the Environment, we are being requested to short-circuit that scrutiny process.

The Bill is a key building block in the entire process of creating stronger and more effective local government for Northern Ireland — it has the potential to provide the structure of local government for decades to come. In the light of its importance and significance, full and proper legislative scrutiny is essential. The Ulster Unionist Party believes in strong local government, which means that the Assembly has a responsibility to ensure that it gets the legislation right.

The Bill is not a mere technicality that is irrelevant to the wider process of local government reform; it is central to that process. The Bill determines the number of local government units and sets out the remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. Therefore, the Bill is the legislative foundation for the entire reform of local government in Northern Ireland.

Accelerated passage is not always an indication that a piece of legislation will proceed smoothly and without difficulty. We have only to think of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill to realise that short-circuiting the scrutiny process can undermine the passage of legislation. Careful legislative scrutiny goes alongside the intention of producing good, robust legislation rather than flawed legislation.

Local government reform is of such significance to Northern Ireland that we should not risk the possibility of producing a flawed Bill. Nor should accelerated passage be employed when the House is not fully

convinced of the case for only 11 local government units. That a majority in the Assembly support having 11 councils is not at issue. What is at issue is that a not insignificant number of Members believe that 11 councils — although better than seven — falls short of 15 units, a number that is based on the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies and on coterminosity.

In their submissions to the fifth periodical review of parliamentary constituencies, which was published recently by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, every party represented in the House recognised that the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies reflected the ties and identities of local communities, as they should. Parliamentary boundaries, therefore, provide an effective template for local government boundaries, which ensure that local government reflects the ties and identities of local communities.

Dr Farry: Does the Member recognise that there is a difficulty because parliamentary boundaries are changed approximately every 10 years, while local government boundaries are expected to be fixed for 30 or 40 years to allow the two types of boundary to diverge over time?

Mr Kennedy: My experience of the review of parliamentary boundaries shows that there has been tweaking at the edges, but there has not been significant change, and the boundaries can be coterminous. The House should, and must, have this debate. Accelerated passage fails to do justice to that aspect of the Bill's significance.

I was interested to hear Sammy Wilson's view that accelerated passage allows plenty of room for scrutiny and amendment. There is, therefore, an argument in favour of using it for all legislation and giving the 108 Members the opportunity to air their views in the House, as Mr Wilson suggested.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I will give way when I have made my point. That is not a proper basis for reviewing and scrutinising legislation. It does not happen and is not advocated in any other place.

Mr S Wilson: I did not say that accelerated passage was the best way of dealing with legislation. The record of my speech will show that. I said that all of the ills that have been attributed to accelerated passage are not true and that there is a case for holding a debate in the House in which everyone has an opportunity to discuss amendments.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his comments, although I am not sure whether I agree with him. Under Standing Order 40(3), accelerated passage is supposed to be used in exceptional circumstances; it is not meant to be the custom and practice of the

House. I recall the saying, “legislate in haste and repent at leisure”.

The same can be said about the remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. The Bill seeks to amend, in part, the remit given to the commissioner by the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. Members will be aware of the local interest and debates that will be stirred by the issue of local government boundaries. Recognising the importance of that issue and the need to determine the commissioner’s remit, and mindful of the passage of time since 1972, full and proper legislative scrutiny is required for those provisions of the Bill.

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to getting the reform of local government right, so it is opposing accelerated passage for the Bill. Mr Maskey accused political parties of being inconsistent in their approach. His party can hardly claim to be lily-white, given that it has abandoned its commitment to seven local government districts, in favour of 11.

Mr A Maskey: Was he talking about me?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Was I referred to by the Member who last spoke? Will you advise me how I was referred to?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is normally the practice for Members who are present in the House to listen to the debate. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maskey: A LeasCheann Comhairle, further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was listening to the debate, but I am trying to be diplomatic, and I am seeking clarification on that basis. I want to know how I was referred to by the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You can check the Hansard report tomorrow, Mr Maskey.

Mr Kennedy: For the benefit of Mr Maskey — and, as far as I can recall, I referred to him as Mr Maskey — he complained that certain parties were being inconsistent. No more so than his own party, which has apparently abandoned its commitment to seven councils in favour of 11 — that is consistency for you.

Full and proper legislative scrutiny is necessary if we are to provide a sure foundation for the reform and renewal of local government in Northern Ireland. The use of accelerated passage is the wrong way to achieve that. We will therefore oppose the motion.

Mr Gallagher: It is unfortunate that this morning’s Bill, which is the first step on an important issue, has been rushed through in the way that it has. That fuels and further heightens concerns among the public that the Executive — dominated by Sinn Féin and the DUP — seek to suppress debate on difficult decisions. Instead, difficult issues are allowed to hang around

until those two parties work out a deal. The Assembly then goes into fast-forward to try to rush that through.

The Minister knows — from what I said when she met the Committee and from what my colleague Patsy McGlone said this morning — that the SDLP has serious concerns about accelerated passage for this Bill and, of course, about the proposed number of councils. As we have consistently said, we would prefer 15 councils. Will the Minister give an assurance that this will be the only occasion on which she will come back to the House in relation to the RPA to seek accelerated passage?

There are some serious considerations for future Stages of the Bill, not least those to do with governance arrangements, protections and safeguards, the rights of minorities and the need to ensure that, in future, there will be no trapped minorities in the set-up. As far as the SDLP is concerned, there is a great deal of work to be done on that. We do not want trapped minorities anywhere. However, it has already emerged that under an 11-council model there will be serious difficulties for minorities in council areas such as that proposed for the north-east, where Moyle, Ballymena and Coleraine are to come together.

Mr A Maskey: Of the nine options that were originally on the table — or indeed any other options — will the Member highlight any one that would have ensured that no minorities were trapped within a majority council? Can you give one example — that uses five, 15, 20, 26 or 40 councils — where that would not happen?

Mr Gallagher: Mr Maskey, may I first take the opportunity to dispel the myth —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer your remarks through the Chair and not directly to another Member.

Mr Gallagher: Mr Deputy Speaker, first, may I dispel the myth — spread by Mr Maskey and peddled by many of his party colleagues for some time — that Sinn Féin had all that tied down under a seven-council model where there would never again be any need for equality legislation or the protection of minorities?

I am looking forward to hearing an assurance that we will have a full opportunity to discuss the issue, because it will put paid to the myth, claimed by Sinn Féin in an effort to bolster the argument, that a seven-council model was best for everyone.

1.15 pm

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask for your advice on this point, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It cannot be in order for a Member to basically tell lies about what another Member has said. The Member’s party colleagues were members of the strategic leadership board of the original task force, and they are fully aware that my party colleagues

and I have consistently argued for the need for stringent checks and balances.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that it is unparliamentary to refer to another Member as telling lies. I ask the Member to withdraw that remark.

Mr A Maskey: I am happy to accept that the Member has made remarks in the Chamber today that are not attributable to me or my party colleagues. I am happy to withdraw the use of the word “lies”, but an untruth is being told in the Chamber today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to be careful about what they say.

Mr Gallagher: I made some points about the future consideration of the Bill and the importance that we attach to that. It looks as though the Bill will be pushed through regardless, but will the Minister outline where we go from here? What is the next step? Will we find out tomorrow that a new commissioner has been appointed — and if that is the case, will it be just one commissioner?

The comments from the Minister’s party colleague Sammy Wilson were very interesting. He was quick to express his party’s view that everything should be in place so that we could have local government elections and Assembly elections on the same day in 2011. Is that the Minister’s view? Are we opting for the scenario that was outlined by the DUP? Clearly that is the DUP’s view of the way forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. At the beginning of the debate, the Speaker said that Members should stick to the motion, which is on the accelerated passage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill. Mr Gallagher, you are now straying into areas that are for another time. Please stick to the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I am merely picking up on the different strands of the debate highlighted by other Members today, and I am not the first person to raise them.

In conclusion, correspondence is on the record between the SDLP Minister and Minister Foster regarding what the Department for Social Development (DSD) is prepared to put out to councils under the new arrangements. We know about urban regeneration and community development, but the Minister for Social Development has gone further and identified some aspects of housing for which local government should be responsible. Will the Member —

Mr T Clarke: On a point of order; has your party changed its mind about accelerated passage?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to remember that when he wants to raise a point of order, he should attract my attention and I will call him to

speak. Points of order should be raised through the Chair and not directly to individual Members.

Mr Gallagher: In conclusion, the point was raised by Mr Maskey —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: No, I will not give way. I am finishing on this point. There is a list of functions that DSD is prepared to roll out. I ask Mr Maskey and Sinn Féin to compare that list with those on offer from the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of Education (DE).

Mr Armstrong: The reform of local government is a crucial issue that will affect all the people of Northern Ireland for many years. For years, local government in Northern Ireland has been the only form of local democratic accountability. We all know about the need for Government to be reformed in order to increase effectiveness, accountability and sensitivity to local needs. The DUP’s first choice was for 15 local authorities based on the current parliamentary boundaries.

We all know that. I wonder what happened to that proposal. That would better serve the people in Northern Ireland. We all know what happens when you accelerate very fast. There is an old saying, “speed kills”; I hope this will not kill anything.

It is extremely important that we get the best form of local government from the current proposals. The Bill is far too important to be subject to accelerated passage. The fact that it will exert influence on the people of Northern Ireland for such a long time means that it must be given the fullest possible scrutiny, both in the Assembly and in the Committee for the Environment.

It is my understanding that accelerated passage should be reserved for emergencies only, when any delay would have substantial consequences. This is not an emergency. If this Bill were to be given the scrutiny it deserves, there should be no serious consequences.

Mr S Wilson: The Member is right. If accelerated passage is going to have dire consequences, then of course it should be opposed. Will the Member outline some of the dire consequences that he believes would arise through accelerated passage?

Mr Armstrong: Let us take a step back in time. Which party opposed devolution, saying that it would get it right, while at the same time saying that it would ensure that its members came on board? Where did its proposal for 15 councils go? Could it not persuade its partners in Government in other ways? For decades, direct rule robbed the people of Northern Ireland of the best democratic accountability and a transparent decision-making process that people could associate with and respect. We have achieved devolution, yet we are in danger of allowing this Executive to bypass the

people's elected representatives. We must take time and get it right.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports local government and devolution. We have no desire to obstruct the workings of Government, and we understand the importance of elections in May 2011. However, the Assembly, the Committee and the Minister could have worked together to ensure proper scrutiny of the legislation within the deadline of this session. I believe that both could have been met. I am disappointed with the Minister's decision, but the UUP will be doing its best to improve this Bill in the limited window available to us.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest, as a member of North Down Borough Council. I thank the Minister for going through the Standing Orders and explaining how, in her view, her request for accelerated passage today complied with those terms. That was a welcome change from the last time a Minister came to this Chamber seeking to pass legislation through accelerated passage.

Having said that, I think that there are major concerns with what is happening today, and it is important to focus on those concerns. During the last debate on accelerated passage, my colleague Naomi Long set out the precedents for accelerated passage in this Assembly and the danger that we could be diverging from those precedents into new territory, and setting dangerous new precedents. Accelerated passage has been used primarily for Budget legislation in the past, and that type of legislation is referred to specifically in Standing Orders. All Members understand that that has to be done to ensure that Departments have money to spend, because otherwise services simply cannot be delivered.

The other area where accelerated passage is used is in parity legislation. In that type of legislation there is not a fundamental policy issue at stake, in the sense that, for 60 years, there has been an understanding that Northern Ireland will mirror what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom in relation to social-security issues. Anyone who wishes to diverge from that does so at his or her peril. There are no real major policy debates to be had over that type of legislation, and it is appropriate that it is rubber-stamped in order to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland have the same degree of protection as elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

With this proposed Bill, we are entering into a major policy issue. The issues to be discussed at Second Stage are not trivial matters; they are matters of major consequence that will go to the heart of what is meant by local government over, potentially, 30 or 40 years.

It is crucial that we get those issues right at the outset, rather than rush the legislation through without allowing Members a proper opportunity to air their views and consider matters fully. In particular, the matter of the number of councils is hugely important.

Mr Weir said that we want a form of strong, modern local government, as if this Bill is the only means by which that can be delivered. In fact, some would argue that the Bill undermines efforts to create strong local government.

Mr Weir: I said that we all want to see strong local government, but my point was that if we unduly delay progress on this matter, we will postpone the day that such government can be in place. Without accelerated passage, we will not be ready for the 2011 target date.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for clarifying that point. I certainly agree that we are working towards that goal, but there are a range of different views in the Chamber as to how that can be achieved. From my perspective, the current proposals may undermine attempts to create strong, modern local government — the powers may not be commensurate with the number of councils being proposed. I would certainly like to engage in a proper discussion on that matter, and I would like the Committee to do so, too.

The reason that we are in this rush to get arrangements in place for 2011 is that there have been major delays in the Executive. I fully appreciate that there is a desire among the people of Northern Ireland to move on and to reach closure on this long-running saga. However, it is important that, in its eagerness to reach that closure, the Assembly does not sell itself short. It is appropriate that the Assembly fulfils its role, which is to scrutinise legislation. We must not fall into the habit of simply acting as a rubber stamp for the Executive's decisions.

The pattern seems to be that the Executive stalls on an issue on which it cannot agree, finally cobbles together a compromise, and then brings it — late — to the Chamber. The Assembly then feels obliged to rush the legislation through its stages. That is not really an appropriate process for the people of Northern Ireland. We must have a balanced form of government that has proper checks and balances.

I was disappointed that the Committee did not resist accelerated passage more vocally. The Committees are supposed to play an important role in challenging Ministers. I have been disappointed when Back-Bench Members from parties that are represented on the Executive act as a rubber stamp for the decisions of their Ministers, rather than seek to challenge them. Even the Committees at Westminster, which have far less power than our Committees, stand up more freely to decisions of Ministers.

Mr Weir: Mention was made before of Members from one party supporting their own Minister's decisions. Could the Member possibly conceive that those Members have supported the decision simply because they support the policy and that they are not the thoughtless automatons that he presents them as? It is a little insulting to portray Back-Bench Members as people who will follow

whatever is thrown in their direction, rather than allow for the possibility that they might genuinely believe in the merits of a proposal.

Dr Farry: I will certainly concede that, on occasions, Back-Bench Members may agree with their Ministers. However, if a pattern is established whereby Back-Bench Members support their Ministers on every occasion, I would be worried that they are incapable of exercising free thought and challenging their Minister's decisions in the interests of democracy.

Mrs Long: Back-Bench Members on a Committee may well agree with the particular policy direction that is taken by a Minister. However, does the Member agree that the concern stems from the fact that the policy has to be pushed through so rapidly that other people's views and opinions cannot be debated? There seems to be some fear that a full and frank discussion would lead to Members being more open-minded about some of the alternative proposals. We have seen that happen before, most recently with issues such as the Victims' Commission.

Dr Farry: I could not agree more with my colleague's remarks. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I will give way to Sammy in just a moment. Any Member who thinks that the Member for East Belfast Mrs Long and I always agree is welcome to eavesdrop on our team meetings on a Monday morning, when we often hammer matters out behind closed doors.

Mr S Wilson: Did I detect the Member's party leader pulling his coat and telling him that he had to agree with Mrs Long a Member for East Belfast? Mrs Long made a point about listening to the views of others, so does Dr Farry agree that even with accelerated passage — and, indeed, Mrs Long mentioned the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill — there would be an opportunity for amendments to be tabled in order that others can express their views in any subsequent discussion? There is no limit in the House on how long a Bill's passage can take once it has been introduced.

1.30 pm

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for that point; it brings me on to an important issue that needs to be clarified. There is a misperception in the House that a Bill is either granted accelerated passage with a Consideration Stage during which all 108 Members can, in theory, participate, or a Bill has a Committee Stage.

In fact, in the normal legislative process, both Stages apply. The expected norm is that the Committee first takes evidence from any interested parties, it formulates its own view and discusses whether, as a Committee, it wishes to table its own amendments. At that stage, Committees have the advantage of having their own

Committee staff and access to the views that have been presented to them. Often, the views of Committees are taken with an appropriate degree of weight, given the role they play.

Following the Committee Stage are Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. At those Stages, amendments tabled by the relevant Committee, and those from Members who do not have the luxury of sitting on that Committee, can be debated. Therefore, I suggest that we should have those Stages on a matter that is as important as the review of local government boundaries.

Standing Orders provide that a Committee Stage should take no longer than six weeks and that if a Committee wishes, it can seek to extend that period. However, if a Committee Stage is not of an inordinate length, that should not be a major difficulty.

The Executive should have expressed their opinion on the number of councils and on the proposed groupings of councils when the emerging findings paper was published in October 2007. Had that happened, we could have had a much more in-depth discussion.

However, it seems compromise was found much more readily on the issue of the powers for the councils than on the matter of numbers. As a result, people have been penalised. In effect, we have had a four-month delay. In order that it could make its views known, NILGA seemed to be organising a conference every other fortnight in anticipation of the Minister of the Environment's decision on the number of new councils. There seems to have been quite a lot of disappointed councillors going to those meetings who missed out on the process.

No doubt the House will discuss tomorrow the many issues that relate to the principles of the Bill. At this stage, suffice it to say that critical policy issues are at stake that need be scrutinised properly in a Committee Stage. The Assembly is rushing the Bill through at its peril: if we get this wrong now, we are locking the people of Northern Ireland into something that will be with them for 30 or 40 years. It is important that we get this right, rather than rush ahead with it arbitrarily.

I would like to raise with the Minister the issue of having two separate processes for the creation of boundary commissions. The first deals with the creation of wards and overall boundaries of the councils, and the second deals with district electoral areas. Those two processes will add a considerable amount of time to the process of preparing for new council elections.

I appreciate fully that one process is determined by the House and the other by the Secretary of State. However, I am interested to know whether any attempt was made to approach the Secretary of State to ascertain whether those two processes could be streamlined into one. As someone who has sat through a Local Government

Boundary Commission hearing on ward issues, I know that the way in which wards will eventually form DEAs is relevant.

There is real merit in merging the two processes to avoid making mistakes and to ensure that we actually have joined-up Government. If we explored that possibility, the rush that we currently face could be avoided.

Mrs Foster: I have listened carefully to all the contributions that Members have made. I will, therefore, go through briefly some of the issues that were raised.

The Chairman of the Environment Committee, Mr McGlone, expressed his Committee's support for the Bill. He then went on to discuss the position of his party, the SDLP. As Mr Ross said, and I am sure that every Member agrees, accelerated passage is not the preferred way to deal with a piece of legislation. However, he accepted my explanation of why it is necessary. I took considerable time to give that explanation. The Deputy Chairman of the Committee, Mr Boylan, also recognised the need for accelerated passage.

Mr Gardiner, who is a member of the Environment Committee and who attended the Committee meeting at which I was present on 3 April, reflected on the huge importance of the Bill to the people of Northern Ireland. He claimed that I did not explain adequately the consequences of the Bill's not being granted accelerated passage. I disagree: I have explained the consequences fully to the Committee and, indeed, to the Assembly. I have explained the reasons that accelerated passage must get the go-ahead. The fact is that if it does not —

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister give way for a point of information? Perhaps the Minister should make it abundantly clear that the same Mr Gardiner voted against accelerated passage in the Committee.

Mrs Foster: Yes, Mr Gardiner was in attendance at that meeting; I made that abundantly clear. He and Mr Ford voted against accelerated passage, and I have no difficulty in putting that on record. I welcome the clarity that Mr Gardiner has brought to the Ulster Unionist Party's position on 15 councils. I must say, however, that it is somewhat at odds with what some of his party's members on the ground have said to me. Indeed, it is most certainly at odds with comments that have been made by Mr Gardiner's friend and colleague in County Fermanagh Mr Bertie Kerr, who said that if there were to be 15 councils, his party would rather keep the current 26 councils. It is, therefore, good to get clarity from the Ulster Unionist Party as to how many councils it believes are necessary.

Instructions on the Bill were sent to legislative draftsmen on the same day that the Executive made their decision on the RPA. I fail to see how I could have acted more quickly. Mr Ford reflected that the Bill would have significant consequences for the people of Northern Ireland. Although he acknowledged

that I went to the Committee immediately after the Easter recess, he claimed that I have completely sidelined it. Again, I do not accept that charge. I have engaged with the Committee on all the relevant matters, and I went to it as quickly as I possibly could after the Executive made their decision.

I will continue to discuss the RPA with the Committee, given that the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill is not the only RPA Bill that will be introduced in the Assembly. My friend Mr Weir mentioned the local contracts Bill, and we will also have the local government modernisation Bill. Indeed, I am sure that during the coming weeks and months, the House will take a long time to discuss the issues of governance that Mr Gallagher raised.

Mr Ford discussed communities, and he mentioned that those of Newtownhamilton and Newtownards do not have much in common. With regard to the current 26 councils, does he seriously suggest that people who live in the council area of Strabane, for example, belong to the same community as the people of Castlederg? If so, that is simply nonsense.

Mr Ford: I appreciate the Minister's giving way. The issue of geography, as it relates to the establishment of the existing pattern of 26 district councils, is such that a simplistic process of merely amalgamating them will throw up a considerable number of anomalies. Of course, one can always debate exactly where boundaries should fall. However, it is difficult to suggest that Castlederg does not relate to Strabane as a district town, in the way that it would be difficult to suggest that Killinchy, which is the place to which I referred, or Saintfield relate to Newry, which is likely to be the centre of that council area.

Mrs Foster: I must point out to the Member that many people in Castlederg have told me that they view Omagh as their local focal point. Therefore, that case is not well made at all.

With regard to copies of the Bill not being available to Members today, the Member knows that a Bill cannot be published until it has passed its First Stage, which occurred this morning. Hopefully, Members will have copies of the Bill tomorrow morning.

Essentially, the Bill has two substantive clauses, which I have explained already. Those can be considered in detail tomorrow and, I hope, next week. Ultimately, it is ironic that Mr Ford, the self-confessed back end of a horse under a previous Administration —

Mr Ford: A pantomime horse.

Mrs Foster: Yes, a pantomime horse. It is surprising that Mr Ford is concentrating on accelerated passage, when, some time ago, he bent over backwards to facilitate the most illogical and bizarre re-designation rule-change to keep David Trimble in post as the First Minister. However, everyone has to stick up for their own position.

Mr Wilson —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker: I appreciate that the Minister's point is all good knock-about stuff and it has recently reappeared on DUP briefing notes. However, are references to a pantomime horse in order or relevant to the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Speaker has made no ruling on that matter, and I accept the Minister's point that it was the Member himself who first said "pantomime horse". *[Interruption.]*

Order.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister raised the issue of the designation vote and described me as the back-end of a horse. I may have corrected her on the precise details of the horse, but it was the Minister who strayed from the subject of the debate. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: Moving on to Mr Wilson, who is nowhere near the back-end of a pantomime horse or otherwise — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson referred to the "abominable no men" in the Alliance Party and in the Ulster Unionist Party and made the point that the boundaries are set by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland and not by individuals in this House.

I want to allow the commissioner the maximum time possible to examine the boundaries. Indeed, Mr Ford made the point to me at the Environment Committee that he believed, even then, that the task would not be completed in time. I am trying to give the incoming commissioner as long as possible, which is why the issue must be dealt with today.

We are trying to resolve the ongoing and lengthy review of public administration and to give a strong lead to local government, which Members acknowledge as the only democratic avenue in Northern Ireland over the past 35 to 40 years. Councils deserve reform, and that is what we are trying to give them.

It is important that a deadline has been set so that local government is provided with clarity. That deadline is challenging, but if the Bill does not pass its first hurdle, one thing is certain — the elections in 2011 will not be for 11 new local government districts.

There has been extensive consultation on the proposed number of councils. One reason that I feel able to move ahead in July 2011 is because we said that we would consider seven, 11 or 15 council areas. Therefore, the models, as other Members have said, have been clearly set out and everyone involved knows that the decision will be limited to one of those models.

I totally disassociate myself from Mr Wilson's "anorak" remarks. The Environment Committee does its job very well — environmentally friendly anoraks, and all the rest of it.

Mr Maskey spoke about the work of the strategic leadership board, the input of which I have often recognised. Five parties come together in the board and work effectively for the benefit of local government. Mr Maskey said that some parties have not clarified what they want from local government, even though it has taken a long time to get to the current position.

I believe that there now exists a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform and modernise local government. Assembly Members will debate in coming days the many and complex issues with which they are wrestling, particularly around governance. Mr Maskey said that there was no such thing as a gentleman's agreement — not that I am suggesting that he would attempt to say that I would enter into a gentleman's agreement — but it is right that the issues will be debated in a statutory context on the Floor of this House.

There has been a lot of toing and froing over governance issues, but I repeat that the future cannot be planned by looking to the past. We should be setting out future governance arrangements for Northern Ireland that threaten no-one and protect everyone — from Unionists in the west to Nationalists in the east.

Mr Weir dealt with some arguments made by the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionist Party. He again referred to seven, 11 and 15 local government districts. He also spoke about the previous Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, and the fact that legislation had been in place in relation to that post for some time. Indeed, the previous Local Government Boundaries Commissioner was appointed in 2006. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; this is a relatively straightforward piece of legislation.

1.45 pm

Mr Kennedy talked about the lack of accountability to the House of the accelerated passage process. He is right to say that the Bill is a key building block for local government reform. He mentioned coterminosity, and I look forward to discussing that issue tomorrow during the debate on the Bill's Second Stage. That debate will not solely concern parliamentary boundaries, however. Issues of health, education, policing, housing and roads must all be addressed. I hope that Members will take the opportunity to do that tomorrow.

Mr Kennedy also mentioned the review of council boundaries. It is intended that, in future, council boundaries will be reviewed every eight to 12 years, especially to detail and to take into account boundary defacement, which happens from time to time as a result, for example, of the building of large housing estates.

Tommy Gallagher expressed serious concerns about accelerated passage for the Bill, and said that he wanted my assurance that other elements of the RPA would come before the House. I am happy to give him that assurance today. There will be a full opportunity to discuss other matters such as governance. Mr Gallagher said that he hoped that the appointment of a Local Government

Boundaries Commissioner would not be announced tomorrow. I assure him that the advertisement appeared only last week, and the appointment process has just begun.

I am glad that the Member for Mid Ulster Billy Armstrong was here today to take part in the debate and give us his thoughts on the accelerated passage of the Bill, because he did not attend the meeting of the Environment Committee on 3 April to discuss the issue and provide the scrutiny that he is now seeking.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister graciously welcome Mr Armstrong back to the House after a period during which he has not been in the best of health?

Mrs Foster: I said that I was very glad that Mr Armstrong appeared today to attend the debate and to give us his thoughts on local government.

Stephen Farry gave his reasons for why the House should not approve accelerated passage for the Bill. I say to Dr Farry and to other Members that this issue is a legacy of direct rule. The Executive decided in July 2007 that we would hold a fast and focused review that would deliver sound and strong local government. We decided on a fast and focused review because many people seemed to believe that the RPA was never going to go ahead.

We should be letting the wider community, including local government staff, know that the RPA is going to happen and that we have a timetable for its completion. I do not accept that strong local government is being undermined. This is the beginning of a process, and I have said from the beginning that functions are being transferred now, and that we hope that more functions will be transferred in future. However, that is a matter for tomorrow's debate.

Dr Farry also asked whether we could have streamlined the process of reform of the district electoral area boundaries and the local government boundaries. It is important to ensure that the maximum amount of time is given to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner so that the most appropriate decision can be made, based on the available evidence. That is one of the reasons that I have asked for accelerated passage for the Bill.

I also wish to thank Dr Farry for acknowledging that I had guided Members through the requirements for accelerated passage, both at the Environment Committee and in the House today.

I will be bringing more legislation before the House in relation to the reform of local government. That will deal with complex issues such as governance and the modernisation of local government capital finance. Rightly, the Assembly will want a full process of scrutiny to be brought to bear on that legislation. For now, however, I hope that Members, despite some of their misgivings, will support the motion and set in train the process that will lead to the beginning of a major and much overdue reform of local government in Northern Ireland.

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

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 52; Noes 21.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill.

UNIONIST:

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr T Clarke and Mr I McCrea.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Burnside, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Mr Savage.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mrs Long.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>52 [71.2%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>20 [100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>32 [69.6%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0 [0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Post Office Closures

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

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the recent announcement that 96 local post offices are to close or be replaced by an "outreach" service; believes that the six-week consultation period is too short; further believes such closures and service reductions will have an adverse impact on community and social infrastructure in rural and urban areas and will adversely affect older people, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups; acknowledges that provision of post office services is a reserved matter; and resolves to establish urgently an Ad Hoc Committee to think creatively about and make proposals for partnerships that could enhance the economic case for viable local postal services based on engagement with commercial, voluntary and public-sector partners and learning from the experience in the Republic of Ireland.

On 1 April 2008 — April Fool's Day, which some Members may think is appropriate — the Post Office announced that, as part of its network change programme, its area plan proposals for Northern Ireland would lead to the closure of 42 post offices and the provision of outreach support. Outreach support is available only until 2011, and many people fear that it is a euphemism for the deferred closure of a further 54 rural post offices. That will be the second round of post office closures in Northern Ireland.

A major concern has to be that there will be further rounds of closures. On 11 March 2004, the Post Office announced the closure of 21 post offices, mainly in urban areas. Therefore, in a matter of four years, the post office network in Northern Ireland has been reduced from 580 to 463 — a reduction of 20%.

We all know that change is inevitable. In some areas, fewer people use the post office because services such as bill payments, television licences, car tax and passports are now available online or through banks, as a result of the growth in telecommunications. Apparently, one in five letters is now delivered by private competitors. We are told that the Post Office is losing £500,000 every working day, or about £200 million a year, and that the closures are necessary to stem those losses, to bring the post office network into profitability and to stabilise the situation.

As part of its briefing, the Post Office has produced an impressive-looking document with a branch report

for each of the 96 local offices that are under threat of closure, containing addresses, opening hours, average weekly customer numbers, local population profile and so on. However, those reports are incomplete: there is no information on the profitability or otherwise of individual branch offices. Indeed, it has been accepted that profitability has nothing to do with the closure of many branches, and that many local offices, especially in urban areas, are profitable and well used. The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has identified six of its members who run local convenience stores that have post offices in the premises: two are in Belfast and the others are in Castlereagh, Omagh, Antrim and Dungannon. Their owners say that they are extremely busy and profitable local offices, and that, if they are forced to close, it will have a severe impact on the viability of other services that are offered in-store and on neighbouring retail outlets, and will cause job losses. Post Office Ltd must explain why it is proposing to close down stores.

Mr Attwood: The Member spoke of post office closures around the North, including in Belfast. Does she agree that any decisions about the future of the post office estate should take into account two values: first, whether services fulfil a shared-society outcome; and, secondly, whether post offices in areas of most deprivation should be protected? Does she agree that the decision to recommend the closure of the post office on Black's Road, which fulfils these and many other criteria, makes no sense?

Mrs Hanna: I agree with the Member. The Post Office has not given any reasonable explanation as to how it can contemplate doing such a thing.

An economic appraisal should apply to every store that the Post Office is proposing to close, and must take into account not only quantifiable factors such as profitability, but non-quantifiable factors, some of which were mentioned by my colleague. Equally valid factors must be taken into account, such as the impact on the local community; the viability of other local businesses; access; the availability of public transport; socio-economic data such as age, health, deprivation; and what I would call the equivalent of biodiversity. We are all increasingly ecologically aware when it comes to the natural environment and the importance of maintaining the diversity of plants and animals. The same applies to communities, especially in rural areas, where it is the small-scale institutions — schools, churches and post offices — that bind communities together. I represent South Belfast, which is a wholly urban constituency. However, I acknowledge that rural post office closures have a particularly devastating impact. John Dallat and other Members will speak about the damage done to rural communities by those closures. Local post offices are part of the lifeblood of local communities, urban and rural — providing essential

services, especially to the elderly and to those who do not have access to their own transport.

At a time when the Government are talking about reducing carbon emissions, the closures will increase pollution and further deplete resources.

The two rounds of closures have closed or proposed to close a number of post offices in the constituency of South Belfast. In 2004, the post offices at Balmoral, Cromac Street, Ormeau Road, Stranmillis Road and Willowfield were closed. This year, it has been announced that the post offices at 217 Lisburn Road and 160 Ormeau Road are to close. Seven urban offices have been taken out of the smallest constituency in Northern Ireland.

The post office at 217 Lisburn Road is situated in the Windsor ward — it serves most of that ward and the Blackstaff ward. The post office at 160 Ormeau Road is in the Botanic ward. Although neither the Windsor ward nor the Botanic ward rank high in the list of deprived wards, the Blackstaff ward is in the top 5% of the most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. The Windsor and Botanic wards are the first and third most populous wards in Northern Ireland. Since the statistics were published in the 2001 census, those wards may have become even more heavily populated. Since the 2001 census, both wards have seen a considerable influx of immigration of minority ethnic groups. The diverse population of those wards includes elderly people, students and migrants. Those are precisely the types of people who may not have access to mainstream banking services.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member accept that the Post Office must carry out the fullest consultation process that is available to it? In my constituency of Foyle, a post office in Claudy, a rural area, and a post office in the city centre, on Carlisle Road, are to close. Those post offices are seen as economically not viable, but they are based in areas that have the highest levels of social and economic disadvantage in the city. What relevance will be given to targeting social need when representations are made, and will those arguments be accepted?

Mrs Hanna: I could not have put that better. There are specific questions for the Post Office. Has it taken account of the specific requirements of public bodies to undertake section 75 equality impact assessments on closures? If the Post Office has done that, will it make those assessments available? Has it considered making full economic assessments of closure decisions, and will those be made available?

Does the Post Office acknowledge that, in light of the unanimous outcry against its announcement, the six-week consultation period is far too short? It should be at least double that period — a minimum of 12 weeks. At the very least, the Post Office should acknowledge that the six-week consultation period is far too short to

allow for meaningful community consultation. All of those questions must be considered by the Ad Hoc Committee that the motion proposes. That Committee should consider the situation in the Republic of Ireland, which has also been short-sighted in dealing with its postal service.

A few months ago, the Government bailed out Northern Rock, a building society with two million customers. The cost of that is £100 billion, which equates to £1,700 for every man, woman and child in the UK. Post offices in the UK still have 11 million customers, and the Government has promised a subsidy of £1.7 billion for the three years to 2011, provided that the Post Office implements its closure programme. That subsidy amounts to £5 a year for every man, woman and child in the UK.

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

Mrs Hanna: To finish, we must make the case for the proposals —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Lord Morrow: The DUP supports the motion. The sentiments that are expressed in the motion adequately sum up the revulsion that we all feel about the closure decision. Throughout many years of direct rule, the infrastructure of the Post Office has been run down.

That was another legacy of direct rule, and one in which elected representatives have had little say. Ironically, even though we now have an elected Assembly, we are still going to have little say on the outcome of this debate.

2.15 pm

Carmel Hanna put her finger on the pulse of the matter. The Post Office must reconsider the length of the consultation period — six weeks is totally inadequate. By doing so, the Post Office could show the people of Northern Ireland — those who work in post offices and those who depend on its services — that, at least, it is listening to their elected representatives.

I suspect that there is going to be unanimity in the House in favour of the motion. However, if after listening to the views of Assembly Members in this debate, the Post Office continues on its own merry way, that would send a bad message to those of us who believe in democracy.

As I come from the rural constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, my concern is for rural post offices. People who live in rural communities seem to be penalised day and daily — the running down of rural post offices follows the running down of rural schools. Seemingly, people who live in rural communities are being told that they are not entitled to the same facilities as those who live in urban areas. That is a matter that the Assembly should take on board. Northern Ireland,

by definition, is rural. Therefore, I suspect that this matter will resonate with more Assembly Members than one that would occur in a more urban area.

It has been said that the post offices that have been earmarked for closure are not profitable, and I accept that such factors have to be considered. However, I believe emphatically that the Post Office has not properly considered the future of the rural post office network. Surely the Post Office needs to assess what it wants to see in the rural community of Northern Ireland in 20 years' time.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that senior citizens who do not have their own modes of transport will be the people to suffer most when post offices are removed from villages and hamlets?

Lord Morrow: I congratulate the Member for making that point. We owe a lot to the older members of our community. The cost of everything is rising — I have just read in the local press that it is expected that the food bill for a normal household will have risen by approximately £600 over a 12-month period. Similarly, as Members will not need reminding, the price of oil is rising on a virtually daily basis. Therefore, the cost of travel is also rising at an alarming rate. Those are other factors that impact on the senior citizens mentioned by Mr McCarthy.

The rural post office in Granville — my own village, which is two and a half or three miles from Dungannon — is one of those up for closure. The rural post offices in Cabragh — about five miles from Dungannon — and Carnteel are also due to close. The Post Office has selected the branches that will close, or that will have their service changed.

I want to know what consideration was given to the communities that they serve.

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

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support this timely motion, and I thank the Members who introduced it to the House. I hope that the debate will allow Members to deal pragmatically and holistically with this matter. The closure of post offices can have a devastating impact on communities, particularly, as has been mentioned, on rural communities. Key social and personal services will be lost, and Sinn Féin calls for coherent action to replace them.

The general public cannot comprehend proposals that threaten some of the busiest and most successful post offices. The number of people who use those post offices demonstrates their importance to local communities. Another major concern is that the proposed cuts are likely to be a precursor to many more far-reaching cuts in 2011, when the provision of the mobile or shared option that Royal Mail has put on the table will end.

I am extremely concerned about the negative impact of the closures on communities, particularly those in rural and remote areas of the North. It is widely acknowledged that the closures will increase social isolation and disadvantage. The Post Office justifies the closures on the basis that the offices are financially non-viable, but does not take into account either the accompanying business-related services, such as private shops, or the vital role that post offices play in the social infrastructure of local communities.

Six stores in Castlereagh, Omagh, north Belfast, Antrim, Dungannon and west Belfast incorporate extremely busy and profitable post offices. If their owners are forced to close the post offices, it will have a severe impact on the viability of their stores and result in job losses. The Post Office must answer this question: why does it propose to close offices that are economically viable? That makes no sense.

Sinn Féin requests that the six-week consultation period that has been outlined be extended to allow more time for consideration. Communities must have time to formulate their responses. In my South Down constituency, the council is holding meetings this week to gather evidence, and more time is needed to process such information.

Post offices are key focal points for communities, and they are often the only shops in the area. The human contact that post offices provide to many people far outweighs the cost of keeping them open.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member agree that the closure of post offices will deprive many older people, and some disabled people, of their independence?

Mr W Clarke: I concur with the Member. The closure of post offices will result in the isolation of some of the most vulnerable people in the community.

Sinn Féin is making it clear to the Post Office and the British Government that when they deem it commercially logical to close a post office, it is vital to provide an alternative. There is an onus on all Members to implement practical measures to help communities to replace the services currently provided by local post offices. Assistance must be given to local authorities to support communities and provide services.

In response to post office closures in the South, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Ireland outlined the measures that are required to mitigate the effects of the proposals: when a town loses its post office, regular transport must be available to take people to sufficiently resourced post offices in towns and villages that are within a reasonable distance; postmen and postwomen should be given guidance on spotting the signs of social isolation and need; all older people in need must have access to social alarms; and local community groups should be given additional relevant training and resources.

Despite increasing urbanisation, a more mobile population and demographic changes, there remains a significant number of people, particularly older people and those who live alone, for whom the local postal service plays a vital part in their social and personal lives.

The decision to close local post offices cannot be based solely on economic imperatives. It has been suggested that the rules on planning and rating be reformed to make it easier to operate a post office from a church hall or village hall. That sensible proposal deserves support, and it is essential to set up an Ad Hoc Committee to investigate every option. Perhaps the Assembly can ensure that all utility bills — with no disadvantage to those who choose that method of payment — and every bill that is payable to Government, including local councils, can be paid at post offices?

Maureen Edmondson, the chairperson of Postwatch Northern Ireland, said:

“Postwatch accepts the rationale for change, but it is important that change happens in a way that is customer-focussed and avoids confusion. This means that Post Office Limited’s decision must be sensible and public consultation meaningful.”

I concur with those sentiments; we must consult, not insult, and local people’s views must be considered meaningfully and acted on. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be David Burnside.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to outline the action she has taken to reduce teacher-pupil ratios in primary schools. (AQO 3012/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. Is é an cóimheas daltaí le múinteoirí 2006-07 do Thuaisceart na hÉireann 20:8; tá seo níos airde ná cóimheas na hAlban, 16:3, an Bhreatain Bheag, 19:9, agus Deisceart na hÉireann 16:4. Ach tá sé níos ísle ná cóimheas Sasana, atá 21:8.

The pupil-teacher ratio for primary schools in the North of Ireland was 20:8 in 2006-07. That is higher than in Scotland, where it is 16:3; Wales, where it is 19:9; and the South of Ireland, where it is 16:4: but it is lower than in England where it is 21:8.

I have recognised publicly that the gap between funding for primary schools and post-primary schools is too wide. For that reason, I allocated a greater share of resources to primary schools in 2008-09. That resulted in an overall increase for primary-school budgets of 4% over 2007-08 levels, compared to an increase of 2.5% for post-primary schools. It was achieved by increasing the weighting of primary schools in the local management of schools formula. We will continue to enhance the levels of support for primary schools by progressively increasing the weighting of primary schools over the Budget period.

In addition, over the next three years the Budget provides for significant additional funding, specifically for primary schools, including almost £12 million to help primary-school-teaching principals, in recognition of the pressures they face, and a further £32 million to support primary schools with delivery of the foundation stage of the revised curriculum. That includes £7 million in the 2008-09 financial year to support the introduction of the foundation-stage curriculum in years one and two. The foundation stage sets out a more appropriate curriculum for the youngest learners, and I have listened to primary-school principals and teachers who have told me that additional numbers of classroom assistants are needed to deliver it effectively. Therefore, the present Making a Good Start (MAGS) funding arrangement, which provides classroom assistants for year one and

some year two classes only, will be replaced from September 2008 by foundation-stage funding.

Those measures represent a significant real-terms increase in the amounts available to primary schools for classroom assistance and materials in support of the foundation-stage curriculum to help give the youngest primary pupils the best start to their education.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will agree that continuing problems with literacy and numeracy represent a barrier to equality, and that a good education is a powerful weapon in anyone's armoury. Does she agree that continuing to improve the ratio of teachers to pupils will improve levels of literacy and numeracy, and, consequently, future investment in remedial education can be reduced?

Ms Ruane: The Member said that better than I could have done. I absolutely agree. Research confirms that a mixture of factors — including the quality of teachers and of the instruction that they provide — is the key influence on learning outcomes. There is also evidence that smaller class sizes in early grades can have a positive impact. Teachers in schools with a significant proportion of disadvantaged pupils must have smaller classes so that they can deal with the barriers to learning, give individual help to pupils or work in small groups. As the Member knows, since I came into office I have initiated work and developed policies to tackle underachievement and ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve her or his full potential.

Consultation on 'Every School a Good School' has just ended, and we are revising the literacy and numeracy strategy. We are also overhauling the current academic admissions criteria: that, too, is changing and will contribute to an improvement in outcomes.

The Member knows that to deal seriously with the teacher-pupil ratio more resources are needed. Countries such as Finland and Sweden, which have improved teacher-pupil ratios, have put significant additional resources into education. All parties should support my request for increased resources for this purpose.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware that only last week the Committee for Employment and Learning received evidence from St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College, and that Queen's University and Stranmillis University College have recently announced that they are going to merge. She will also be aware, because she has already informed me of it in response to a question for written answer, that over 6,500 teachers are not currently in full-time employment. Will the Minister therefore recognise that reducing class sizes, or making a firm commitment to do so, will help teacher training institutions to plan for the future, and may also help some of those unemployed teachers find work?

Ms Ruane: We need to create opportunities for younger teachers, because they are not getting the opportunities that they deserve. I will outline some of the steps that I have taken to ensure that newly qualified teachers are employed. The Department of Education has issued guidance exhorting employers to give preference to newly qualified teachers and to experienced non-retired teachers who are seeking employment. Employers have also been advised that retired teachers should only be re-employed to provide short-term cover when newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable.

We have also capped the levels of reimbursement of the costs of substitute cover, which provides an incentive for schools to employ newly qualified teachers as substitutes. I have just asked my officials to re-examine the arrangements for employing retired teachers as substitute supply teachers. They will take legal advice as necessary and will also consider what is happening in the South of Ireland. It is not fair that our newly qualified teachers do not get the chances that they deserve.

The number of unemployed teachers presents an opportunity to reduce the ratio of pupils to teacher; however, that is dependent on resources, and, beyond those for the measures that I outlined in my first answer, my Department did not obtain enough resources in the Budget. I look forward to receiving the Member's support and that of his party when I present such proposals.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister accept that the majority of schools are suffering from an initiative fatigue, that short-term, project-led funding does more harm than good and that what is required is enhanced long-term core funding? Will she further accept that her plans to close off the early-retirement option for teachers who are suffering from burnout simultaneously reduces dramatically many of the opportunities that were formerly available to young teachers hoping to obtain their first full-time teaching post?

Ms Ruane: Obviously, schools need substantial amounts of funding to deal with the issues that they face. Staff of all schools argue that the education sector faces a lack of funding, and I absolutely agree with them — there should be more money going into education. In England, an extra £600 million is going into education. However, when funding was allocated to the North of Ireland, equivalent funding was not put into education. As the Member would expect, I argue — and will continue to argue — that it should have been.

Some initiatives are very important. Sometimes we need to introduce initiatives through pilot programmes and then bring those programmes into the mainstream. I argue that the programmes that I have brought in are worthwhile — the GAA and the Irish Football Association programmes, as well as the languages programmes in primary schools, because our children

are learning languages much too late. I feel that we do not introduce our children to sport and fundamental ball skills early enough — *[Interruption.]*

I ask that Sammy Wilson does not interrupt me so that I can continue with my answer.

It is important that children have a sense of their bodies and of the fun of sport and that they enjoy sport. That will lead to better standards of literacy and numeracy, as well as healthy self-esteem. Therefore, some initiatives are good; however, I take the Member's point about initiatives, and I am aware that many schools are making the same point. Go raibh maith agat.

Special Schools: Transformation

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Education if she will introduce legislation to allow special schools to transform to integrated status. (AQO 3003/08)

Ms Ruane: Is maith a thuigim dualgas mo Roinne an t-oideachas imeasctha a spreagadh agus a éascú. Aithním an ról tábhachtach a imríonn an t-oideachas imeasctha ag cruthú todhchaí cobhsaí síochánta do pháistí.

I appreciate fully my Department's duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. I recognise the contribution that integrated education makes to the establishment of a stable and peaceful future for our children. However, there are specific reasons for protecting the educational interests of children and why the legislation prohibits special schools from attaining integrated status. The current intake criteria for special schools are based on the special educational needs of each and every individual child.

Integrated schools can currently include community background as an intake criterion based on religion rather than educational needs. The prohibition in the legislation recognises the complex needs of children in the special education sector, which I witnessed at first hand during recent visits to special schools in Antrim, Lurgan and Belfast.

Children in many special schools already access shared provision and serve as an example of the way forward. All types of schools have their part to play in developing opportunities for sharing and integrating. I am less concerned about the label attached to a school than I am about the degree of sharing that takes place. Indeed, some of the best integration happens in special schools.

Mr Neeson: Special needs know no bounds — pupils come from all religious and social backgrounds. I suggest that special schools are already integrated. I understand that the Minister supports integrated education, but will she acknowledge that by granting special schools integrated school status?

Ms Ruane: I have answered that question already. The Member knows that I support integrated education

and that I take my statutory duties on that matter seriously. For the reasons that I outlined earlier, I do not believe that that is the best way to proceed because it would create equality issues.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the exemption or the prohibition amount to a denial of a child's right to integrated education based on parental choice?

Ms Ruane: That is a children's rights issue — cearta páistí. First, there is the right of children to receive the most appropriate school provision, regardless of their religion. Secondly, there is the right of children in special schools to have the same options as children in mainstream schools, including access to shared schooling that admits all religions and values every individual.

Given the particular difficulties that are faced by children whose needs require placement in a special school, I am determined that meeting their individual needs must remain paramount in selecting their school. To allow religion to influence that selection is not in the child's best interests.

In addition, as Members will know, children in many special schools already access shared provision and serve as an example of the way forward. All types of schools have their part to play in developing opportunities for sharing. I am less concerned about the label attached to a school than I am about the degree of sharing that takes place.

We must also consider how to mainstream children with special needs and provide what they need in mainstream schools. When possible, children should attend the same school as neighbouring children. Some of the saddest stories that I hear come from parents who say that their children love the special schools, which are like an oasis, but that they then go home and have no one to play with in the street. The Assembly must consider how to mainstream and ensure that children with special needs are given the fairest chance in life.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister is often quoted as saying that all children are to be valued. One mile down the road, Tor Bank School provides for children with the most severe special needs that anyone could ever meet, and it does so in the most appalling conditions imaginable. It is a shame that we are discussing integrated status for special needs schools when that school has been waiting since 2004 for a newbuild. Will the Minister kindly outline for Members an indicative timetable for when that newbuild will start? That is what will give those children equality and recognise their needs.

Ms Ruane: I do value all children. As the Member will know, I visited Tor Bank School — *[Interruption.]* I did not interrupt the Member during her question.

Mr S Wilson: That does not stop us interrupting the Minister.

Ms Ruane: I know that.

I met the principal of Tor Bank School at a wonderful all-island autism conference in Croke Park on 15 April. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister should spend more time doing her job here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: Part of my job here is to arrange North/South visits. If Members really care about children with special needs, they should know the benefit of learning from what happens in the South of Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales.

2.45 pm

We should not let ideology get in the way of addressing the needs of all our children. Officials in my Department are liaising very closely with the principal of Tor Bank School. I visited that school and had a wonderful time. I also visited the Special Provision for Education for Autistic Children (SPEAC) Centre, and saw the proposals for a new school build. The Member will know that because I wrote to her about that, and I am meeting her very soon to discuss that. I look forward to that meeting. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I just check, Minister; is question 3 linked to question 11?

Ms Ruane: Yes.

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of Lumen Christi College's decision to set its own academic based admissions test.

(AQO 2960/08)

11. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the decision by Lumen Christi College to set its own entrance exam.

(AQO 3001/08)

Ms Ruane: Tá mé meallta gur fhógair Lumen Christi go raibh rún aige a theist iontrála féin a cheapadh, agus feicim go bhfuil mo mhealladh ar Easpag Dhoire, arb é duine de iontaobhaithe sinsearach na scoile é.

I am disappointed that Lumen Christi has announced an intention to set its own entrance test. I note that my disappointment is shared by the Bishop of Derry, one of the school's senior trustees. I fully agree with Bishop Hegarty that the current transfer procedure amounts to a form of social selection. I fail to see how the school's proposals align with the ethos of social justice that has traditionally characterised schools in the Catholic sector.

The proposal appears to be chiefly concerned with defending privilege. It will only serve to perpetuate the impact of demographic decline on the secondary school sector, which has already experienced a drop of over 5,000 pupils over a 10-year period, whilst grammar school enrolments remain broadly the same. My concern is widely shared, as demonstrated by views expressed by teaching practitioners in every single sector across the island of Ireland.

I hope that the school's current board of governors will review that decision and not set the school on a collision course with the Department. I would very much like Lumen Christi to join with me and the majority of the post-primary sector as we work to assemble a consensus.

The presumption inherent in the announcement of Lumen Christi College is that a legislative framework for transfer 2010 will not be in place. However, if transfer 2010 is to be unregulated, I previously stated that the Department will not fund or support breakaway tests. Lumen Christi, and schools contemplating similar actions, should understand that independent breakaway selective procedures require much more than the provision of a test.

Academic selection based on a test comes with a whole host of pressures and risks. The tests need to be supported by challenge mechanisms in order to manage the high level of appeals. They need to be supported by a special circumstances procedure to ensure that the system is fair. Those are resource-intensive and critical functions — vital if admission criteria based on selective procedures are to be robust. If those functions are not delivered effectively, it is very likely that the admissions processes of such schools will be dysfunctional. That would be damaging for the children immediately concerned, and would also affect the admission processes of other schools. Admissions resulting from dysfunctional processes are also likely to lead to litigation and liabilities for school boards of governors.

I issued a letter to the school — and to 30 feeder primary schools because Lumen Christi had written to them — on 15 April 2008. Those letters highlighted the administrative and legal perils associated with an independently operated entrance exam. No post-primary school can oblige a primary school to prepare pupils for any particular feature of its admissions process. Feeder primary schools have been reminded — and they are glad to be reminded because they like the revised curriculum — that their focus must be on preparing pupils for the revised primary curriculum and not for a test that is unsupported by the Department.

I asked Lumen Christi to reconsider that decision in the interests of social justice, equality and fairness for every child.

Mr Hamilton: Does the decision of Lumen Christi College — one that I applaud — not show that opposition to the Minister's so-called vision is widespread right across all sections of our community? Instead of blackmailing and bullying boards of governors, would the Minister not be better off working with others to help implement a system that enshrines the reality of academic selection? It is a reality that her party's leaked position paper admits is here to stay.

Ms Ruane: First, I suggest that the Member looks at the statistics and at the numbers of people who support — *[Interruption.]*

I did not interrupt you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has been asked a question, and she has the Floor. Members must allow the Minister to answer.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: If she answers, it will be a first.

Ms Ruane: You will get an answer, if you stop interrupting.

There are 226 post-primary schools in the North of Ireland, roughly 20 of which state, at this point, that they support academic selection — 20 schools out of 226. Secondary schools are bearing the brunt of demographic decline, and that is totally and utterly unfair. I am working with everyone to build consensus. However, I will lead the change, and I will ensure that every child in this state has a fair chance, because not every child has a fair chance at present.

We have heard a defence based on privilege. If you were so concerned about retaining academic selection, your party should have chosen to take up the Department of Education. You did not choose it — we did. We chose it because we are going to bring about changes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Any questions from the Floor, or comments from the Minister, must be addressed through the Chair.

Ms Ruane: We will bring about changes that will benefit everyone. They will benefit everyone on the Falls and Shankill Roads. They will benefit people in Coleraine, Ballymena, Derry and Tyrone, and the 12,000 young people who leave school without even attaining English and maths GCSEs. Would any of you want your children to leave school without English and maths GCSEs? Would you? Of course you would not.

Mr S Wilson: You seem to want that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members continue to waste time. Members and the Minister must address questions and answers through the Chair.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will not accept points of order until Question Time is over.

Ms Ruane: I ask, through the Chair, whether any Members would like their children to leave school without English — or Irish — and maths GCSEs. I do not think so. However, I will ensure that we deal with underachievement. There are none so blind as those who will not see. We must have change. Not changing is not an option. People can wriggle on a hook, bay at the moon and howl at the wind, but change must, and will, come.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I regret that some Members would not listen to it or allow the rest of us to listen to it properly.

Will the Minister emphasise that not only are there legal liabilities and vulnerabilities for any board of governors that conducts its own selection test, but there are serious implications for other schools and for the wider transfer procedure? Will she accept that a school that runs its own transfer test not only places other secondary schools in confusion and at a disadvantage, but places primary schools in an invidious position, because they will not be sure what advice or assistance they can — or should be expected to — give teachers and children who ask questions about a test that might be imposed by a particular school?

Ms Ruane: I agree with many of the Member's comments. However, I do not agree with his point about primary schools. Primary schools are very clear about what they must do. There is a revised curriculum. I have explained very clearly to all primary schools — at every school visit and in all my statements — that they must teach the revised curriculum. We introduced the revised curriculum, which is much better than the previous one. Let me say again, in case there is any confusion — although there should be none — primary schools have no duty to teach according to any post-primary admissions criteria. This is the last year of the 11-plus exam, and that is the end of it. Thankfully, teachers will be able to get on with teaching the curriculum without it being distorted, as it has been previously.

I agree that there are huge perils for any school that chooses to operate breakaway tests, and schools know that. Schools know that there must be change. We cannot continue in the free-fall situation that we are in now.

Mr B McCrea: If the Minister is so concerned about the amount of money that is available for the sector, she should have argued for more funding when Ministers Ritchie and McGimpsey were doing so. How will the Minister persuade Lumen Christi not to use academic selection? Can she outline to the Assembly what legal powers the Department has to commence the entitlement framework, set admission and enrolment numbers, and implement the sustainable schools policy

and area-based planning, in particular? How will the Minister persuade schools to do things that they do not want to do?

Ms Ruane: I have argued for funding, and I will continue to do so, because education is not getting enough money. It is no secret that I have argued for funding, and the Member can look at anything that I have said in the Chamber or at my response to the Budget. I accept that there is a limited amount of money and that the Executive came to an agreement, which all parties supported. Some parties were more united than others, and some tried to ride two horses.

As the Member knows, the situation regarding a legislative framework is still under discussion and negotiation. My aim is to achieve a legislative framework that is based on consensus. To that end, I have engaged in lengthy negotiations with stakeholders, and I will present proposals to the Executive.

I want to have a legislative framework for transfer in 2010 that will help progress the vision for post-primary education that I announced on 4 December 2007 and developed in my announcement on area-based planning on 4 March 2008. The time will come, however, when I will have to move forward on the basis of the maximum consensus that it has been possible to achieve, because change is required, and I cannot allow the development of new arrangements to drift.

Teacher-Training Provision

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to detail the provision for training teachers of deaf pupils. (AQO 3017/08)

Ms Ruane: Tríd is tríd, déanann an oilúint múinteoirí thosaigh múinteoirí atá cáilithe go ginearálta. Ach aithníonn an oilúint i riachtanais speisialta oideachais riachtanais speisialta daltaí agus díríonn sí ar straitéisí le riar ar na riachtanais sin.

Initial teacher training produces generally qualified teachers. However, training in special educational needs in all courses covers the recognition of pupils' special needs and focuses on strategies to meet those needs. Some student teachers choose a special-educational-needs-specific option during their training programme, and some spend part of their teaching practice in special schools.

During the induction and early professional developmental stages of new teachers' careers, they are also educated in — and expected to demonstrate their competence in — the recognition of pupils' special educational needs. The Department's schools census statistics for 2007 show that there were 887 children with severe, profound or mild/moderate hearing loss on the special-needs register. To ensure that teachers of

the deaf receive appropriate in-service training, the Department of Education resources the education and library boards to fund a number of places on a mandatory course for those teachers who are employed by schools or boards. Candidates for that training must meet certain criteria that are set by the Department of Education.

Recently, the Department allocated £10,000 to the education and library boards to cover the costs of training for teachers of the deaf who work with children up to the age of three. That allocation was made on foot of the Department of Health's hearing screening programme for newborns.

I have also been advised by the chief executives of the education and library boards that a range of training is available for teachers of the deaf to ensure their continuing professional development.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she acknowledge the importance of training for teachers of deaf children? Will she confirm that the issue will be included in the special educational needs review? When will the review be concluded and its results publicised?

Ms Ruane: Training for teachers of deaf children is important. I will pass on Mr Ramsey's comments on the special educational needs review to the review team. The review will go to the Committee for consultation soon — if it has not already done so. I am looking at the Chairperson of the Committee for Education for confirmation, but I think that it is in the process of going to the Committee. It will be a fundamental review, and I will pass on any comments that are made on it today to the review team. Members will have opportunities to contribute when the review is before the Committee and at all other stages.

3.00 pm

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Variable Tuition Fees: Impact

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the impact of variable tuition fees on university enrolment among people from deprived backgrounds. (AQO 2999/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): It is too early to gauge the impact of variable tuition fees, as we have completed only one academic year of the new arrangements. An independent review of variable fees and student-finance arrangements, which will include consideration of participation rates

by students from low-income backgrounds, is planned to commence in the academic year 2008-09.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for that response, and I accept that it is early days. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high drop-out rate among first-year students, as many of them try to juggle their academic work with holding down the part-time jobs that enable them to meet their living costs and fees. Will the Minister ensure that, in any assessment, he will examine not only the enrolment issue, but the potential drop-out problem?

Sir Reg Empey: The drop-out problem is an important issue in its own right. I have studied the figures, and they have been constant over the past three to four years, albeit they are higher than I would wish. As yet, there is no evidence of a relationship between drop-out figures and work problems that are related to earning money to pay fees. The drop-out rates have been consistent, and they are too high. We work with universities and assist them in developing strategies to deal with the problem. That is a free-standing issue that merits investigation, but not necessarily only in the context of the review of variable fees. It is an important issue in its own right, and I will take on board what the Member has said.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that, in a tight budgetary situation, operating his budget in the dark, so to speak, due to the statistics not being available for further education class enrolments, is undesirable, especially when it is pertinent to the non-national situation? Indeed, I understand that there are no records to show how many non-nationals are registered in further education. Although the Minister allocated £1.5 million in his annual budget for non-nationals, he must wait until they turn up at a class and are counted.

Sir Reg Empey: I am not sure about the relationship between the Member's point and the question. Nevertheless, I will attempt to respond. Following several debates, I made a commitment to the House that the whole question of variable fees and related matters, including the ability to participate, will be dealt with under the review. Last week, I addressed the conference of the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland, and I repeated my commitment to that body.

Various sources of figures provide conflicting statistics. However, by the time that the review is under way, a further year of statistics will be available. The review will take those statistics into account and establish whether a pattern has developed. That will be an important step forward.

We have a policy of trying to increase participation in higher education in general, particularly that of people who are from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Resources are ploughed into that policy. We are doing better than the UK average for participation of people from difficult socio-economic backgrounds, and we

are almost at the target level that the United Kingdom Government set for England. Therefore, we have a good participation record.

Mr Attwood: When one looks at the spread of parental incomes, and given that grants payable to students in England are higher for those whose household income is more than £21,000, and that such grants continue to be paid in respect of household income up to £60,000, does the Minister propose to adjust the grants payable to students in the North to reflect the practice in England?

In addition, given that university enrolment among people from deprived backgrounds is such an important matter, why is the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) about to propose a funding formula that would make the college in Northern Ireland with the highest participation rates of students from lower social and economic backgrounds no longer viable? That college is St Mary's University College on the Falls Road.

Sir Reg Empey: As has been said in debates before, the question of the English experience was raised last summer, along with certain announcements, of which we were given no notice. We made the judgement that the best way that we could help people with social and economic problems to participate in further education was to maintain the maintenance grant differential, which is £500 higher than that in England. We felt that that would make the best contribution towards encouraging people from such backgrounds to participate in further education — that maintenance grant is payable across the board.

As I have previously said, all other issues relating to participation will be part of the review process. We will be examining our performance and what the statistics are showing us as regards participation rates. We will have at least one year's further figures at our disposal at that stage and will be able to detect patterns.

One other factor that is often overlooked and must be taken into account is the demographic cohort from which most students are drawn, which has been dropping as the number of 18-year-olds falls due to the demographic trend. All those matters will be taken into account, and I relayed that point very specifically to the students when I addressed them last Wednesday.

Adults in Further Education

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of adults who have completed further education courses in each of the past three years.

(AQO 2992/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The total number of people aged 18 and over who completed further education courses

for the past three years for which data are available is as follows: in 2004-05, the figure was 142,231; in 2005-06, it was 131,666; and in 2006-07, it was 125,129.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. The figures indicate that there has been a decline in the number of adult learners over that period. First, will the Minister state whether he believes that the evidence that he has produced today is a result of the fact that the three-year-old FE Means Business scheme needs to be examined to see whether changes can be made? Secondly, will he comment on whether, with the creation of the new regional colleges, there could be a further decline in those numbers due to the new structures that have been in place and which may have a detrimental effect?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. There are a number of factors in play. First, I am increasingly confident that the latest statistics will probably be more accurate than some of the earlier ones. Nevertheless, the Member's point is still significant.

Many factors could be involved. As the colleges are still in their first year of operation, it is probably too early to make definitive judgements. As the Member is aware, there have been other factors involved, including industrial action. The Member raises some important points. The colleges have to be kept under review and consideration, and I will be closely monitoring the operation of the colleges as they move into their second year.

Several Members have written to me in the past few months with concerns about participation, particularly in leisure courses, among others. I have little doubt that the inconsistencies in the operation of policy in the current academic year could be a factor. I cannot give the Member a definitive answer, but I can tell him that I am very happy to keep those matters under review. We have invested a great deal in those colleges, and it is important that we get the best possible results from them.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I ask the Minister to give his assessment of tuition fees at Magee College in Derry and of its ability to attract further education students from its natural catchment area of Donegal, where no fees are payable.

Sir Reg Empey: That question is, of course, about higher education. The Member knows that the Assembly has inherited a fees policy about which many parties had anxieties from the start. It is not possible to take unilateral action on that matter — the budgetary implications are massive. I know that many Members are concerned about that issue. We have to be clear about the type of arithmetic that is involved — we are talking about 10% of my Department's budget.

I know that people from the educational institutions in Londonderry are already working with their colleagues in County Donegal to see what opportunities might arise, and, obviously, I encourage such engagement. I am

looking forward to hearing their proposals, because they could be significant and imaginative. I will certainly look on them positively, if it is at all possible to do so.

I look forward to receiving a report, and I have already stated publicly that I support the colleges in their work and in their co-operation. Such co-operation has always existed in the north-west. For instance, Invest NI — like the Industrial Development Board before it — co-operates with its colleagues in County Donegal and the north-west generally. I see no reason why that spirit of co-operation cannot extend to the further education and higher education sectors.

Mr A Maginness: I want to draw the Minister's attention to Training for Success contracts. Can the Minister confirm the final number of trainees who have signed on to that programme? Has there been a significant drop in numbers from previous years? Does the Minister accept that such a drop would add to the increasing skills shortage that must be remedied if we are to take advantage of the benefits that are available to us? One such example is the forthcoming investment conference, which we all hope will be successful.

Sir Reg Empey: I note that today's questions cover a broad range of issues. I often think that some colleagues are in competition to see how far they can push the envelope with their questions.

I will have the opportunity to make a presentation on skills at the forthcoming investment conference. It is perfectly clear that any offering that we make will be strongly linked to skills. As Members know, the grant regime will become very limited in scope over the next couple of years. Therefore, the attractiveness of this place will depend more on people's skills.

Whether we are talking about Training for Success or further and higher education, the message boils down to a simple fact: we must maximise the skills levels in our community. That applies to the apprenticeship regime as much as it does to further and higher education. At present, the scheme is sufficiently flexible to become attractive to potential employers, including the provision of bespoke training at employer level. I support any measures that would make the scheme more attractive to potential investors.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should be directed to the original question and to Ministers' responses; they should not be left open to Members' imaginations.

Accommodation for Third-Level Students

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's position on

the regulation of accommodation for third-level students in relation to (i) that provided by third-level institutions and (ii) locations recommended to students by third-level institutions. (AQO 3027/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Student housing, whether provided by a third-level institution or a private landlord, is regulated under the Department for Social Development's legislation on houses in multiple occupation (HMO). Under that legislation, third-level institutions are responsible for the policies and practices in the accommodation that they provide and the locations that they recommend for their students.

Mr Brady: As the Minister may be aware, my question was prompted by the tragic and untimely death of one of my constituents from Bessbrook, who was a student at Liverpool Hope University. A tenancy agreement had been signed for her accommodation, and her parents are now being pursued ruthlessly by the letting agents for four months' rent. Her death occurred in January, and her parents are still grieving, shocked and traumatised. They are also shocked by the cavalier attitude of the letting agents.

Should steps be taken to alleviate situations where mental-health problems affect a student or a student suddenly dies? Given that such situations cannot be legislated for, they should be factored into any tenancy agreement. I also stress that in that specific case, money for the student's rent has never been an issue for her family.

Sir Reg Empey: I recall that incident, and I express my sympathy to the family. That very distressing set of circumstances received a lot of public attention. I will draw the Member's point to the attention of the university authorities and to my colleague the Minister for Social Development.

The functions that regulate such properties are split over several different bodies. For example, some accommodation is controlled directly by the universities, while university authorities recommend other accommodation to particular students. The Member may know that there is a 'Student Pad' website where students can look up and access details of accommodation.

Given the legal and other technical implications of the case that the Member has raised, it would probably be wise for me to consult further with my own Department, the university authorities and the Department for Social Development (DSD) to see what options are open to us on the details of the contract. I was not aware of the specific point that the Member was making when he asked the question, but I will certainly pursue the matter, and I am happy to write to the Member about the matter at a later date.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister confirm that the regulation of student housing is carried out under HMO legislation, which is the responsibility of DSD?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. That is indeed the position. The HMO legislation governs that area and has implications for health and safety, among other areas.

I suspect that the point made by the previous Member to speak was different. Nevertheless, I can confirm that position, and I will draw the matters in question to the attention of the Department for Social Development.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that the lack of direction and policies from DEL to Queen's University on student accommodation has contributed to the current housing problems and difficulties with antisocial behaviour in South Belfast?

Sir Reg Empey: As far as student accommodation is concerned, the universities control their own affairs; the Department for Employment and Learning does not dictate to them on every issue.

There are mixed messages with regard to accommodation. The University of Ulster says that it cannot get 100% uptake in its locations; neither, in fact, can Queen's University. There are still vacancies in the accommodation that is operated by both universities. As far as the Department is concerned, the public interest is being served if good-quality accommodation is provided for students at sensible prices.

I am aware that the Member and others from her constituency of South Belfast have consistently raised the issue of antisocial behaviour. The problem has various causes; it is not simply a matter of accommodation. The Department encourages the universities to take positive steps to ensure that local communities are not adversely affected beyond what is reasonable. The Member will be aware that the problem in her constituency has emerged because too many planning applications were approved in the first place. The percentage of houses in multiple occupation in the area has gone from 20% to almost 80%. The concentration of student housing in the area is the biggest source of the problem. I have great sympathy with the Member for the point that she makes. However, responsibility for the matter is widespread and is not confined to my Department.

Learning and Skills Commission: NI Representative

4. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the progress being made towards the appointment of a Northern Ireland representative to the Learning and Skills Commission. (AQO 2970/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The UK Commission for Employment and Skills was launched on 1 April 2008. The Department intends to appoint an employment and skills adviser who will represent Northern Ireland on the commission. A public-appointments process will be

instigated for that appointment within approximately one month.

Mr Cobain: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he confirm that the development of that UK-wide commission will not in any way reduce his devolved policy-making powers with regard to employment and skills?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I do not believe that any loss of devolved power, or threat of loss, will result from participation in the commission. Members may be aware that although employment is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, it is not in Scotland, strangely enough. A considerable number of people do not understand that, including some in Whitehall, where we have been at pains to make the point on several occasions.

I do not believe that a threat exists; indeed, there are benefits to be gained from participation. The commission is primarily advisory. As Minister for Employment and Learning, I will take all decisions on employment and skills issues. There are several reasons why it is important for Northern Ireland to have a role in the commission. It means that Northern Ireland will be able to influence the commission's work to support the world-class skills agenda and will benefit from advice and best practice.

In addition, the Department will continue to receive financial support from the commission with which to take forward the work of the sector skills councils, of which there are 25 in Northern Ireland. It is important that we continue to be involved. I am in regular contact with my counterparts in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions. It is important that Northern Ireland should have a representative on the commission who will speak for it and advise Ministers throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr Campbell: The Minister has indicated that the appointment of the employment and skills adviser is under way. Can he ensure that when that person is appointed, he or she, the commission and the Minister himself will do what they can to deal with areas where a large workforce, such as former Seagate employees, must go out into the world of work and achieve the diversification and skills that they need to try to pick up the pieces after having suffered the consequences of an announcement such as that which was made at Seagate?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that I am fully conversant with the unfortunate circumstances at Seagate. Efforts are ongoing to help the workforce in his locality. Not only is help being provided by people who were appointed by the company to do so, but, through its work with Limavady Borough Council and other interests in the area, the Department hopes to run job fairs in the area later in 2008 after production at Seagate ceases.

The usual practice of providing training as we go along cannot be followed because Seagate production is continuing until closure.

In relation to diversification, the Member knows that the Leitch agenda is regarded as a key economic driver by UK Ministers, at Whitehall and throughout the UK; it encourages people to be flexible and to obtain training that they actually need.

The Member will also know that my Department engaged the North West Regional College to carry out a training needs analysis on every worker in Seagate, each of whom was interviewed. That work has been co-ordinated, and, as the year unfolds, we will gain an accurate picture of the needs of the workforce.

The number of workers from Limavady who may be offered jobs at the Londonderry site is more than was initially estimated; since a substantial number of Seagate workers come from the city area, there may be some hope that more of them than had been envisaged will be re-employed.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer to Mr Cobain on the learning and skills commission. Is the Minister aware that the so-called Celtic tiger in the South has benefited from a well-thought-out, integrated education and skills strategy? Will the Minister detail the structure and approach of any similar strategy for the North?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member knows that the entire rationale of many Departments' policies is to ensure that we have a world-class workforce that has the flexibility and skills to meet the demands that are placed on it.

The Member also knows we have a higher percentage of unskilled workers in Northern Ireland than is satisfactory, and, in many cases, employers have been using migrant workers to fill posts that were normally occupied by indigenous workers. The reason that they have been doing so is because many migrant workers are highly skilled. My concern is that there is a tendency, therefore, not to invest in upgrading people's skills, not only the unemployed but those in work. There is a risk that employers take a shortcut and recruit people by phoning an agent rather than creating a skilled workforce.

I can assure the Member that our policy will be based on providing the Northern Ireland workforce with the skills that it needs to be competitive. The Celtic tiger is suffering a bit at the moment, along with most of us, and we all have lessons to learn.

Training for Success and the Automotive Industry

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm what assessment his Department has made of the ability of further education colleges and a private organisation awarded Training for Success contracts to deliver the quality of training required by the automotive industry and to fulfil the requirements for trainees under this programme. (AQO 3023/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Only those organisations judged capable of delivering contracts to the required standard have been placed on the list of potential suppliers of Training for Success, among them further education colleges and private training organisations.

To ensure quality even further, I have asked the Education and Training Inspectorate to survey training suppliers to the automotive sector under Training for Success. The survey will focus on quality of training, standards, the range in level of facilities and equipment, the experience of staff and the accessibility of provision. DEL officials will consider and act on the survey's findings.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's clarity and the inspection.

Does the Minister acknowledge the concern of the automotive industry, as outlined to the Committee for Employment and Learning, that for all the good work done by further education colleges, some may not have the training capacity or specialism to meet the requirements of the high-tech automotive industry? Did DEL assess whether the further education colleges awarded Training for Success contracts could deliver after the Carter and Carter Group withdrew from delivering training to apprentices in the automotive industry?

3.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: Several Members have, for some time, been expressing their concerns to me about this issue, and I welcome the opportunity to put some points on the record. The contractual process in question began about 18 months to two years ago, and was conducted by the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel. My Department has been following the details of the contractual process throughout that period.

When a supplier is given a contract but is found to be incapable of completing it — which is what happened in this case — the contract is offered to the next supplier on the list, until someone comes forward who is prepared to undertake the work. The same conditions apply at that stage as they did to the initial contractor. In other words, the contractor is asked the following questions: can it do the work, is it doing the work, will it do the work, and what equipment does it have?

The Education and Training Inspectorate has been engaged by my Department as its eyes and ears. Its staff are the professionals; they determine what is or is not happening. I can, therefore, assure the Member that a rigorous process will be followed. In circumstances in which it is discovered that a contract cannot be completed, we would review the whole process, and, perhaps, go down a different road. However, while the legal process is in place, we take the advice of the Department of Finance and Personnel, which determines the level of rigour of the contractual obligations. It is up to my Department to ensure that those obligations are met.

I will keep the House fully informed of developments because I am aware that this is a matter of significant concern to Members and to the automotive industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Northern Ireland Energy Targets

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm the energy targets apportioned to Northern Ireland following the meeting of the 2007 Spring Energy Council, and to outline the implications of these targets for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 3067/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): At a recent EU Council meeting, member states agreed the target that 20% of the European Union's energy consumption should come from renewable sources by 2020. The target for the United Kingdom is 15% of total energy consumption across electricity, heat and transport. Whatever the final level of the target, it will require a step change in renewable energy consumption and production.

There are currently no plans to set separate targets for the devolved Administrations. Northern Ireland will, however, wish to contribute to those very challenging national targets. I have recently written to Executive colleagues, seeking cross-departmental co-operation to ensure a co-ordinated approach.

Dr McDonnell: I noticed recently that the Electricity Supply Board in the Irish Republic has committed a tremendous investment of some €22 billion into renewable energy projects, with a view to halving carbon emissions in the next 12 years and achieving zero net carbon emissions by 2035. Having examined what some other countries are doing, I estimate that that will put the Irish Republic at the forefront of the development of

renewable technologies, and will afford them some advantage in that respect.

Could we do the same here, or come close to those targets? Does the Minister intend to encourage a similar programme in the North to ensure that we link into and meet the same level of targets?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. The targets in the Irish Republic are for 2020; our current target is that 12% of total electricity consumption will be met by indigenous renewable energy sources by 2012. We are confident that that target will be met, but, over and above that, we have an additional target, which is to meet 15% of the total consumption of electricity, heat and energy through the use of renewable sources by 2020. Those are very ambitious targets, and we will have to examine a range of measures in order to achieve them.

I have already contacted Executive colleagues with a view to establishing a co-ordinated approach across Government on that issue. The Member should be assured that we take those targets very seriously and that we will do everything in our power to meet them. He will also be interested to know that my Department recently published a grid study in conjunction with our counterparts in the Irish Republic, examining the capacity of the grid with respect to renewable energy sources. The survey revealed that 42% of the grid's capacity could be accommodated, but would require substantial investment, totalling many millions of pounds. We must examine that issue carefully in future.

Mr Cree: What plans does the Minister have to replace the Reconnect grant scheme in order to encourage energy users to convert to greener and renewable fuels?

Mr Dodds: Although the installation of household renewable-energy systems will contribute to reaching the 2012 target; in percentage terms, that contribution will be small. The bulk of the target will be met by wind-powered electricity generation.

The Reconnect grant programme was funded through the environment and renewable energy fund, which was a two-year initiative that expired on 31 March 2008. We will evaluate the programme's impact, and ensure that whatever we do is compared with the targets set in the programme. However, the Member should be aware of, and reassured by, the fact that my Department is doing a lot about renewable energy. We continue to support small-scale renewables through a reduction in standard-rate VAT to 5%; grants are available from the UK-wide low carbon buildings programme, and renewable obligation certificates have been introduced.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister — who, obviously, supports energy targets — tell the House why Action Renewables and his Department have prevented a reputable energy-saving employer based in Dundonald, in my constituency, from securing work under the

Government's grant scheme, thus putting more than 100 jobs in jeopardy? Will he will reconsider that position?

Mr Dodds: If the Member cares to provide information to back up his claim, I will be happy to consider it. However, I would be surprised if Action Renewables, or anybody else, was in the business of putting people out of work. Nevertheless, if he provides details, we will investigate and respond to that matter.

Anaerobic Digestion

2. **Mr Maginness** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his Department's assessment of the economic and environmental potential from the development of anaerobic digestion as a means of producing heat and electricity from municipal, industrial and farm waste. (AQO 3066/08)

Mr Dodds: My Department is responsible for leading and co-ordinating an integrated and strategic approach to the development of sustainable bioenergy in Northern Ireland. It has appointed consultants to undertake a study to assess that potential, which will involve, among other things, an assessment of feedstock materials — such as municipal, industrial and farm wastes — and an investigation into how different technologies such as anaerobic digestion might contribute to the renewable heat, electricity and transport markets. Informed by that work, during 2008-09, the Department will continue to work closely with other relevant Departments — including DARD and DOE — on the development of a cross-departmental bioenergy action plan.

Mr A Maginness: Having been traumatised over the weekend as a result of reading my oil bill, I am asking this supplementary question with additional enthusiasm. Will the Minister consider models of good practice in relation to community-heating schemes that are run on anaerobic digestion systems? Scandinavian cities such as Copenhagen are, to a large extent, fuelled in such a manner. Will the Minister examine such systems in order to provide some relief to poor consumers like me?

Mr Dodds: I am sure that the Member's colleagues are interested to hear him describe himself as a poor consumer. I wonder whether that is totally accurate, although I commend him for reading his oil bill last weekend.

Of course, we are aware that as a result of world economic conditions and the price of oil on the wholesale market, this is a difficult time for everybody as regards energy and fuel prices, particularly for those who may be pushed further into fuel poverty. To some extent, those matters are beyond our control; however, having said that, we are attempting some measures. The creation of the single electricity market was a major advance in securing supply, and we have been bearing

down on wholesale prices and, ultimately, on domestic and industrial consumer prices.

The issue of renewable energy is something that needs to be examined very carefully. The Member raises the issue of energy from waste, and, as I mentioned earlier, there is a considerable emphasis on wind power, because of the plentiful supply of wind in this part of the world, not least in this Chamber, but also further afield. Consideration must be given to other forms of renewable energy, such as bioenergy, energy from waste, marine energy, and so on. All of that will be considered, because the targets that have been set in that area are very challenging indeed. We need to ensure that everything possible is done in order to meet our EU obligations; that we avoid significant financial penalties; and not least that we contribute to a clean and less wasteful environment.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister said that his Department is examining a whole range of bioenergy proposals. Is he aware of the concerns, particularly regarding the environmental impact, of Rose Energy's proposals for an incinerator plant on the banks of Lough Neagh, an area of high scenic value, and of outstanding beauty? Will he confirm whether his Department will or will not fund such a plant, given the nature of it, given that there is all-party opposition to it locally, and particularly given the area in which it will be located, on the banks of Lough Neagh, and possibly using water from Lough Neagh?

Mr Dodds: I am aware of the proposal. The situation regarding the funding for that particular project is a complex and dynamic one. Invest Northern Ireland is in contact with the promoters and their advisers. I can tell the House that at this stage we are not in a position to finalise the analysis, due to ongoing negotiations between all the parties on the optimum funding mix. Consideration of the case for support will be completed, subject to a satisfactory conclusion to the ongoing shareholder negotiations. As the Member knows, the project will be subject to separate consideration by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service, and it will be in that context that a lot of the issues that have been raised will have to be dealt with.

Mr Beggs: The Minister spoke earlier about wind energy, but will he clarify how he proposes to incorporate energy from waste into the Government's programme for alternative fuels, so that Northern Ireland's environment and economy can benefit from combined heat and power from such thermal treatment, rather than those energy-rich materials being added to landfill, with all the associated risks of that?

Mr Dodds: I hope that the Member will be reassured by the fact that, as he knows, under the environmental and renewable energy fund, which was created to fund a number of environmentally friendly projects, some £18 million was directed towards energy from waste.

My Department issued a call for expressions of interest in that back in October 2006. The shortlisted projects are in the final stages of appraisal, and a number of those obviously contain elements of anaerobic digestion. He will also be aware of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy, and he will be assured that the very issue that he raises is one to which we give a considerable amount of attention and focus.

Ulster-Scots Heritage

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps his Department and tourism agencies are taking to promote the Ulster-Scots heritage through paintings and murals.

(AQO 2963/08)

Mr Dodds: Paintings and murals are not specifically marketed as tourism products. However, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's consumer website provides links to a range of visitor services, such as tours, where the opportunity for visitors to see paintings and murals is identified. The Tourist Board is currently working with the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council to define the Ulster-Scots product that can be marketed to the travel trade and to Ulster-Scots groups in target markets for the 2009 season. Tourism Ireland has identified the potential of a Williamite trail and has discussed that with the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland.

Mr McQuillan: In view of the interest shown in the creation of an Orange banner at last year's Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, will the Minister agree that more could be done to market and promote Loyal Order banners as a medium through which the Ulster-Scots story could be told? Does he have any plans in relation to that?

Mr Dodds: The Member referred to the Smithsonian Festival, and I remember visiting the stalls on the Mall in Washington DC, which covered a range of activities and interests related to Northern Ireland. Banner painting was one of those activities, which attracted a lot of interest and was the focus of much discussion. Banner paintings are a key ingredient of Loyal Order parades and pictorially tell part of the story about the Ulster-Scots heritage of this part of the world.

3.45 pm

The Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland could market banner paintings as part of the Ulster-Scots product to travel writers and include them in selected PR opportunities and relevant trails and sites when they are fully developed.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is a wall in west Belfast that is known as the international wall because thousands of people

from all over the world visit each year to look at the murals and paintings on it. Will the Minister and his Department try to find a way to promote that wall by examining similar initiatives? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dodds: People visit Northern Ireland to take part in a range of activities and look at different sites — some activities or sites will appeal more to some people than to others. Northern Ireland has a lot of cultural tourism to offer: there is a good mix of art, architecture, painting, dance and music.

I am not familiar with the wall that the Member mentioned, but there is no problem if it factually reflects part of the history of Northern Ireland. However, there is a problem when support is requested for projects that glorify a particular view of terrorism. I reiterate what I said in the House on 19 February 2008 during a debate that was tabled by the Member — he would not expect me to, and I will not, support anything that seeks to glorify acts of violence or terrorism.

Tourism: Seaside Towns

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the role of seaside towns in promoting Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. (AQO 2981/08)

Mr Dodds: Research shows that seaside towns are important assets to the tourism sector. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's signature projects include extensive stretches of Northern Ireland's coast and incorporate some seaside towns. Those towns play important roles as gateways to key destinations and meeting the requirements of visitors.

As part of the Mourne signature project, work has already commenced to develop Newcastle as a seaside resort and gateway. The Tourist Board has provided Down District Council with £250,000 to assist with gateway activity in the town, and Invest Northern Ireland offered £2.5 million towards the expansion of the Slieve Donard Resort and Spa in 2005.

In 2006 'The Guardian' described the Causeway coastal route as:

"Arguably the most spectacular 60 miles in Britain."

The route passes through a number of seaside towns and brings visitors and economic benefit to key towns on the route such as Carrickfergus, Larne, Ballycastle, Portstewart and Portrush. St Patrick's trail, which starts in Bangor and passes through a number of seaside locations including Portaferry and Strangford, illustrates the wide variety of seaside activities in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: I agree that seaside towns play a vital role in the promotion of Northern Ireland. Is the Minister satisfied that the regional tourism bodies have

sufficient resources to promote the seaside towns that he mentioned?

Mr Dodds: The Member is aware of the significant budgetary increase for tourism for this year and over the next three years. That extra funding for product development and for marketing — in Northern Ireland, Great Britain, the Irish Republic and internationally — will reap significant dividends through the number of visitors and the money that they spend over the next three years.

There are discussions going on between the Tourist Board and the regional tourism organisations. That is something in which I will take a close interest, and I will listen to representations that are made to me. However, I am satisfied that, in respect of the tourism budget, more financial investment than ever is now going into this significant driver of our economy. As a result, I believe that we will meet the target of increasing the number of visitors to Northern Ireland from about two million at present to 2.5 million by 2011.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the Minister's comments on the Causeway coastal route, and I agree with him on the success and importance of that project. I take a considerable interest in the towns along the north coast, which play an important role in contributing to tourism. A mix of elements is needed for that success to continue, whether accommodation, transport, events or leisure opportunities. I ask the Minister to continue to support all of those areas.

I welcome the announcement of a high-speed ferry to Rathlin Island. A feasibility review on the reinstatement of the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry is under way. The Minister will be involved in that review; will he give it favourable attention?

Mr Dodds: We covered most of north Antrim and all parts in between in that run-through of the tourism product of that part of the world. It is a beautiful part of the world, and I concur with what the honourable Member said. Considerable investment has been made in the area, for example with Portstewart Strand and the Portrush regeneration group. In addition, DSD is involved in Larne on the development of seaside towns.

The Member will know that the issue of the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry was raised at the British-Irish Council, when it was agreed that there would be an economic appraisal. That appraisal has begun, and I look forward to getting the results in order that we can determine how to proceed with the matter. The Member will be aware of previous efforts to bring that ferry service into operation, which required substantial public subsidy. That is an issue that will have to be examined. However, I welcome his desire to strengthen the links between that part of Northern Ireland and our kinfolk in Scotland.

Mr Campbell: The Minister mentioned Portrush and Portstewart, and that area has enjoyed great success in the past 10 to 15 years with the Milk Cup, North West 200 and the Northern Ireland International Airshow. The Minister's Department has supported some of those events, but will he ensure that the Tourist Board continues to promote such activities on the north coast to make them bigger and better, not just in the next year or two but over the next five or 10 years?

Mr Dodds: I hope that the Member is reassured by some of what we have been saying about the investment that has been made in the Causeway coastal route, which has had a major impact and which will continue to have a big impact in expanding tourism, not at just the Causeway but right across that coastal area. Consultants appointed by the Portrush regeneration group have produced a blueprint for the regeneration of Portrush, estimating an inward investment of public and private support of £90 million. We are aware of issues surrounding seaside resorts in general, and in particular Portrush, whose image has suffered in recent times. The Tourist Board recognises the potential of seaside resorts, coastal towns and villages. They are vital to our economy, and we should maximise their tourism potential through investment in their unique built and cultural environments.

Economic Investment Conference

5. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on his arrangements for the forthcoming economic investment conference. (AQO 2983/08)

10. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on his plans and expectations for next month's investment conference. (AQO 3031/08)

Mr Dodds: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 10 together.

The US-Northern Ireland investment conference has been devised as a platform to showcase Northern Ireland with a stable devolved Administration that is pro-business and proactive in meeting the needs of international business.

Planning and organisation for the event are progressing well. Almost 600 invitations have been issued to chief executive officers and senior executives, and I am delighted to say that US business leaders have shown considerable interest. As of today, some 90 senior executives, representing more than 70 high-profile corporations, have indicated that they plan to attend. That significantly surpasses the target of attracting between 30 and 40 chief executive officers and senior executives that I announced earlier this year. Venues and keynote speakers have been identified, and we

recently finalised all the details of the programme for the event.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for his answer. Bearing in mind the need to strike while the iron is hot, can he tell the House what plans he has to follow up urgently on any interest that is shown by potential investors?

Mr Dodds: The follow-up to the conference is critical, as plans to follow up offers or expressions of interest will be a key part of the conference. There is no point in investing time, energy and expenditure to showcase Northern Ireland to the senior executives if we do not have a properly thought-out and well-planned follow-up in place. However, we do have that, and it will be done professionally and effectively.

The investment conference is a unique event; never before have so many quality potential investors and senior American executives attended an event in Northern Ireland. It is an immense opportunity. Members will be aware that we do not expect immediate results or announcements, but the conference will position Northern Ireland as a place that is open for business. It will showcase the Province, and it will lead to investment in the medium term. The support that we have had from the US Administration, Downing Street, my colleagues in the Executive and the Republic deserves to be acknowledged. We are grateful for all that support.

Mr Irwin: In view of the considerable local enthusiasm for the investment conference, can the Minister outline the extent of consultation with local stakeholders and interested parties?

Mr Dodds: Engagement with community groups and local councils has been a critical part of the preparations for the conference, and that has ensured that people understand its nature and focus. It has allowed us to receive input into their thinking and how best to ensure that potential investors can see all the opportunities that are available in all parts of Northern Ireland and in all communities.

Although the conference will be mainly based in the greater Belfast area, the exhibition space, attendance at various elements of the conference and other opportunities will allow councils and communities to be represented and to put their case strongly. The conference provides a unique opportunity to highlight the business proposition for Northern Ireland, so we must pull together to make the best of it.

Mr Durkan: On behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I underline the Committee's support for the efforts of all the agencies that are involved in preparing for the investment conference.

It was promised that the Varney II review would be helpful in time for the investment conference. Is the

Minister still hopeful that it will be? If so, when and how will the report be delivered? Will the report include proposals that will complement the positive announcement that was made by the two Finance Ministers on financial services jobs?

4.00 pm

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Chairman for his comments, and to the Committee for its support. The Committee will play an important role in the conference and its aftermath.

As the Chairman knows, work on Varney II is being led by the Department of Finance and Personnel. I will ensure that his comments are relayed to my ministerial colleague with responsibility in that area. We have not yet received an indication that Varney Review II will be published imminently, and the conference will take place soon. However, I will write to the Member about that matter.

I, too, welcome the recent announcement on financial services. I pay tribute to the role that Invest Northern Ireland played in bringing about that initiative. That is a classic example of co-operation for mutual benefit bringing about a win-win situation for the economies in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that — as set out in the priorities in the investment strategy and the Programme for Government — any investment that is secured through the conference will meet the needs of the most disadvantaged in our society?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. It is very important that the benefits of investment be felt right across the board in Northern Ireland. However, I must reiterate that it is the investors themselves who will decide whether and where to invest in the Province. However, we will highlight the tremendous amount of work that has been done in many communities to work alongside potential investors on skills and the provision of labour.

It must be pointed out that one of the Department's priorities — and one of the targets set out in Invest Northern Ireland's corporate plans — is for 70% of all inward foreign investment to be located close to, or within 10 miles, of areas of high deprivation. That indicates the Department's commitment to meeting the challenges that the Member outlined.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Post Office Closures

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the recent announcement that 96 local post offices are to close or be replaced by an 'outreach' service; believes that the six-week consultation period is too short; further believes such closures and service reductions will have an adverse impact on community and social infrastructure in rural and urban areas and will adversely affect older people, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups; acknowledges that provision of post office services is a reserved matter; and resolves to establish urgently an Ad Hoc Committee to think creatively about and make proposals for partnerships that could enhance the economic case for viable local postal services based on engagement with commercial, voluntary and public-sector partners and learning from the experience in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Burnside: When I think about the importance of post offices to local communities, I am reminded of that speech made 40 years ago, when Martin Luther King said: "I have a dream".

I have a nightmare about the closure of post offices. If we are not careful, many towns outside Belfast will comprise of little more than massive housing estates with no local shops or post offices; the banks, too, have been in decline.

This subject is of major importance to local communities. Members have argued on behalf of their local post offices on the closure list. I will cite the example of Parkhall post office in South Antrim. That post office is situated in the centre of a big estate, quite close to the centre of Antrim.

Last year, Post Office Ltd, by its own judgement, declared Parkhall as community post office of the year 2007. That title was awarded on the basis of sales and performance in the local community. Parkhall is now one of the post offices targeted for closure — you simply could not make it up.

Last Monday evening, we had a very successful meeting in Parkhall community centre. The postmistress, Elaine Murdoch, and her brother Charlie Henderson — who runs the Mace store at the post office — fronted that meeting and outlined the lack of sense in the Parkhall case. Charlie Henderson talked about the money that Post Office Ltd had spent on flying him to England to receive the award for the local post office.

The post office at Parkhall serves 4,000 people in the local community, of whom 12% are retired senior citizens. The massive expansion plans for that area of Antrim include the construction of an additional 8,000 houses over the next few years, many of which will be located adjacent to Parkhall. There is a post office in the centre of Antrim, one in Greystone, and one in Parkhall. No criteria could justify the closure of the post office at Parkhall.

I hope that the consultation process will be extended but, if not, Members must operate within the set consultation time limit. Antrim Borough Council will submit a proposal outlining the development of the town and designating the area in which new houses will be built in Parkhall's catchment area.

It is ludicrous to consider closing a successful, profitable, community-based post office. I worry that should the post office at Parkhall close — and it is a jewel in the crown of the Post Office in Northern Ireland — it would mean that no criteria for closure are being used. Its closure would have no economic basis, nor would it be in the interest of community relations. Therefore, no criteria could save any post office in Northern Ireland that is on the hit list.

I used the post office at Parkhall as an example, because it happens to be my privilege that it is in my constituency. It was post office of the year in 2007, and we have no intention of allowing it to close. There is cross-party support, cross-community support and 100% support from the council for its retention.

I ask the Post Office for a genuine consultative process in which it will listen to people's views and review the criteria for closure. I ask it to reverse its decision to close the post office at Parkhall.

One opinion that has been expressed in Antrim is that people from other areas in the town may not want to come to Parkhall. That is an insult to the community there, who welcome anyone from any area of the town. Perhaps the Post Office has taken bad advice or has based its decision on the wrong criteria. If so, I ask it to be big enough to examine the facts and statistics, listen to the views of local politicians and the community and announce that Parkhall's post office will be retained.

I have outlined the best example in Northern Ireland of a post office that should not be closed, and Members will cite further examples.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Burnside: I welcome the motion, and I hope that it will be unanimously supported by the House.

Mr Bresland: I congratulate the Members who introduced the motion to the Assembly. The Post Office's announcement of major changes to its network in Northern Ireland has caused considerable unease in the community. The Post Office's failure to manage the proposals effectively has caused confusion about how the changes will eventually be implemented.

The Post Office recommends four types of outreach services: mobile; postal; partner; and home services. They all raise important questions about how they will effectively serve the needs of Post Office customers, whose many questions remain unanswered. What is an outreach facility? Will the shops' staff be fully trained to meet the needs of Post Office customers? Will the

outreach centres guarantee the confidentiality that is extremely important to customers, particularly elderly people? What is the exact nature of services that the proposed outreach facilities will offer?

The proposed changes will have a major impact in my West Tyrone constituency. Although only one post office, at Strathroy in Omagh, will close, the outreach services that will replace a further 11 post offices in west Tyrone account for 20% of the proposed total.

Mr Shannon: The Ballyhalbert post office, in my constituency, completes 300 transactions daily; it is ludicrous to close or reduce the hours of a post office with that level of transactions. Does the Member agree that the pen-pushers — who are responsible for the closures — have adopted a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey evaluation that is based on monetary reasons and that they must consider the lives that will be adversely affected by the closures and the reduction in hours?

Mr Bresland: I agree with the Member. The village of Dunnamanagh in north Tyrone has a population of over 600. The Post Office has proposed the closure of the branch to incorporate a partner service with the village shop, which, perhaps, is a reasonable move. However, many local residents are concerned that this process will eventually lead to the closure of that post office and are confused about confidentiality and what services that new partnership will offer. According to Post Office proposals to introduce outreach options, only Annahilt, Feeny and Dunnamanagh have a population of more than 500. That does not include the rural hinterland that supports those post offices. That level of population should be able to sustain a post office in a village such as Dunnamanagh.

The vast majority of the proposed changes are in rural communities, and, although I fully accept that it is unsustainable to retain a post office with 28 customers, more thought must be given to how the Government can support rural post offices. That will be achieved only by offering a wide range of professional services to ensure that all age groups use and support the local post office.

Mrs Long: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the Business Committee for scheduling the debate. The consultation period on this issue is too short. Those people who use post office services are frustrated and feel that they are being denied the opportunity to reply fully. Such a short consultation period hampers consideration of possible alternatives to closure that could make the services sustainable. We cannot consider the matter comprehensively in a six-week period.

The number of services that are exclusive to post offices has, over time, reduced. The revenue stream from benefits administration, for example, has also ceased. Those are central government decisions, which

have led to post office services becoming less viable. They have essentially dismantled the service and only now are asking people about the order in which to dismantle it, and we should all be concerned about that.

Therefore, we must bear in mind that the problem was not created by the Post Office. However, it is the Post Office's responsibility to respond to the new circumstances in a creative way, and I believe that it is failing. This is not the first wave of closures; there has been a cycle of closures, and the most recent proposals prove that closures are not the best option to improve sustainability.

If closure is the only option explored, we simply delay the inevitable — the complete destruction of the service. Libraries have suffered a similar fate; opening hours were reduced and became so intermittent that numbers fell and, eventually, libraries closed. Therefore, we must, in conjunction with the Post Office, examine the potential for co-location of public- and private-sector services in order to provide more sustainable services for the future. Like other Members, I have received numerous representations from constituents who will be directly affected by the proposed closures of Summerhill, Orangefield and Belmont post offices in my constituency — a constituency with higher-than-average levels of elderly people.

A mile may not seem far to a fit individual who is looking at a map in an office. However, the reality and cost of negotiating that extra mile to the post office and home again could be the difference for many older people, people with restricted mobility and people with young families between reliance on others and retaining independence. It is not only the journey to and from the post office but the waiting times — whether that be waiting times at busy branches or waiting times for buses — that we must consider. The social consequences are serious, and we must also consider whether there is suitable parking for people with disabilities adjacent to proposed alternative post offices.

4.15 pm

I caution Members against getting caught on the hook of a rural-urban split and focusing on indices of social deprivation as the only issue. Disconnection, fragmentation and isolation do not happen only to whole communities at a time: they often happen to vulnerable individuals within communities; those who live in an otherwise affluent and mobile community but who do not have their own transport, access to affordable alternatives or the Internet. Such people can suffer the type of total isolation that is generally not measured by statistics or addressed by Government. We need to be aware of that issue and those people for whom the Post Office is providing a service.

The consequences for businesses and services that are sited adjacent to post offices have to be considered.

They rely on the footfall generated by post offices, and we have seen again and again that, when a local post office or library closes, the adjacent shops find that the footfall drops and business becomes less sustainable. That happened the last time there was a wave of post office closures, and it will happen this time. However, this is not just about shopping and business; it is about the other services that the post offices provide.

The last round of post office closures related largely to businesses that were not viable: that is not so on this occasion. In many cases now, the post offices and stores providing post office services are viable businesses. However, with the removal of post office services, they may no longer be viable. That will have implications for the Assembly's commitment to encourage entrepreneurship; support small- and medium-sized businesses, and reinvigorate declining communities.

The issue is massive. When the Assembly agrees its resolution today, I hope that the Post Office listens to the elected representatives.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the debate. What was once a vibrant public service is now, unfortunately, in terminal decline. The proposal to close many post offices is the latest in a series of cuts to the post office network across the country and, as Naomi Long mentioned, the Assembly has been powerless to do anything about it. Decisions have been taken by the British Government in conjunction with Post Office management, and we need imaginative proposals that will prevent the closures.

As other Members have said, the brevity of the consultation period gives rise to huge concern. For many people, six weeks is insufficient time to make a considered and comprehensive response to the proposals.

David Burnside, a Member for South Antrim, cited the example of Parkhall post office. Last week, during a public meeting on the closure of post office at Blacks Road, Belfast, to which Post Office management were invited, several issues were put to them which they had not factored into their proposals. One of the main issues was that the Protestant and Catholic communities use that post office, which is situated between Suffolk Road and Blacks Road.

We are in a new political era, and we are striving to bring both communities together, yet the Post Office is closing shared facilities. Members have made representations about the Carlisle Circus post office and other places in north Belfast where the same situation obtains: both communities using a post office that is being threatened with closure.

At the meeting about the Blacks Road post office, which I attended, Post Office representatives conceded that they had not considered that point when framing their proposals. We should be aiming to use the slogan

“shared service for a shared future”. Post offices are more than just places in which one can post letters and parcels: they are part and parcel of the community. The elderly, people with disabilities and those on benefits rely on their post offices: for them they are essential.

I fear for the future of the post office network. As recently as 2006, the Post Office had plans to abolish the Post Office card account. However, because of the reaction of Westminster MPs, representing constituencies throughout Britain, the Government pulled back from that.

Therefore the matter may again be open to consideration. There is also concern about how the Post Office is undertaking the consultation process, as many of the post offices that are being told that they may be closed were not even consulted. Members did not know anything about the matter until we were notified of it through the post. Questions exist about the Post Office's approach to the exercise.

I understand that the Post Office is under commercial pressures and that the market has changed, but the Assembly needs to find ways of returning services to the Post Office. It was once the case that TV licences, for example, could be paid for at post office branches, but those services are being withdrawn. The Assembly must consider that matter.

Some local businesses rely on their local post office, and, in turn, those businesses are part and parcel of the survival of their post office, so closing post offices in some areas will affect local businesses. Therefore we must consider measures will that ensure that post offices play a central role in their community. I fear that if a large number of post offices closes — both in rural and urban areas — many people, particularly the elderly and persons with disabilities, will become increasingly isolated. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr W McCrea: As have others, I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion; I give it my whole-hearted support. The motion is a valuable contribution to the debate, and I trust that the Post Office and the Government will listen to the representation made by the Assembly, especially as I believe that the motion will receive unanimous support. We support the motion because it is appropriate that a proper network of services be provided for the people of Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge that the UK Government and the Post Office made the decision about post office closures before the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The period that has been set aside for consultation is certainly short — six weeks. That is totally unacceptable. It leads many to believe that the real purpose of the consultation is not necessarily to hear what the community has to say, but in fact is to perform the act of consultation without doing so meaningfully. I am happy to be proved wrong and to be assured that the Government and the Post Office are listening to this debate and will act accordingly.

Over the years, the Government has dismantled many of the services that post offices provided to the community. Naturally, after many of those services have been withdrawn, it will be claimed that the local post office is not viable, but that is because it was not given the opportunity to remain viable and to continue operating as it had always done. I understand that, as time moves on, we cannot ask that nothing ever change. However, in reference to my constituency of South Antrim, I congratulate two of my colleagues from Antrim Borough Council — Councillor Brian Graham and Councillor John Smyth. They called the community together and allowed elected representatives from across the political spectrum to hear what the community was saying about the proposal to close the post office in Parkhall.

I am absolutely amazed at that proposal. I spoke to Elaine Murdoch, who is a member of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) from Parkhall Mace and post office in Antrim, who told me that they are at a complete loss as to why they have to close their post office, as they have more than 1,200 customers a week and the two surrounding housing estates are growing all the time. Only last year, that post office won the award for the UK community post office of the year for outstanding sales and performance, and it came third in the UK for its special delivery sales. After achieving that high standard, the workers were simply thanked for their services and for what they had done to sell post office services.

Sometimes when I listen to Post Office officials, I feel that they are not selling the service. Rather than selling the service to the community, they tell us why post offices have to close. If the services are not sold properly, and if the post offices' ability to continue to provide the services is bad-mouthed, the heart will naturally be taken out of the community, and the services that they should be promoting will not be sold.

That post office in the heart of Antrim, despite winning a UK community post office of the year award for outstanding sales and performance, is being rewarded with closure. That is disgraceful. What message does that send to the people of Antrim or to postmasters and postmistresses across the Province?

That post office is not being closed because it is unviable or because it is not profitable — it has received an award because of its success. However, its workers are now being told that, irrespective of what success they achieved, it is being closed simply because a certain number of post offices have to be closed. That is what it comes down to.

Many senior citizens in Antrim who rely on the excellent services that are provided by that post office will no longer be able to do so. That is a despicable situation and it is a shame. The Assembly has to demand

that the Government listen to us and provide us with an appropriate consultation period to put the full case for local post offices.

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

Mr Armstrong: The importance of this issue is reflected in the media coverage that has been given to the announcement that so many post offices in Northern Ireland face closure.

Four post offices in my own constituency of Mid Ulster have been earmarked for closure, and a further three are to be downgraded to provide outreach services. The four earmarked for closure are Culnady, which is in the Magherafelt District Council area, Sandholes and Killycolpy, which are in the Cookstown District Council area, and Clonoe, which is in the Dungannon District Council area.

As Members know, Mid Ulster is a predominately rural constituency, and the closure of post offices in the above areas will be a hammer blow to the communities that they serve. Post offices are a vital part of the fabric of rural areas, and I do not accept that they should be closed.

The people of Desertmartin, Churchtown and Dunnamore are only slightly better off. Although their post offices are not due to be closed completely, they are to be downgraded, with an outreach service being put in place.

As experience has taught us in this country, simply saying no is not enough. If we are to persuade the Government and Post Office to rethink their closure plans, we must present them with an alternative that will deliver viable and sustainable businesses. That will ensure that we do not find ourselves in the same position later down the line.

Having been starved of public services, rural areas have faced an onslaught for many years. Increased car ownership and the growth of out-of-town supermarkets have assisted in the demise of small shopkeepers such as grocers, butchers and newsagents, and have contributed to the reduction of employment in rural areas.

A recent report by the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association warned that up to 700 shops could be in jeopardy unless the growth of large out-of-town developments is curbed. It is of little surprise that village post offices should be at risk when the Government have already removed some of their most profitable services.

That has had an especially negative impact on those who are already marginalised or socially excluded, which includes the elderly, people with disabilities and those who do not have access to a car. What will they do? Who will speak for them? As MLAs, we were elected to speak for them and to influence the Government.

Those issues, when considered along with the threat of closure that hangs over many rural schools due to

falling rolls, clearly show that the fabric of life in many of our towns and villages is under threat.

4.30 pm

I believe, however, that if there is a will there is a way. We need to breathe new life into rural communities. The Executive and local government must examine what they can do to assist the threatened post offices via funding, rate relief and the transfer of functions from council or Government offices into local offices that might be incorporated into post offices. A Government rethink is required. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: It appears that the Post Office has a death wish that will impact rural and suburban areas in Northern Ireland in a way that will knock the stuffing out of the communities concerned. It will also knock the stuffing out of any small retail businesses that need the post office connection to ensure that they remain viable. That is borne out by the presence here today of representatives from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, which represents thousands of small retailers.

We can accept those proposals, go through the ritual of objections and protests, and quietly tell ourselves that the closures are inevitable. Then we can sit back and wait for the next wave of closures that will come in 2011, as sure as night follows day. If we are sincere about saving our suburban and rural areas from further erosion and loss of identity, we can take positive action.

Various Members mentioned their communities — I mention Millburn in Coleraine, which provides a 37.5-hour service to 1,500 customers every week. It is a community that has a large elderly population, and it also has many young mothers with young children. What is the alternative for them? According to the Post Office, elderly people could go to the main post office because they get free travel. That is wonderful. The Post Office also said that space is provided on buses for disabled people who use wheelchairs. There is even a pelican crossing for those who want to brave the traffic. That is the alternative that the Post Office is offering to the people of Millburn in Coleraine. It is no different to the situation in Parkhall and various other places mentioned.

There was a ritual culling of post offices during the time of the previous Assembly. Various debates took place in Westminster, but nothing really happened. It is time that this Assembly took the bull by the horns and took a direct interest in the future of our post offices. If we have a strategy, I am sure that the people intending to close so many branches will be interested in listening to us. That is why I am pleased that this motion includes the creation of an ad hoc committee, because we should challenge the Post Office on what it is doing.

There have been success stories in other places. In recent times in the Republic, post offices have been

matched up to financial services. That has been a huge success, given that many working-class people do not have bank accounts.

Banks have already begun the closure of branches in Northern Ireland. If we sit back and do nothing, many of our towns and villages will be left without a bank or a post office. In England, up to 60% of decent-sized towns have been left with no bank, no post office, no butcher, no baker — no sense of community. We could not live with that happening here.

Clearly, the people in charge of the Post Office have only one agenda — that is clear from recent interviews. They are bent on wiping out post offices, and they will continue the present trend. It is a situation that we cannot tolerate or accept. We can lie down, or we can get up and challenge what they are doing, but we need proposals that will work. We can overcome adversity and make a success of our post offices by breathing new life into them.

The credit union movement was set up many years ago with nothing more than a suitcase. There are now credit unions in every town and village right across this island because people were inspired by the idea, and were committed and dedicated to it. All of those are sustainable and provide a service. I would love to see that replicated for the post offices.

I have been told that this Assembly has not been particularly good at supporting the post offices in the past. The 11 Departments have given very little Government work to the post offices. That is one way in which they could be supported.

This Assembly can be remembered for what it built and retained, or it can go down in history as having stood idly by, allowing whole communities to be wiped out. I hope that we will not do that, and, therefore, I am glad that we are having this debate. I hope that the agenda will be shifted and that we can take the initiative, create inspiration and stop the lemming-like approach to the future of the post offices. By being inspirational and imaginative, and by looking at the best models elsewhere, we can adapt and make the necessary changes to avert the crisis.

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

I support the motion. Much has been said about post office closures most keenly impacting on those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the community. I agree with the thrust of the speeches made by John Dallat, Naomi Long and others about the need to be creative and imaginative and to approach the situation from a solution-orientated point of view, rather than with a mindset that accepts closures as inevitable. I commend my colleagues Paul Butler and Willie Clarke for raising many of the points that I intended to raise.

I support the idea of extending the consultation period, as detailed by the Rural Community Network, Help the Aged and other groups. A 12-week consultation makes much more sense than a six-week one. I seek assurance that the consultation is real, because people often feel that consultation exercises are not real. It is to be regretted that the Post Office is not accountable to the Assembly and that this is a reserved matter, rather than a transferred matter, as we would like it to be.

I wish to make the case for Strathroy post office in Omagh. Strathroy post office is earmarked for closure, and there is no plan to mitigate the impact of that by establishing outreach services, for example. An editorial in the 'Ulster Herald' — a newspaper that is read widely in County Tyrone — described the closure as a dumb idea that should be returned to sender. It is a bad idea at best, a dumb idea at worst, and it should be returned to sender. The decision-makers must examine the particular circumstances and the merits of the case, because that closure is particularly ill-thought-out.

In my capacity as an MLA for West Tyrone, I convened a meeting last Friday with several community representatives in the area. I was pleased that Barbara Rolston, the head of external relations for the Royal Mail Group, and Sheila McCann, the network development manager with Post Office Ltd, attended the meeting. They agreed to come along and hear the views of the community in that part of Omagh at short notice, and I appreciate that. Both of those senior representatives told us that they were not part of the consultation team. They said that the petition that was handed to them would be forwarded to the consultation team. That consultation team is invisible, and it seems to be unaccountable. It seems to be somewhere beyond the representatives of Royal Mail Group and the network development manager.

At that meeting, the Post Office representatives and I listened to testimonies from local people. People said that the community is part urban and part rural. Strathroy is an area of social deprivation, but it has a strong sense of community. It is a neighbourhood renewal area, and it has a tremendous Sure Start project at the heart of the community. The Strathroy estate and Lisanelly were planned around that major post office and shop facility, which is at the centre of the community. Even the single-storey dwellings that accommodate older people were concentrated in an area that allowed them to take advantage of the proximity of the post office.

We heard from young parents about the cost of public transport for those who wished to travel from the Gortin Road or the Derry Road to the centre of Omagh. They must travel to the Ulsterbus depot and then make their way to the main post office at the SuperValu in the town centre.

The cost in pounds, shillings and pence was spelt out by parents who calculated what it would cost if they had to bring their children with them on the journey. Many older people will have to bring along their home helps.

The proposal has not been future-proofed. Strathroy is adjacent to the Lisanelly site in Omagh, the development plans for which were debated in the Chamber last week. Plans exist for 545 houses adjoining the Strathroy estate, including a Costcutter. The merits and special circumstances of the case must be looked at.

Lord Browne: I am pleased to support the motion on the closure of post offices. However, I am sure that most of us are only too aware of recent dismal predictions of a bleak outlook for the economies of western developed countries. If those prove to be correct, there will be business closures and job losses, which will be a matter of great concern for us all.

That said, it is a profound mistake to regard the closure of a post office as if it were the closure of any other business. The breadth and diversity of the services that post offices offer make them distinct. Not only do they provide accessibility, banking services and cash withdrawals, but they provide a unique link between the public and Departments.

The advice that post offices provide is particularly useful to the disadvantaged sections of the community. Today, we are constantly faced with a barrage of cold calls trying to make us part with our money for super-special offers such as mobile phone contracts or super interest rate loans; older people like me would need a PhD in finance to understand the jargon. That is when advice from someone you can trust — from someone in a post office — is invaluable.

Surveys show that those aged 65 or over, the disabled, carers and single-parent families are the biggest users of post office services. Post offices are the main source of cash for deprived urban residents, especially those without cars or bank accounts. Those are the people who will find it most difficult to adapt to the loss of their local post offices.

It would be easy for a middle-class housewife to make a stop in her people carrier at a new post office in a fancy garage. It is a completely different matter for an elderly person suffering from arthritis who walks the few yards from his or her home to a local post office, which is now threatened with closure. People will say that pensioners have free bus passes, but we must take into account how far the bus stops are from their houses and how long they will have to wait for a bus in the pouring rain.

As Naomi Long pointed out, East Belfast has been hit hard. Of the 10 proposed closures in Belfast, three are in East Belfast: Orangefield, Campbell Park Avenue and Summerhill. Of those, two are in the Victoria area, which has the highest proportion of elderly people in

the city and which is one of the two areas in Belfast that is facing two closures.

If those closures go ahead, they will have an adverse affect on local schools, community groups and small businesses, which rely on the local post offices for banking facilities.

Mrs Long: The Member was involved on the previous occasion that closures took place. Would he agree that the closure of the Belmont branch will affect people whose business was previously transferred from as far away as the Knocknagoney branch when it was closed? Those people now have a considerable distance to cross without any bus services or support.

Lord Browne: I agree entirely. Businesses will suffer a further blow through the loss of post offices in their vicinity, especially in Summerhill, Orangefield and Campbell Park Avenue. They will suffer from the loss of custom from people who will be forced to travel to post offices that are further away. As Mrs Long said, they will face longer queues at those post offices and, perhaps, a service that is inferior to that of their local post office.

4.45 pm

Some Members who have ploughed through the voluminous documents that the Post Office has provided to explain the rationale for the closures may be convinced that that organisation has given the fullest consideration to the adverse consequences of its actions. Given that we have been given only a few weeks to consider the documents, it will be difficult to spot all the flaws immediately. I am not convinced that the Post Office has taken all the social and economic consequences into account. Members should recognise that the early retirement packages that were already offered to sub-postmaster officers may have had some influence on the decisions made by the Post Office.

I support the motion.

Mr Savage: I support the motion, and I congratulate the Members who secured the debate. As a rural dweller, I can focus on what post office closures will mean to people in those communities. I understand that there will be 27 post office closures in rural areas, and it is proposed that a further 54 rural post offices will be replaced with outreach services.

I visited the new mobile post office when it visited Stormont two weeks ago. Although I was impressed by the facilities on offer, I was concerned that some rural areas might have the mobile post office for only one hour — or two at the most — once a week. Such provision will be a severe cutback to the daily services that those people are provided with, Monday to Friday, nine-to-five.

The mobile post offices must be accessible to the whole community, especially the elderly, who benefit

greatly from the services provided by post offices. Many post offices provide a focal point and lifeline for people who live in rural areas.

Although I realise that post offices are a reserved matter, I welcome the intervention and comments of local Ministers, such as the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who met recently with the Post Office to discuss the proposed closures.

I echo the comments of the Rural Community Network, which believes that the six-week consultation period is too short. I do not think that anyone could disagree with its chief executive, Michael Hughes, who said:

“Rural post offices provide a vital service for sections of the community, particularly for older people, those with poor literacy and numeracy skills, lone parents, those on benefits and newcomers such as the migrant population. The changes proposed will particularly impact on those who are both vulnerable and disadvantaged and it is vital that their voices are heard during the consultation period.”

He went on to say that the consultation period needs to be lengthened so that a true reflection of the voices of the people can be heard. He said:

“Change has to happen, but I think change has to be planned. There needs to be a long term consultation with the communities that will be affected by these so they have some say in the type of outreach service is meaningful to them. Normal procedure would be at least a 12 week consultation. To have a six week consultation period, particularly with 54 communities affected by an outreach service, is not enough time to allow those communities to have some say about a postal service that will mean something to them.”

The Rural Community Network has asked MLAs and MPs to join with it in calling for an extension to the consultation period. The Post Office must realise that a longer consultation period is required, and it must be aware that it needs to listen to the people. It is obvious that Royal Mail has not fully considered the consequences of the post office closures, which will have a detrimental effect on the vulnerable in society.

The results of the Citizens Advice survey showed what important consequences the post office closures will have on groups of individuals in the community, including those aged 65 and over. There will be big changes to their lifestyles, and those people must be taken in to consideration. With these proposals, we are witnessing the slow death of community life.

It appears that Royal Mail Group is more concerned with profitability and productivity than it is with practicality. Post offices were designed first and foremost to provide a service. Sadly, that ethos has gone to the wall, leaving postmasters facing an uncertain future. The key question for Royal Mail Group arising from the debate is how essential services will be provided for the people who need them most.

The sickening thing is that we are talking about the closure of post offices today; but what is it going to be

next week? The Assembly must support local post offices. I support the motion.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Chamber. In my constituency, the proposal is to close Battlehill and Eleven Lane Ends post offices and operate outreach services in another eight locations. That will represent a significant change in the way in which the Post Office will operate in Newry and Armagh.

Indeed, the local people who will be affected by the changes have been vocal in their opposition to the proposal. As my constituency is largely rural, post office facilities in the area, such as those in Loughgall, Battlehill, Altnamachin, Jerrettspass and Cladymore are a real necessity, especially for the elderly. Rural post offices are a port of call for many rural dwellers, and in many cases, they provide the only service in the area for several miles.

Removing such services will obviously be detrimental to the areas affected, and I am concerned that the rural infrastructure will be weakened as a result. The Post Office argues that centralisation is necessary for the survival of its brand and that the proposals — to either close, operate on reduced hours or use a mobile service — represent the best way forward. Undoubtedly, it must be said that the usage of post office facilities in some areas has been reduced due to other available methods of banking and the centralisation of services in larger villages and towns. However, for people who are less mobile and who live in more remote areas, travelling a few miles to a post office is already a challenge without having to travel many more miles to the nearest facility. Those people will certainly be disadvantaged.

I am also concerned about the small rural businesses in my constituency that rely on the local post offices for various services. Opening times will be greatly reduced at eight local post offices in Newry and Armagh, and in some cases, they will only open for four hours a couple of days per week. In Loughgall, for instance, opening times will be reduced from 40 hours per week to eight hours per week. That will cause a great inconvenience to many people. Indeed, it is possible that it could result in the closure of the only shop in that village.

Although this is a reserved matter, the Assembly can still play a part in reducing the impact of the proposals. It is vital that local people respond to the public consultation — that is the positive way in which they can get the message across that local post offices are lifelines in rural communities. I call on everyone in the community to support their local post offices and not to take them for granted.

Lastly, I hope that the Members present here today are not hypocrites who say that they support the motion but

drive past their local post office to use other facilities. I support the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Carmel Hanna and John Dallat for bringing the motion to the Chamber. It concerns a matter that is hugely important for so many people across Northern Ireland.

For as long as can I remember, post offices have been an integral part of the community. For many people they are a lifeline; they provide essential services in a way that cannot be provided by bigger, commercial organisations.

Most importantly, for elderly and vulnerable people and for young families, post offices provide a very personal service. Post office staff know the names of their customers; they know who is well and unwell, and they know their customers' circumstances, which is important when it comes to benefit-related banking services. Post offices provide services in a way that banks cannot — banks do not want to provide services to people in the way that post offices do at present. For obvious reasons, banks are not interested in people who are on benefits.

Everyone, young and old, should take the opportunity to participate in the consultation process.

In my constituency of Foyle, the closure of post offices in rural and urban centres will cause real problems for the most vulnerable in society. Claudy post office serves Claudy village and the surrounding rural area. Many people in that area are elderly or disabled, and many suffer from financial hardship. If that post office closes, how will the most vulnerable from that area manage their affairs? How will they get their benefits? The banks in the city will be unable to provide the social and economic function that is carried out so well by post offices.

John Dallat mentioned credit unions. They could be integrated with post offices and could provide the same services as banks. For example, credit unions could introduce the smart-card system to enable customers to access their social security benefits.

The Carlisle Road post office in Derry, which serves mainly the Protestant area of the Fountain and surrounding areas, is also designated for closure. There are high levels of unemployment in those areas, as well as high numbers of elderly and disabled people. Indeed, some sheltered homes are strategically placed within walking distance of that post office.

By definition, the least economically viable post offices are in the areas of highest social and economic disadvantage. That is a paradox. The post offices that are closing are used mainly by people who suffer the worst social and economic disadvantage. The closures will hit the most isolated areas, and the people who are in most need of the post office services will be denied them if the proposed closures go ahead.

As other Members said, the Assembly should send a strong signal to the British Government that the post office network is a means of ensuring social inclusion. Post offices are a vital part of the infrastructure that is necessary for the reduction of poverty and exclusion. Social disadvantage and the social and economic impact of closures should be taken into account when deciding where post offices should be located and which post offices should be closed.

I am delighted to take part in today's debate. As other Members said, everyone should participate in the consultation process to get the message across loud and clear that post offices should be protected.

Ms Lo: I thank Mrs Hanna for proposing the motion, which I support fully. I, too, am concerned about post office closures, particularly those on the Lisburn Road and the Ormeau Road, as they are in my constituency of South Belfast. People in South Belfast suffered in the previous wave of post office closures a few years ago, and now they will suffer a second round of such reductions. The closures will cause serious cutbacks on local service provision.

Last week, I met with residents on the Lisburn Road and visited their post office. Many elderly people live in that area, and that extra half a mile to and from the next post office is too much for them, particularly in the bad weather, which we regularly have, if I may say. That extra distance would add worries about security for elderly people, particularly when they have just collected their pensions. Many elderly people are dependent on the post office and trust the staff there. I saw with my own eyes that the postmaster of the Lisburn Road post office has a big pack of benefit cards in his drawer, which were given to him by elderly people who were worried that they might lose their cards. He has worked there for 14 years, and he knows his customers well and cares about them. It is a family run business, and his daughter works in the post office as sub-postmistress.

5.00 pm

People are devastated by the proposed closure. That post office is very much the hub of the community, where people meet their friends and neighbours and look out for one another. If someone does not turn up for a while, questions are asked.

When I visited the post office, I could see that it is a very busy, friendly and viable business. Both the residential and business communities in the Lisburn Road area, which has many shops and businesses, use the post office to bank the day's takings. It serves different sections of our community with very diverse backgrounds, and it serves nurses and staff from the nearby hospital.

The closure does not make sense when the business is viable, and many customers are not aware of the proposed

closure. Many of them are not aware of the consultation. As Members have highlighted, the consultation period is not long enough. I propose to drop leaflets among the residents of the local area to alert people to this issue.

I hope that the Assembly will support the motion and take a strategic look at keeping viable local post offices open.

Mr P J Bradley: Before I wind up on the motion, I would like to include some comments of my own. I open my remarks with a comment similar to the one that I made when representatives of the Post Office attended a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

At that meeting on 8 April 2008, I asked whether the visit by those officials was merely a cosmetic exercise. I suggested that, no matter what Committee members had to say or propose, no changes would be made to the proposals of the Post Office to abandon numerous rural communities. Will today be any different? Will the views of Members — particularly those who represent rural areas — who are concerned about the proposals of the Post Office to shut 96 of its current facilities even be considered?

Given that the 27-working-day consultation process is more than halfway over — it closes on 12 May 2008 — we should know the result of our endeavours on behalf of those whom we represent very soon.

My fears that the Assembly and the Committee may be ignored are based on the lack of consideration given to the efforts of one of our Ministers on the issue of post office closures.

On 22 June 2007, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development referred in a press release to a meeting that she had held with the Royal Mail and Post Offices Ltd, when she heard about the preparations being made to reduce the size of the urban and rural post office network, following the Department of Trade and Industry's proposals for reform. The Minister, recognising that it was a crucial period for rural areas, said that she was determined to play her part to ensure that the needs of the rural communities would be fully taken into account when decisions were made on the size and shape of the future post office network.

The Minister made it known that her officials would work closely with Royal Mail and Post Offices Ltd on future provision. I believe that it is fair to assume that exchanges between DARD officials, Post Offices Ltd and the Royal Mail did take place, but, given the proposals announced on 1 April, those exchanges were non-productive. If the Minister and her Department were ignored, why should we, as mere Members of this Assembly, expect to be treated any differently?

At the meeting of the Committee to which I referred earlier, I made a special case for the retention of Attical

post office, which is located in the heart of the Mournes. The post office serves the village and forms part of a wider service that is provided to a very scattered and diverse community by the sole retailer in the village. The post office is the key element of business that is carried out in the popular village store.

Attical post office attracts people from across a wide catchment area and plays a significant social role in the community. The people who reside in those areas that are serviced by that facility do not see themselves as being of one persuasion or the other. They consider themselves to be people of the Mournes, living and working side by side as a united people.

Attical post office — and the village store — is the hub of the community, and it should be noted how people there live in harmony together. Indeed, press releases show that the proposed closure is opposed by their elected representatives from the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party. The Post Office has proposed to offer the Attical customers what it terms an "outreach service" — a mobile van service. I am convinced that that is a temporary form of appeasement, offered to lessen the eventual effects of total withdrawal.

Rural and urban dwellers alike have witnessed the downgrading of the services that post offices provide. That was no doubt a preparatory measure to allow for closure and to lessen the impact of what we now face. That is also the case with mobile post offices — it is inevitable that even that basic type of service will be withdrawn in a few years' time, if not sooner. A couple of hijackings or the mobile unit having a flat wheel or two — or any other reason imaginable — will be all the excuse that the Post Office needs to withdraw the service when it believes it timely to do so. I make one final appeal to any decision-maker who might be listening: please revisit the proposal for Attical post office, and, when doing so, please read from the handout that Post Office Ltd distributed at its meeting with the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Development on 8 April. It stated:

"Our aim is to make Post Office Ltd a business with a social purpose."

If the Post Office Ltd proceeds as planned at Attical, it would not only be removing a business with a social aspect, it would be introducing the beginning of the end for a close-knit rural community.

I now turn to my winding-up speech. I first wish to thank my colleagues Carmel Hanna and John Dallat for bringing this detailed motion to the House. I thank all the Members who took part in the debate and supported them. The fact that only one and a half hours was allocated for the debate meant that many Members were denied the opportunity to speak. I can speak only for the SDLP — I know that a dozen of our Members

wanted to speak. I am sure that all the other parties were in the same boat.

Carmel Hanna mentioned the earlier post office closures, and she predicted that there would be further closures. She touched on the domino effect that closure will have on other businesses attached to post offices. She identified the consequences that closure will have for many communities in Belfast, including those in South Belfast, an area that she knows best. She called for an economic appraisal, an equality impact assessment and an extended consultation period.

Lord Morrow used the word that he thought best described his feelings, and the feelings of all elected representatives: "revulsion". That feeling is shared by all the communities under threat. He, too, requested that the proposed closures in his constituency be reconsidered.

Willie Clarke questioned the Post Office's decision to close post offices that are economically viable. He made suggestions of merit regarding the future of the service, particularly in rural areas. Mr Burnside exposed the hypocrisy of the Post Office. An award was given to the Parkhall post office in his constituency just last year; this year, the proposal is to close it. What does that tell us about those making the proposals — the pen-pushers, as Jim Shannon called them?

Mr Bresland touched on the plethora of services that are proposed to replace the post offices. He described the futility of introducing such measures and named a number of areas in his constituency that deserve better professional services.

Naomi Long criticised the all-too-short consultation process and mentioned the cycle of closures. The Member for East Belfast gave us an insight into the consequences for her constituency if the draconian measures are implemented. Like me, she wondered whether anyone up there was listening.

Mr Butler repeated the comments of others, and he was concerned about the short consultation period. He questioned the attention that will be given to the Assembly's views. He was also critical of the constant downgrading of post office services and the inevitable outcome of the downgrading process.

Dr McCrea commended the proposer of the motion on bringing the matter to the Assembly. He dealt at length with the very limited consultation period, and he expressed his views on why the consultation period was so short. The ludicrous situation regarding Parkhall post office was central to Dr McCrea's address, and he demanded that Government immediately review the proposals.

Mr Billy Armstrong devoted his speech to the proposal for his area. He highlighted the lack of services in rural areas and the negative impact on the rural community. My colleague John Dallat, who is the joint proposer of the motion, has championed the cause of both rural and suburban post offices for many years in both this Assembly and the previous Assembly. He described

the situation in Coleraine, which is similar to the situation elsewhere. He highlighted the need to establish urgently an Ad Hoc Committee in an effort to think creatively about the serious outcomes of the proposals.

Mr McElduff referred to the Rural Community Network and Age Concern and their desire to have a 12-week consultation process. He also highlighted the lack of accountability by the Post Office, and he concluded by stating that the proposals had not been future-proofed.

Lord Browne spoke of the job losses that would ensue if the proposals are allowed to proceed. He made reference to the various categories that would suffer most as a result of the proposed closures. In particular, he spoke of the effects that the closures will have on senior citizens, and he concluded by warning of the social and economic consequences of the proposals.

Mr George Savage spoke about the proposed mobile post offices and the fact that he has no confidence in the service that they would provide. He also called for a longer consultation period to allow for a better and more realistic picture to emerge, concluding by suggesting that this is the only the beginning and that there is worse to come.

Mr William Irwin took us on a tour of the Newry and Armagh constituency and listed the post offices that are earmarked for closure there. He was also critical of the proposed opening hours for the post offices. I welcome his call for the community to respond to the consultation process.

My colleague Pat Ramsey described the Post Office as a lifeline to many people, repeating the call for everyone to make their views known on the closures. He questioned why the Post Office was targeting the most vulnerable and socially deprived people in society.

Anna Lo a South Belfast Member discussed the first tranche of closures in her constituency and suggested that further closures would be a major disadvantage for many people, especially the elderly. She also questioned the reasons for closing viable businesses.

It only remains for me to thank everyone for taking part in the debate, and, as someone said earlier, I hope that the vote on the motion will be unanimous.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the recent announcement that 96 local post offices are to close or be replaced by an 'outreach' service; believes that the six-week consultation period is too short; further believes such closures and service reductions will have an adverse impact on community and social infrastructure in rural and urban areas and will adversely affect older people, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups; acknowledges that provision of post office services is a reserved matter; and resolves to establish urgently an Ad Hoc Committee to think creatively about, and make proposals for, partnerships that could enhance the economic case for viable local postal services based on engagement with commercial, voluntary and public sector partners and learning from the experience in the Republic of Ireland.

Construction Industry Jobs

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on construction industry jobs. Before I begin, I inform Members that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has written to me to advise that due to unavoidable diary commitments, he regrets that he is not available to respond to the motion. He has arranged for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Nigel Dodds, to respond on his behalf.

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. 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 McEluff: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the job losses in the construction industry in recent times; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to establish a working relationship with all his Executive colleagues and key stakeholders from the industry to devise a strategy aimed at creating further opportunities and sustaining jobs in this sector.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I state from the outset that I and Sinn Féin are happy to accept the amendment, as it adds value to the motion.

I assert the importance of the construction industry, which could rightly be described as the backbone of the local economy throughout the island, North and South.

In the North alone, the construction industry has an annual total output of approximately £3.2 billion and employs some 85,000 people. It is, therefore, one of our largest single industrial sectors. That is according to the Construction Employers Federation (CEF), which also drew attention to the 1,500 job losses in the sector in recent months.

Those losses have happened for a variety of reasons. One reason, but not the only one, is the slowdown in house building and the flatness of the housing market.

There is serious concern in the industry and fear for its short-term future. If the construction industry sneezes, the entire economy catches a cold. Why do I say that? I say it because building suppliers, planners, architects, engineers, plant-hire companies, surveyors, estate agents, solicitors, banks, advertisers, shops and even hot-food counters will all feel the pinch and experience the knock-on effects.

5.15 pm

I have highlighted the great uncertainty that exists at present. In the North, for example, builders and developers who, during the past couple of years, took risks and

bought land at high prices, have expressed serious disquiet that they must set aside 20% of every development for social and affordable housing. They are at pains to point out that although they support the concept of providing social and affordable housing, they want mechanisms to be introduced that will prevent the industry from being crippled and allow it time to adapt.

In 2007, 78,000 homes were built in the South of Ireland. However, only 45,000 were built in 2008 and just 37,000 are predicted to be built in 2009. Often, that affects self-employed people most. Of construction workers, 70% are self-employed and do not receive sick pay, for example.

The motion calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take action in the first instance. However, the Assembly has been told that the Minister of Finance and Personnel cannot be present at the debate and that he is happy to delegate that responsibility to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The debate is also relevant to other Ministers — a plethora of them could have been in attendance today. Although I am happy that the Enterprise Minister is present, the debate has messages for a range of Ministers, which is why the motion calls on Minister Robinson to establish a working relationship with relevant Executive colleagues. The amendment calls on him to do that on a North/South basis, particularly given the nature of the building trade and the wider construction industry.

During the past week, I took the initiative of writing to builders and contractors in West Tyrone to ask them for feedback on the issue. I received replies from them within a quick turnaround. Planning Service could learn a thing or two about prompt turnarounds for correspondence to an Assembly Member for West Tyrone. I posed questions on what hurdles, obstacles and threats are faced by the construction industry. The views that were expressed demonstrate the relevance of the issue across many Departments.

For example, DOE's Planning Service was described by many contributors as the biggest single influence on the industry. Draft PPS 14 was quoted extensively; for example, its blanket ban on building houses in the countryside and the need to improve the poor criteria for replacement of dwellings. The Assembly awaits with interest the outcome of deliberations on draft PPS 14.

I have been told that rather than enabling development, the planning system frustrates it. It holds up major construction projects; draws out decision-making; and creates lengthy delays in the processing of planning applications. The system is too slow. The Assembly tries to attract inward investment and build hospitals, schools and houses. Two years is too long to wait for a planning decision. Indeed, many developers wait much longer. People say that accountability is needed. Although that is certainly the case, management processes are

also needed that will deliver quicker, more efficient decision-making and that will not cripple the construction industry.

The water service, Roads Service, Environment and Heritage Service and Northern Ireland Electricity have all been faulted for the turnaround in their consultation times. Each has the capacity to slow the process down or to speed it up. Again, that has a tremendous effect on company planning, because local companies' finances are not finite.

The industry tells me that banks need to be more flexible and lenient. In the current climate, they are slower to give out much-needed loans. They constantly push for payments and show no understanding of circumstances.

If we consider what the Department for Social Development, the Housing Executive and housing associations can do, I have been told that in Strabane, for example, there is plenty of Housing Executive land that could be released to allow private developers to build houses at an affordable rate.

A constituent has written to me describing how he invested false hope in co-ownership housing association funding. Minister Margaret Ritchie announced this February that part of the new agenda for housing included a major investment in co-ownership housing and that, among other initiatives, the threshold for purchasing a property would be increased to £180,000.

The press release was no sooner issued than the money for the project was pulled. People are asking me whether the Minister understood the funding restrictions in her own Department before she raised people's hopes by making an official statement.

The Minister also said:

"give me the money and I will build the houses." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p134, col 2*].

We have yet to see any evidence of that. Questions are being asked about the possibility of housing benefit increasing to address the realities of 2008.

The investment strategy and the Programme for Government promise much, but builders, contractors and others in the construction industry are frustrated because the plans are not taking effect quickly enough on the ground.

The Titanic Quarter, the potential education campus at Lisanelly in Omagh, retail and housing projects, and the Maze/Long Kesh stadium project are all being talked about. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister heard that the entire Maze/Long Kesh project could produce up to 10,000 jobs, many of which would be in the construction industry.

The shelving or stalling of the A5 and M2 road projects, along with school and hospital initiatives,

creates a sense of indecision among observers. People in the construction industry also want more opportunities for smaller, local contractors who are disadvantaged by group procurement.

I welcome the fact that the Programme for Government states that procurement policies must pursue social objectives. Hopefully, that will create opportunities for young apprentices and for the long-term unemployed, and the Department for Employment and Learning can help through appropriate retraining and reskilling.

The construction industry is facing many opportunities — as well as threats and challenges — but it remains a backbone of our economy. The industry wants a level playing field. The Executive, Departments and Ministers are being called upon to intervene and to breathe life into the construction industry, to sustain current jobs and to create future opportunities.

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "times" and insert

"; further notes the infrastructure investment opportunities announced in the Republic of Ireland's National Development Plan; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to establish a working relationship with all his Executive colleagues, relevant Ministers in the Republic of Ireland and key stakeholders from the industry, to devise a strategy aimed at creating further opportunities and sustaining jobs in this sector."

I thank Members for bringing an important and timely issue to the House. I recognise that although we in the Assembly cannot create jobs directly, we can create an environment for others to do so, and we are discussing how we must do that.

The construction industry makes a major contribution to the Northern Ireland economy through employment and turnover. Any decline, shrinkage or shrivelling of that industry affects us all. The sector has grown rapidly over the past few years, not only through house building, but through major regeneration projects in cities such as Belfast and Derry and in towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland. Now, however, as a result of micro- and macro-economic factors, a downturn is fairly inevitable.

Statistics from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's quarterly employment survey and labour force survey show that some 80,000 people are employed in the construction industry. It may be that the figures were assessed too early, but, at this stage, the surveys do not seem to express any sense of concern about job creation or job losses. The figures contained in the surveys fail to take into account the realities of the past few months, in which the "readjustment" — for want of a better word — in the housing market and the global credit crunch are squeezing the construction industry.

I am told that, in the past 12 months, the Northern Ireland construction industry's output amounted to

some £3.4 billion, approximately 50% of which was generated from house building. The significant downturn in the house-building sector is having and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to have a negative impact on the construction industry. That can be predicted from the dramatic fall in the number of new house starts and can be seen in the number of construction workers who are being laid off. Several firms are even operating a four-day week in an attempt to retain staff and keep functioning.

Our planned social housing and education programmes will go some way towards addressing the issue, but they are not nearly enough to offset the current downward spiral. We must put more money into social housing, and we must build more primary schools to replace those that are, in many ways, well beyond their sell-by date. I have visited several primary schools in South Belfast, some of which are 30, 40 or 50 years old, and they all need some repairs, if not full replacement.

The Budget allocation of £1.8 billion a year to the construction industry in our planned investment strategy will lead to opportunities in the sector. However, those opportunities will be severely limited by the fact that that level of expenditure is largely similar to that of previous years, and by the fact that projects are notoriously slow, subject to delays, planning problems and repackaging.

The construction industry in Northern Ireland could, and will, avail itself of, and benefit from, the investment and job opportunities created by the Republic's national development plan. Although I welcome many of the comments made by Mr McElduff in proposing the motion, I regret that he preferred to make a Judas sideswipe at the Minister for Social Development rather than tackling the issue head-on. The Minister for Social Development has had about six weeks to get to grips with the issue, and she has done so. It does not help if there are sneers and jeers from the sidelines.

The Republic's national development plan will encourage valuable North/South co-operation on a range of projects in infrastructure, transport, energy and tourism. The construction industry will have a major role to play in the delivery of those projects, and I am confident that the wealth of experience and skills in our construction industry, which has international recognition and standing, will be deployed in that regard.

Northern firms have already had tremendous success across the world and in the Irish Republic. There have been new developments at the harbours at Killybegs and in Cork, several new bridges and the new motorway to Dublin. Northern firms had a substantial input in all those ventures, which I welcome. I hope that they are equally successful in future.

There are a number of projects in hand. The House has often debated the issue of the A5 Aughnacloy to Omagh road. There are other plans to link Belfast and

Dublin to the north-west, but I will not go into the details of those plans today. The development of the Belfast to Dublin rail network is an important issue; access to tourism and links between County Down and County Louth are being improved. The bridge at Narrow Water is a simple example of that, and much more extensive opportunities exist at that location.

There is work on the restoration of the Ulster canal, the development of City of Derry airport and, last but not least, the development of the North/South electricity interconnector for delivery, we hope, in 2012.

5.30 pm

I stress that I tabled the amendment honestly and openly and not from a party-political motive. I consider it to be good business, and I urge the Minister to work with his Executive colleagues and with Irish Government Ministers to ensure that local construction firms are in the best position to benefit from any opportunities that may arise. The Assembly can assist in that, and, given that the Minister is much more powerful than other Members, I appeal to him to reinforce our efforts to ensure that the construction industry does not sink to its knees. If it is allowed to do so, it might take three or four years to get back up again, and if the skills base is lost and people are redeployed out of the industry, there will be a skills shortage when the industry turns around and labour will have to be found from abroad.

Without being too narrow, I want to ensure that local construction workers are given hope and kept in a job that allows them to bring home a week's pay or a monthly salary on which to live comfortably.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, which comes at an opportune time to address some construction industry issues.

The construction industry is a major employer in the Province, and it generates approximately £3.5 billion a year and employs approximately 80,000 people in various sectors. Although it is clear that the UK is suffering from job losses in the construction industry, there is a positive outlook for Northern Ireland, which alone holds the crown for dramatically reducing skills shortages to the lowest level of any region in the history of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors' construction market survey.

That survey illustrates that workloads have reduced; however, workloads in the private industrial sector have risen, which provides a sense of hope for Northern Ireland's construction industry. Nonetheless, the motion comes at a good time to generate interest, and now that we have the skills, jobs must be provided. I am positive that that can be aided by the Assembly's actions, which is why I support the motion.

I was aggrieved to read that one of the Province's leading surveyor firms cited indecision in local govern-

ment as a major factor in the industry's downturn. As a councillor and an MLA, I understand that planning system restrictions have been a factor in the reduction of jobs, but it is clear that the growth in the Province's industrial sector can and should be repeated across the board.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel and his colleague Nigel Dodds are doing an excellent job in encouraging business growth. Encouraging the emergence and expansion of small businesses will secure construction jobs for generations to come. As businesses expand, the consumer base and customers will follow. Such businesses will require larger premises and, in some circumstances, new buildings, so there will be work to be done. A healthy economy is one that is booming and growing, and Northern Ireland is moving into a growth phase, which should be reflected in the construction industry. I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his work in partnership with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I urge that he continue that partnership because Northern Ireland feels the benefits — not least in the construction industry.

Although it is clear that we have the required skilled labour — indeed, many of our construction workers are poached for work on mainland projects, such as Canary Wharf — the fact that much essential work in our hospitals has been undertaken by companies from the Republic of Ireland and overseas must be highlighted. I urge Ministers to ensure that any work carried out on Northern Ireland properties that are owned or rented by the Government should be undertaken by home-based firms. That will increase the work for our construction industry. That said, some properties' rental agreements stipulate that certain firms must be used; however, regulations should ensure that such firms hail from Northern Ireland and not from further afield.

I believe we have the skills, and I think we should employ those skills for our benefit.

The Government are investing in excess of £18 million in building projects, and it is imperative that that work is given to local firms so that Northern Ireland benefits in a two-fold manner, both from the new builds, and from the economic boost that the workload will produce.

It is particularly imperative that, given the additional funds that were given to DSD and earmarked for social housing, the resulting work is given to local firms. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has freed up money for expansion, and the parties must make sure that Northern Ireland benefits fully from that. However, there is concern that although the house-building sector is responsible for over 35,000 jobs, there has been a notable downturn in the number of houses being built and new houses for sale. There is a two-fold issue and problem.

Let us turn in a slightly different direction and focus on social housing, because that is where the jobs are

and where the potential prosperity could be. The market has turned. People are not buying houses as they did previously; they do not have the funds with which to purchase, and, that being the case, and although there is a need for social and private housing, the funds to buy houses are not available at the moment. As a result, developments are not being progressed as quickly as they could be.

As regards draft PPS 14 and the proposed restriction of growth in developments through a blanket ban, I again urge the Minister for Social Development to liaise with our colleague Arlene Foster to implement a new planning policy that will encourage sensible development to supply the needs of the rural community and care for the countryside. It is clear that the construction industry will benefit from that.

In conclusion, the Minister of Finance and Personnel should take much credit for the fact that our economy is turning and is becoming self-sustaining. It is clear that for that to become a reality we must look after our local firms and ensure that they get the work. Each Minister has a major part to play in the security and future of the construction industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I thank the proposers of the motion for securing the debate today. The construction industry represents a valued part of our local economy, and it is something with which we must take care. The industry is one of Northern Ireland's largest areas of private sector employment, generating up to £3.5 billion a year and accounting for about 14% of our gross value added. There are 45,000 employee jobs in the industry, but as many people are self-employed, it is thought that there are actually more than 80,000 people working in the sector.

In recent years the industry in Northern Ireland has seen periods of record growth, and there are reasons for that: the relative peace that we have enjoyed, the buoyant UK economy, the growing local economy and increased confidence have all played a significant role. Although there is merit in the motion, we all must recognise that the Assembly has a limited role to play, as many of the factors involved are driven at UK level or indeed at world economy level.

The construction industry is experiencing a decline, which is in response to the downturn in the housing sector following the UK sub-prime mortgage losses. The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, indicated in its UK first quarter survey of 2008, that public sector housing and public works are now in decline throughout the UK. According to that survey, the Northern Ireland infrastructure workload fell for the third quarter in a row. The survey also indicates that commercial workloads are falling; so there is a range of areas that are declining.

The Executive and the Assembly must ask what more can be done to facilitate and support the construction industry, given its importance. I am aware of sizeable commercial developments in my constituency that are experiencing undue planning delays, and that does not give confidence to those who are putting up money and risking their capital to try and encourage the local economy. We must have an efficient planning system.

What else can be done in the short term? Industry representatives are concerned that the infrastructure projects envisaged under the investment strategy are not proceeding as speedily as they could. It is of paramount importance that those projects are confirmed and are delivered in the most efficient manner. Therefore, I would be grateful if the Minister would update the Assembly, on behalf of his colleagues, on the progress of Departments in implementing the investment plans. The construction industry can be helped by the Executive delivering public funds in a timely fashion; dealing with planning issues, and ensuring that the funding flows.

There have been noticeable delays in some new school developments. For example, a colleague told me that a big fanfare and public announcement was made in January 2005 about a new school to be built on a 28-acre site on the Tempo Road, Enniskillen. The site was acquired for a £16·7 million scheme to build a 700-pupil post-primary school to replace outdated facilities in Kesh and Enniskillen. That scheme was expected to be completed by September 2008. It has not even started.

What is happening with our school-building programme? Properly financed, such a programme would provide work in the construction industry and our workforce would have the necessary skills to complete that work. A sustainable construction industry and a sustainable and affordable housing market are required. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been set aside for new social homes, and we must ensure that a building programme proceeds expediently.

As other Members have mentioned, we must also ensure the establishment of a co-ownership scheme that helps to boost the economy and supports first-time buyers. First-time buyers are a critical part of the market — without them, no one else can move. It is vital that first-time buyers be encouraged and given the confidence to re-enter the market, because everyone benefits — other people can move house, the industry will benefit, and jobs will be created. It is therefore disappointing that the entire fund that was set aside for co-ownership has been used by the third week of the new financial year.

I know of people who were assessed for co-ownership, qualified, and agreed the sale of a house, only to have an essential part of the jigsaw taken away. I call on the Minister to ensure that additional funds be directed to

the co-ownership scheme to help first-time buyers and secure more jobs for the economy.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Long: I thank the Members who brought the motion before the House, and the Minister for his attendance — the motion calls on his ministerial colleague to act, but DETI also has a role to play.

After working in the construction industry for 10 years before becoming a Member of the Assembly, I am aware of its cyclical nature and the changes that it goes through. During the past 20 to 30 years, there have been periods when employment prospects were much worse at the professional, technical and craft grades. For example, when I graduated in 1994, the lion's share of civil engineering graduates went east, south or even west to North America to find work. At that time, graduates with masters degrees were applying for programmes such as YTP schemes to get a foot on the ladder in the industry. Thankfully, it is no longer necessary to do that.

Political change and relative stability have ensured unprecedented growth in construction and development in our towns and cities. Recent conversations that I have had with many employers have focused on the lack of suitably skilled people to advance current and future development commitments, particularly at craft level. For example, major developments at the Titanic Quarter and Sirocco Quays were seen as needing imported labour.

Due to international market changes and local economic factors, there will be fluctuations in the sectors that make up the construction industry. Some Members have referred to the situation in house-building as part of the overall picture. Although some Members are correct that the statistics in the past few months are a cause for concern — that should not be denied — we must be cautious of talking ourselves into a crisis because we could undermine confidence in the local industry. We must also be careful not to talk ourselves into making knee-jerk reactions.

Some Members mentioned draft PPS 14. Sustainable growth and development of the construction industry is needed, but that is also required for our rural communities and they must be considered.

The latest labour market survey from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, which relates to the final quarter of last year, shows that, although workloads are reduced, the balance is positive. The workload in the private industrial sector rose, as Mr Shannon said; private housing and infrastructure workloads were static; other public works and private commercial work both fell. Although confidence in anticipated profits slipped for the third successive quarter and are now negative, workload and employment expectations have remained positive. Therefore, there are positives and negatives, and the negatives should not be over-egged.

5.45 pm

The Ulster Bank Construction Purchasing Managers' Index, which is seasonally adjusted to measure the overall performance of the construction economy, has fallen to a new low for the third successive month. The large, public-sector civil engineering projects suffered the largest fall. That tends to reflect larger-scale projects, which are often in the public sector, not being delivered.

We should continue to be vigilant and to watch trends. However, the industry realigns itself from time to time, and we might be going through such a realignment. These figures come at the end of a period of unprecedented and, some would argue, unsustainable growth in the development market. That is something about which we have to be realistic. The industry has a cyclical nature. In a free-market economy, even the Government and — this from an opposition politician — the Executive cannot be expected to alleviate all those woes and improve matters in every case.

I do not have a problem with the motion or with the amendment. However, we need to look more closely at the Programme for Government, and particularly at the investment strategy. If we could deliver on some of the big projects that have been earmarked in that strategy, such as Maze/Long Kesh or the Ilex regeneration scheme, we could provide some comfort to those in the industry — first, by providing jobs to allow people to realign themselves within the sector when they have the appropriate skills; and, secondly, by creating a sense of confidence in the private sector in order that it, too, might be willing to commit its money to planned works. There are many areas in which construction plans are approved, but people are now unwilling to commit their cash because they see those areas as high risk.

If we want young people to continue to see the construction industry as having prospects, we need a sustainable approach when dealing with the industry. Boom and bust cycles have been the biggest weakness in the construction industry. We need to move away from that by taking a measured approach in a period of realignment and by looking at how public-sector investment can even out some of those trends. I will welcome the Minister's comments on those matters.

Mr Newton: I support the motion. The construction industry is a highly valuable industry for Northern Ireland. The industry has many highly skilled people, it is sustainable, it is local and it offers many career choices to school-leavers. Job losses are a great concern in any industry. The construction industry is one of the largest employers in the Province, with an estimated 84,000 employees, and generates an annual income for the Province of £3.5 billion.

Northern Ireland, in common with much of the United Kingdom, has seen considerable rises in house prices in recent years. That boom has also seen a rise

in the number of commercial and residential properties being built, creating many jobs in the construction industry. In recent months, however, we have seen the opposite happening, with a considerable downturn in the property market, especially in the private housing sector. That will, no doubt, have a knock-on effect on the number of people in the industry. According to the Construction Employers Federation, that downturn in market values, along with other economic factors, has the potential to cost hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs in the industry.

As we have seen in the Republic of Ireland, once the infrastructure of a city is complete and the large companies have completed the office blocks, there is, inevitably, a loss of jobs. It is, as has been said, a boom and bust situation.

Northern Ireland has seen many buildings going up around the country, especially in Belfast, where the skyline is barely recognisable in comparison to that of five years ago due to a number of new buildings. The new shopping centre in Victoria Square, with its large glass dome dominating the Belfast skyline, is probably the most notable of those. There is a huge potential for five or six high-rise buildings to be constructed in Belfast if we can get a high-rise building policy. Developers are actively interested in those high-rise buildings.

In my constituency of East Belfast, buildings such as the Holywood Exchange and IKEA have sprung up, although most of IKEA arrived in the back of a lorry. Nevertheless, that added some construction jobs. George Best Belfast City Airport is being extended with an investment of £14 million. One of the largest construction projects in Northern Ireland is under way at the Titanic Quarter, which will result in the creation of hundreds of long-term jobs. Those jobs must go to people in the local area in order to ensure that potential skills are developed for the longer term.

The construction industry is an important employer in Northern Ireland. It is vital for investment to continue to flow in order for the industry to be kept sustainable at its current level. As I said earlier, the slump in the property market will have an effect on the number of houses, but if one were to take a drive around Belfast city centre, it is possible to see the number of commercial developments that are under construction.

I encourage the Minister to consider the huge potential of the Olympics Games in London for construction. In whatever way possible, local construction companies should be encouraged to seek direct, indirect or subcontracting work from the Olympics Games development. The site for the Olympic Games is the biggest building site in Europe, the project has known schedules, its budgets are already established and it has predicted skills shortages. Any assistance that the Minister can provide to assist local companies to compete

in that environment and consider work that can be undertaken in Northern Ireland would be beneficial to the construction industry.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be brief because my party colleague Mr McElduff covered everything on his solo run. It was reminiscent of the great solo run that he once did when playing for his home club, Carrickmore. He talks about that every day, and I believe him.

Mr Elliott: No one else does. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Brolly: Today's situation is made worse by the fact that, for many years, construction workers have been fully employed and highly paid. Young men were leaving my village with newly bought vans that were beautifully inscribed with their names. They went to do dry lining in Dublin, Galway, Donegal and Belfast, and they brought home huge wages. That has created the present difficulty because the work has stopped, and those young men have vans but they have nowhere to go. They do not have the kind of money that they need to pay for the things that they bought when they had a lot of money.

I take a different line on the subject than my friend Mr McElduff and other Members who spoke about statistics. Over the weekend, I visited construction workers and asked them what they felt about the situation. It was only when I spoke to the workers on the ground that I fully appreciated the despondency, insecurity and fear, especially from family men. I spoke to one man in his mother's house. His sister and his wife were there, and they were keen to let me know how big an effect the downturn in the construction industry was having in the places in which they worked. They both worked in supermarkets — one on the deli counter and the other in general service. The person who worked in general service said that the trolleys that were once overflowing were now half filled.

At the deli, the queues of workers who have rushed out in the morning without breakfast are dwindling. Those are the sort of effects that we must consider.

The construction industry is an umbrella for many other services down along the line. The same fellow told me that the plastering company that his employer uses after building had been completed, initially employed 53 people. At the beginning of last year, that figure was down to 24 and, at the last count, the company employed only five people.

The plastering company would have had various types of vans — expensive vehicles. Indeed, that man told me an interesting story. In the middle of last year, when times were good, a certain van sales company had orders for seven vans from construction industry workers; only one of those vans has been picked up.

He also told me a nice, if sorry, story about a local contractor developer. That contractor was out of work in the run-up to Christmas. He asked his friend, another developer, to let him do a small job for the price of the materials alone. The contractor did that because he did not want to pay off his workers just before Christmas. That gives a picture of the seriousness of the situation in the construction industry.

I appreciate the statistics. Mr McElduff talks to contractors and is close to the situation. Mrs Long was very good on statistics, and her confidence in the continuing existence of a strong building industry is, perhaps, heartening. However, I do not appreciate Mrs Long's lack of confidence in those of us who live in the rural areas having the capacity to look after the rural areas. We do not need advice from someone from Belfast city.

Mr Gallagher: This is a timely motion, which highlights the growing concerns about job losses in the construction industry. However, I support the amendment because it adds an important all-Ireland dimension, which has a significant contribution to make to the construction industry.

The importance of economic co-operation has been highlighted. For example, a recent report from the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on the all-island economy states:

“The vision must be of an island characterised by a strong competitive and socially inclusive island economy with strong island-wide economic clusters whose development is not impaired by the existence of a political border.”

The basis of an all-Island strategy on transportation is already set out in the regional development strategy in the North, and the national spatial strategy in the South. Co-operation with the Irish Government — for example, on developing roads that have been identified in both strategies — would benefit the entire community in Northern Ireland, and all people on the island. The South's national development plan contains a North/South chapter to encourage joint governmental work on such initiatives, and to provide funding when projects have been agreed.

The west has a legacy of underinvestment and poor roads infrastructure, and many people there rely heavily on the construction industry for income. That industry, among others, is being squeezed. The manufacturing industry in the west is also on a downward trend and has experienced job losses.

6.00 pm

Departments are working with councils in Dungannon, Omagh, Strabane and Fermanagh to help redress, to some extent, the disadvantages that exist in the western region. Useful work is being done to develop business, tourism, training and other cross-border initiatives.

The joint aspiration of the British and Irish Governments is to deliver balanced regional development, which is vital to the economy. However, there can be no development in the west until the key transport corridors from Derry to Dublin and Belfast to Sligo are in place. With increased co-operation comes potential EU investment in regional development, and therefore tremendous opportunities exist to improve key roads and open up the west for economic development. Water, the environment and waste management are also important factors in economic development.

Investment would make a tremendous impact on research and development, and it would be good for the economy in the west. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is in the Chamber, told me that Invest Northern Ireland is committed to exploring North/South co-operation on the establishment of facilities for research and development and industry-led competency centres.

The amendment highlights the importance of key stakeholders, and I commend the private developers who have played a significant role in advancing North/South co-operation. Often, they have been ahead of the politicians in that respect, and they have made a fundamental difference. The Strategic Investment Board and InterTradeIreland, which is the North/South body that was set up to improve cross-border trade, can also play an important role in linking investment strategies across the border. They can help to lever additional funding, thus stimulating economic growth for the benefit of everyone.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the business on the Order Paper will continue beyond 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the outstanding business is completed.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin agus an leasaithe.

I thought that you were going to tell me to be brief for the second time today. Go raibh maith agat.

I support the motion and the amendment. I am pleased to speak to the motion, and I thank my colleagues for introducing it to the Chamber. The construction industry is, undoubtedly, experiencing a downturn, and action is required to stem the rising number of people who are once again leaving our shores to seek work elsewhere. People were led to believe that that scenario was a thing of the past, but tell that to the tradesmen, tradeswomen and labourers who are leaving their families behind to go to England, Scotland and America. Many of them are from my large rural constituency of Newry and Armagh, including some from my hometown of Keady. The Assembly must address this matter urgently to save not only those who work in the construction industry, but the businesses affected by the downturn.

According to the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, growth in construction work has fallen to its lowest level for more than 10 years. Some reasons for the downturn are beyond the control of Members, but we can influence others. The long-foreseen fall in house prices, exacerbated by the global credit crunch, is a major part of the problem, but it is not the only cause of the crisis in the construction industry.

It is time for some of the Assembly's Ministers and their Departments to step up to the plate and help to address the situation. In particular, I call on the Minister for Social Development to fulfil her pledge to deliver social-housing projects. She cried out that she wanted to be shown the money, and her Assembly colleagues have delivered. Now she must show us the houses.

The Minister of the Environment must ensure that the issues surrounding draft PPS 14 are resolved, as she has said they will be, over the coming weeks and months. A satisfactory outcome will allow many projects to proceed and ease the pressure on rural construction companies.

I have been approached by such companies, which believe that the present situation is slowly killing their businesses; they have laid off skilled and experienced workers as work has dried up. The Minister of the Environment must also address the overstretched planning services. Although I recognise that the Minister is committed to an overhaul of planning, she must find resources to ensure that planning applications — including areas plans, which are the mechanism for zoning land for development — are dealt with quickly and professionally.

Too many construction workers are kicking their heels waiting for straightforward planning applications to be approved; all Ministers must address that matter. The Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister must address the issue of applications awaiting decision by the Planning Appeals Commission. Furthermore, I urge the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a positive decision on the proposed stadium, associated infrastructure and development at the Long Kesh site.

In conclusion, I emphasise to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that thousands of workers in the construction industry are relying on the leadership of the Assembly to offer solutions to the construction industry's predicament. We must ensure that we stem the flow of Irish workers to other shores and prevent skilled workers leaving the industry. To achieve that, we must ensure that projects and developments are available to generate work. I hope that the Minister will influence his Executive colleagues to deal with the construction industry crisis. Although Naomi Long thinks differently, I believe that it should be considered a crisis when people leave home to seek

employment. At a time when we hope for serious economic regeneration in the North, the collapse of this essential industry could have serious consequences. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): My colleague Mr Peter Robinson, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, has key responsibilities in this area; he is chairperson of the procurement board and has responsibility for managing the interface between Government and the construction industry. I am pleased to respond to the debate, and, as several Members indicated, all Ministers and Departments must make an important contribution to supporting the construction industry.

I thank every Member who participated. Some contributions were balanced, highlighting the cyclical nature of these situations; others were more cataclysmic. We must examine the issue in its context and recognise that many of the problems are driven by forces beyond the control of Governments — especially of a devolved Government.

Our vision is of a vibrant, competitive construction industry in Northern Ireland that is capable of delivering the investment strategy. The construction industry delivers buildings and infrastructure for the public and private sector and has experienced sustained growth over the past number of years. In 2003, the construction industry produced a total output of £2.5 billion with a workforce of more than 64,000. In 2007, the workforce was more than 75,000, and, although the 2007 figures are not yet available, in 2006 the estimated value of construction output was £3.25 billion — the equivalent of 12.3% of gross value added.

Those figures illustrate the fact that construction is one of the largest industries in Northern Ireland. Through the construction industry forum, key stakeholders in the industry recently raised concerns about a slowdown in sections of the industry. They expressed concern about the effect of the downturn in the housing market, which has been mentioned during the debate.

That is important because the housing market represents in excess of 40% of the total turnover of the construction industry. Therefore, any downturn in demand for house-building and renovation has the potential to have a major impact. The Construction Employers Federation has also advised the Central Procurement Directorate that its 'State of Trade' summary for the fourth quarter of 2007 also shows a downward trend: 48% of firms predict a downturn in workload over the next 12 months.

Sustained investment in infrastructure is absolutely crucial to the future of Northern Ireland and necessary to transform the Province into a successful, competitive regional economy with high-quality public services. The public sector represents about 40% of the total

turnover of the industry. Government spending on construction has effectively doubled over recent years: in 2003-04, total public-sector spending on construction was £676 million; in 2007-08 it is expected to exceed £1.2 billion. I appreciate the points that Members have made about certain projects and programmes, which they claim to be slow and so on. However, when one considers the effective doubling of Government expenditure on construction over four years, it puts into perspective the sort of investment that has been made over that period.

The good news about the future is that the level of public-sector spending is to increase significantly with the investment strategy for 2008-11 and beyond. The investment strategy sets out the Government's infrastructure investment proposals, which offer an unprecedented opportunity for the construction industry. The 10-year strategy was agreed by the Assembly in January, and Departments have now been tasked to deliver capital investment of £1.8 billion in this financial year, £1.7 billion in 2009-10 and £2 billion in 2010-11. Most of that investment will relate to construction projects, and it represents a step increase over recent allocations and a real opportunity for the construction industry.

Government is also funding Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland for a three-year period. That centre of excellence, based at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, supports all sectors of the construction industry. It provides the local industry with a valuable knowledge base to help it stay ahead of the competition. It forms a unique bridge between industry, clients, consultants, Government and education, and aims to assist the industry to address challenges and deliver improved performance.

In my area of responsibility as Enterprise Minister, Invest Northern Ireland actively encourages client companies operating in the construction industry and its supply chains to pursue additional opportunities.

Several Members have mentioned the opportunities in the construction sector and how companies might make the best of them. One of those mentioned by Robin Newton was the 2012 Olympics, to be held in London. That is important. The current focus of the construction industry and Invest Northern Ireland is the opportunity arising from the CompeteFor portal. Invest Northern Ireland provides information on an ongoing basis to client companies on opportunities arising from Olympics 2012. I have been involved in some activities connected with that, and there is great potential in it.

Other Members mentioned the national development plan in the Irish Republic. That, too, offers opportunities for companies in Northern Ireland to take advantage of the investment in infrastructure in the Irish Republic.

Invest Northern Ireland's construction clients are also encouraged to promote their capabilities through participation in its ongoing programme of international trade missions. Additional opportunities exist in sustainable construction, research and development and specialist product provision, such as the global hard-build security market.

6.15 pm

Issues and problems do exist. Several Members mentioned delays in the planning system and how those are of particular concern at the present time. All of us are aware of those issues. The Planning Service continues to face considerable operational pressures, primarily due to the sustained high number of applications over recent years — approximately 27,000 a year — however, steps are being taken to address those pressures.

Steps must be taken in the short-term, medium-term and long-term, through the comprehensive programme of planning reform that the Minister of the Environment announced last year. I am sure that all Members want to see that programme being progressed to ensure that the Planning Service is properly reformed so that work is streamlined and decisions are made.

Some Members also mentioned smaller, local firms as compared with large national or international consortia. Government policy is to encourage small- and medium-sized enterprises to form consortia and/or seek opportunities in supply chains. I am pleased to note that concerns among the industry that firms here would be excluded on the grounds of size appear to be unfounded.

For example, the concern that Northern Ireland firms would be excluded from appointment to the central procurement directorate's framework for the procurement of public sector construction projects has not been realised. Four of the five integrated supply teams are based in Northern Ireland, and the other has a headquarters in Cork and an office in Belfast. Each of the firms employs a wide range of subcontractors and designers, many of whom are locally based.

The investment strategy represents an unprecedented level of co-ordination and co-operation across the Executive. It also provides an opportunity to integrate a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues through the procurement process. I am therefore confident that the delivery of the investment strategy will contribute to a sustainable construction industry over the long term — an industry that is capable of delivering the twenty-first century infrastructure that is needed to enable the Government to deliver public services throughout Northern Ireland.

As Naomi Long said, it is important that we do not talk ourselves into a crisis or into an overly pessimistic view of the situation. When we consider the historical context — where the construction industry was previously and where it is now — then it is true that things are not

as good as they were over the last three or four years. However, it is important to note that the scale of investment now being made in the public sector represents an unprecedented opportunity, and I firmly believe that we will be able to see our way through all of this.

Francie Brolly, the Member for East Londonderry, mentioned particular examples of how the current situation impacts on individuals and their families. As I have said in previous debates, we always need to be conscious of the fact that we are talking about real people, real families and real firms that are made up of employees who are worried about their future. Certainly, it is sometimes easy in these debates to start talking about statistics and suchlike, and to leave the personal aspect out of the debate. Statistics can be manipulated in many ways, but I prefer to approach the issues by considering the objective facts, and those facts must be provided. However, it is important to be reminded that there are real people out there with fears, worries and concerns, and to make it clear that we care about that and are seen to address those issues. We cannot solve all the problems, but at least we are considering the issues. That is one of the values of a forum such as the Assembly, where issues can be raised and debated, and people know that that is happening and that some action is being taken to try to deal with those issues. That should give those people some reassurance.

The Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland already provides a strategically focused interface between representatives from Government and construction industry stakeholders. The forum is chaired by officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel; it facilitates discussion on key issues in the industry, and it is uniquely placed to explore what further strategies might be put in place to sustain jobs in the industry. I will ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that the concerns that have been expressed in today's debate, as well as those that have been expressed previously by representatives of the industry, are discussed at the next scheduled meeting of the forum, in June. I will also ask him to request an update from the Central Procurement Directorate after that meeting.

It is clear that effective working relationships in the Executive are already providing unprecedented opportunities for the construction industry. We will continue to work with the industry, through the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland, in order to realise the vision of a sustainable construction industry in Northern Ireland that can demonstrate truly world-class standards and compete in the global market.

Mr O'Loan: We are in a serious situation, and the published figures do not fully reflect that situation. To that degree, I disagree with one or two of the Members who spoke, including Naomi Long. As many of us

know, the figures have not caught up with the reality of what is happening in the construction industry.

The problems particularly relate to house building. Two issues have combined. Recent price rises were probably unsustainable, and at some point they were going to fall back, which was always going to cause a fall in confidence leading to some degree of slowdown. Simultaneously, the major international credit crunch also led to a huge crisis of confidence.

Mrs Long: It seems that when a Member makes balanced comments in the Chamber, often only half of them are heard. I hope that the Member will accept that I reflected the fact that the two factors that he just mentioned are currently at work, and causing problems. I was saying that we do not want to talk the industry into further crisis.

Mr Speaker: Mr O'Loan, you will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr O'Loan: I also intend to provide some balance in my remarks. We cannot talk about the situation in the construction industry without reference to house-building. There is stagnation in house construction, which I know from talking to people who work in that industry. There are enormous consequences for developers, on whom the industry depends, and there are heavy consequences for building workers.

Undoubtedly, jobs have evaporated. Some anecdotal evidence was provided by Francie Brolly and Cathal Boylan. To provide yet another anecdote, I know of one person who travels everyday from Kilkeel to beyond Ballymena because that is the only place where he can get a bricklaying job. When he went for a job in his local area, he was told that he was the sixtieth person to enquire about it. Building workers are going abroad — some countries were mentioned earlier — and I have heard of workers who are seeking work in Australia, where, apparently, some jobs are available.

I agree that it is important not to talk ourselves down. There are real grounds for confidence in the future. The regional development strategy, *Shaping Our Future*, stated that 160,000 new homes are required by 2015, some of which have already been built, with more to come.

The Executive recently published figures that show that the number of households in Northern Ireland is projected to grow by 48,500, or 7%, between 2006 and 2011. All those households will need a home. The financial markets will sort themselves out. The recent issue of bonds by the British Government and the Bank of England will help to create confidence.

It is also important to realise that there is no slowdown in the public-housing sector. There has been some falsification of the facts in respect of that issue. Last year, the target was 600 new homes, but there were 1,595 housing starts. The Executive and the Minister

for Social Development remain committed to 1,500, 1,750 and 2000 houses being built in the three-year Budget period. That is substantial.

As others have stated, the construction industry is wider than simply the housing sector. The £18 billion investment strategy will be a huge boost to our civil engineering and broader building industry. Part of the investment will come from the Republic of Ireland's national development plan, which Tommy Gallagher rightly referred to. Our amendment is aimed at setting the whole issue in that context.

The co-ownership issue was also needlessly and wrongly represented by a number of Members, including Barry McElduff and Roy Beggs.

The contribution of finance to co-ownership housing has increased hugely over the last two years. The Executive are spending big in that area, because 500 houses will be delivered this year, at £100,000 per house. It is also important to recognise that co-ownership does not make a huge contribution to the construction industry — only 12.5% of co-ownership dwellings are newbuilds; 87.5% are existing dwellings. It would be as well to use facts when issues are debated; we would get a good deal further.

Some Members made very useful and significant contributions, and I will probably not do justice to those. I appreciated Jim Shannon's confidence in the skills of the industry and the competence of our firms. It will be that competence that will win them contracts. Robin Newton made a number of interesting points, and I agree with him about the exploration of building a number of high-rise buildings in Belfast. I also agree that the Titanic Quarter could make a contribution, and there will be scope for both firms and individual workers in relation to the Olympic Games construction issue.

I appreciate that our amendment has been accepted by the proposers of the motion, and it is an issue on which this Assembly can agree.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am very pleased with how the debate went today. Many of the contributions made during the debate were very positive and realistic about what can be done and what cannot. I disagree with Francie Brolly on the facts and figures. A number of members of Sinn Féin met industry representatives over recent days and weeks regarding the number of employees who have lost their jobs in the last six months. They estimated that between 1,200 and 1,500 people have lost their jobs in the industry.

That is a statistic that should be highlighted, because we have to ensure that no more jobs are lost in the sector. A number of other employers have talked about putting their staff on four-day weeks. That has a large knock-on effect, and not only for the construction

industry. Every year, its 85,000 employees bring £3.2 billion into the industry.

We can blame the fall in house prices on a number of issues. Some developers may have bought land last year and paid a high price for it. Prices have fallen this year, so those developers could be holding on to that land, banking on the price increasing again before building on it, in order to get some of their money back. The industry must address that issue. House prices have fallen by between 10% and 30% in recent months, and that has a massive impact on the industry.

What we are trying to do — via the motion and the amendment — is move the debate on, and to look very positively at ways in which the Executive can help. I heard people say today that the Executive have very limited control over what they can do, but I disagree. If details were published as to when the capital programmes will go online, the industry could prepare for the day when those capital programmes begin.

Barry McElduff said that 70% of the construction industry is self-employed. That is a key statistic that Mr Brolly perhaps did not recognise. That shows that there are many small employers, and this decline has a massive effect on them. Many of the larger employers are now doing more extensions and refurbishments — which means that local tradespeople are losing out on that work.

Mrs Long: Am I to assume, because the Member is having a go at Francie Brolly, that he took exception to Mr Brolly's remarks about us town-dwellers giving advice about anything in this Chamber?

Mr P Maskey: As a townie myself, I will not go into that argument. Francie is a very good friend of mine.

6.30 pm

Barry McElduff asked why so little social housing has been built. Even before the present Minister for Social Development took office — and this is not an attack on any Minister; it is merely a fact — between October 2006 and December 2007 in Antrim, Armagh, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Coleraine, Cookstown, Craigavon, Down, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt, Omagh and Strabane not one social-housing dwelling was built. That is shocking. As Cathal Boylan said, the Minister has been shown the money, now she must build houses. However, some of the problems began long before the Minister for Social Development took office. Nevertheless, in all the areas that I mentioned, not one social-housing dwelling was built in the last couple of years.

Mr O'Loan: Sinn Féin scriptwriters must have a note reminding their Members to have a go at the Social Development Minister whenever they make a speech. I presented the facts clearly about the social

housing that has been built and that which the Executive, including Ministers from the Member's party, are committed to delivering over the next three years. That was fact, and anything else is simply waffle that is intended to distract.

Mr P Maskey: I was not reading from a script; I was quoting facts from a DSD document. Perhaps Declan would like to have a look at the facts and figures in it.

I said that because Ministers and the Executive must introduce proposals. As I said before, billions of pounds are available for capital works through the investment strategy, for example. Construction is a massive industry, and we have an enormous amount of money that we can use to help the industry to progress; however, we must allow the industry to plan for that. We must ensure that we are given timetables and commitments. That applies not only to DSD; other Departments must do the same thing. That is very important.

Barry McElduff mentioned the Maze/Long Kesh site, and development there would create thousands of jobs; there would be opportunities for apprenticeships and employers. Building the multi-purpose stadium there could create up to 10,000 jobs. If we do not make a decision on that in the early stages, we will be throwing an opportunity away.

Alasdair McDonnell said that we were creating the opportunities for others to create employment, and he went on to talk about the global credit crunch. The credit crunch is a fact. Some lenders are charging people 2% just to take out a mortgage, because it does not suit them to lend money. First-time buyers — and even those with properties to sell — who wish to borrow £100,000 will be charged £2,000 simply to buy into a mortgage, which is disgraceful. Some mortgage lenders ought to be ashamed of themselves; they should be trying to help us to find a way out of the present situation.

Jim Shannon mentioned PPS 14 and the fact that we need a new planning strategy, and he is 100% right. For example, in the Dublin docklands, planning applications can be turned around in six weeks. However, even after consultation with the local community, builders and developers to ensure that the best planning application goes forward, applications can take up to three years to process here. That is a disgrace. Why would a developer waste time, effort and money to apply for planning, when it might cost him more money in the future?

Roy Beggs said that we have seen record growth in recent years. However, there has been a downturn. We listened to the industry, and we met representatives of the Construction Employers Federation last week, who said that, according to their figures, about 1,500 people have lost their jobs. We must acknowledge that, despite recent record growth in the industry, we must now start to stem job losses. More important, not only must we

sustain the jobs that exist, we must create more, and we have ample opportunity to do that.

Naomi Long said that she worked in the construction industry for 10 years before she was elected to the Assembly — I am not sure which was the more difficult. Perhaps she will tell us sometime.

Robin Newton mentioned the 2012 Olympic Games and the potential for high-rise buildings in Belfast. If our stadium is up and running in time for the Olympic Games, we could host some events. We are losing out on all sorts of opportunities by slowing down the process and not making decisions as fast as we should.

Francie Brolly talked about people who buy new vans when they start out in business; they drive all over the place in their vans on which their names are displayed. However, they do not have any work to go to now. The Assembly must examine that situation carefully. It is unfair that people who have invested in business opportunities, for example, have no jobs.

Tommy Gallagher correctly mentioned the all-island context, which is important. We are an island, and we have to compete with each other for business, but we should also share our experiences and workloads to enable all people on the island to have a fair share of work. The North can benefit greatly if we take that approach and, thus, Sinn Féin will support the amendment.

Cathal Boylan talked about the people who have to go elsewhere in search of work. A core part of the argument is that everyone thought that we would never again see people leaving our shores to look for work. It is sad to see that happening. The Assembly must put all its efforts into ensuring that the people who are trained to deliver and build for our future remain here.

I know that I am running out of time, but I want to comment on what the Minister said.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the job losses in the construction industry in recent times; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to establish a working relationship with all his Executive colleagues and key stakeholders from the industry to devise a strategy aimed at creating further opportunities and sustaining jobs in this sector.

Adjourned at 6.37 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 22 April 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that I will be absent from the Assembly on Monday 28 April, when I will be in Cardiff to attend a meeting of Presiding Officers.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Taxis Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Taxis Bill has received Royal Assent. The Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 21 April 2008.

Local Government (Boundaries) Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill [NIA 14/07] be agreed.

The Bill is the first step towards implementing the Executive's decision on those elements of the review of public administration (RPA) that concern local government.

As Members are aware, the Executive have decided that 11 is the best configuration for councils in Northern Ireland. That figure will provide the optimal grouping of current councils by striking a balance between reducing some of the diversity among existing areas, such as population characteristics and rating wealth, and promoting the ability of councils and their communities to identify and interact with one other.

As I said yesterday, I intend to implement the agreed structural reforms by 2011. For practical and logistical reasons, accelerated passage is needed in order to secure the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner in early July 2008, which is essential if the 2011 deadline is to be met. Much discussion took place on that yesterday, and I appreciate the support that my colleagues in the Assembly and on the Committee for the Environment gave to the motion on accelerated passage.

The Bill's purpose is to set the context for a review of local government boundaries in Northern Ireland in 2008 and to provide for the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to conduct that review.

That is the first step towards the reorganisation of our local government.

The Bill gives effect to the Executive's decisions of 13 March 2008. It has six clauses, two of which are substantive. Clause 1 provides for the rationalisation of the existing 26 local government districts into 11 new districts. It sets those new districts' broad boundaries by joining together:

“the whole or the major part”

of the existing districts to form new larger local government districts and divides those districts into wards.

Clause 2 provides for the appointment of a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner in 2008 to conduct a review and make recommendation on the boundaries and names of the 11 local districts, and the number, boundaries and names of the wards into which each district is to be divided. The clause also allows for a review of boundaries to take place every eight to 12 years thereafter. It is important that those reviews happen, because, in the past, we have been left with static boundaries for decades.

Clause 2 also provides for the new district of Belfast to be divided into 60 wards, with the other 10 districts being divided into 40 wards. However, the commissioner will be given flexibility to vary the number of wards in any district by not more than five. The other four clauses cover consequential amendments and repeals, interpretation, commencement and the Bill's short title. The Bill is, therefore, quite short.

The Bill does not change in any way the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's procedures. The long-established principle of independence from central Government will be retained, and the commissioner will be required to undertake full public consultation. After consultation on provisional proposals, the commissioner's final recommendations will be laid before the House. Hopefully, that will occur next year. At that point, there will be an opportunity for a full and frank debate before the recommendations become law.

Agreement on the Bill will allow me to appoint a Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to commence work immediately. I anticipate that the review will take up to 12 months. It will then be for a commissioner appointed by the Secretary of State to group the new wards into district electoral areas (DEAs) to enable elections to be held. That will further prolong the process, so that is one of the reasons why we must consider the Bill under the accelerated passage procedure.

The Bill is an important step in modernising and reforming local government in Northern Ireland. Reorganisation will result in stronger local government with enhanced functions and will provide for more effective delivery of local public services.

To summarise, the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill marks the end of the process of deliberation on the number of councils. It is now time to start the process for introducing and implementing new council structures. Therefore, without further delay, I proceed to the debate.

Mr Ross: I am glad that we have finally reached the stage at which legislation can be introduced. We can now set about the task of rejuvenating, rationalising and modernising local government in the Province.

The review of public administration was launched in 2002 during the Assembly's first mandate. That was a long time ago, and an assertion could be made that, all of a sudden, we are rushing a Bill through. However, I hope that that is happening because Members want the issue to be resolved.

Local government is such an important form of local democracy. For many years, it was the only directly accountable form of democracy for the people of Northern Ireland. It is important that we move forward and ensure that the system of local government is brought up to date and that the new councils, with new powers, will complement what will be, it is to be hoped, a new stable and permanent Assembly at Stormont.

During yesterday's debate on accelerated passage — despite numerous warnings from the Speaker — Members strayed on to the subject of the Bill's content. In many ways, that debate acted as a warm-up for today's debate. Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches mentioned numerous times that the DUP had wanted 15 councils, and they questioned when that view had changed. Perhaps those Members should read our 2007 manifesto, which states our clear commitment to getting the review of public administration right. Yesterday, many Members from all sides of the House used the phrase "getting it right". I am glad that they adopted the DUP's election slogan. In our manifesto, we welcomed improvements that would streamline local government and reduce bureaucracy, but we rejected the assertion from direct rule Ministers that there should be seven super-councils. That would have weakened local government and made it more remote. Our party made a clear commitment to replace the seven-council model with a more appropriate number of councils, but nowhere in our manifesto did we state that there should be 11, 15 or any other number of councils.

In politics, certain decisions have to be made, and the assertions made yesterday by the Ulster Unionists and others that there was a choice between having 11 councils and 15 councils is totally bogus. The choice was between having seven councils and 11 councils: I prefer 11 any day.

Now that the issue of the number of councils has been resolved, the Assembly can get on with the job of establishing new, more powerful and more effective local government. I welcome the Assembly's granting of accelerated passage yesterday — we have stalled and deliberated enough. As was mentioned yesterday, it is disappointing that some Members chose to oppose everything just for the sake of opposition, and others spoke of problems when there were none. I look forward to the Second Stage of the Bill progressing, and to the Minister's appointment of a boundaries commissioner at the beginning of the summer to

consider the new boundaries and consult with the community over those proposals.

Members will be able to argue their cases regarding boundaries, and no doubt some, as usual, will not be satisfied with the outcomes. At least, Members know from previous statements by the Minister that there will be checks and balances and that protections will exist for minorities — both unionists in the west and nationalists in the east. This should be welcomed. I support the Bill.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I may get a chance to say a few more words today than I did yesterday. Mr Ford and Mr Gardiner said everything yesterday, and I would like to hear what they have to say today. Are they going to repeat themselves?

Sinn Féin has little interest in giving enhanced powers to local councils unless they are accompanied by appropriate checks and balances to avoid discriminatory practices. Equality and fairness must be enshrined in any future legislation for the new structures.

As a former member of Armagh City and District Council, I and my constituents have concerns as we have been linked with Craigavon and Banbridge and will be a nationalist minority in a new council. The decision has been made, and equality and fairness is the key. If that hurdle is overcome, then the serious business of co-ordinating public bodies can begin. The review of public administration, if properly implemented, will strengthen local politics; enable it to make real improvements in the quality of life for all; and enhance service delivery.

The Executive have agreed that the first step will be to allow a local boundaries commissioner to be appointed to review the present boundaries and establish the broad boundaries of the new 11-council model. That review should not be a carve-up, as others have commented; it should be a real opportunity to serve the interests of the general public by making public services more efficient.

Accelerated passage of the Bill should not be used as a political point-scoring exercise — it will make no difference to the outcome — it will only delay the inevitable. The Assembly has been running for a year, and people want to see real decisions being made, not continue to listen to sound bites from self-proclaimed opposition parties. It is imperative that legislation is not held up any longer. We should ensure that the new local government structures will be in place in the time frame envisaged by the Minister and her Executive colleagues. Not to do so would be an affront to the electorate who have put us in the positions that we hold.

Although others in the Chamber have concerns about the scrutiny role, it should be emphasised that the Committee of the Environment and the Members

in the Chamber will be able to scrutinise the outcome of this Bill and future Bills relating to the review — that will ensure that the checks and balances are made. Let us get the process started. I welcome the Bill, and hope it will be the first step in delivering real change in the years ahead. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. This Bill is the culmination of a long-standing RPA process that began in 2001. The long-standing goals were to renew and strengthen the role of local government, and to restore the powers and parities of our local government with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes that. The Local Government (Boundaries) Bill sets out the legislative foundation for this important work, and my party's position on accelerated passage was clearly stated yesterday.

As this Bill will result in long-term changes and will have implications for many decades, it is important that there should be proper consultation to get things right, rather than rush the Bill through the House.

I will now take the limited opportunity available to comment on the Bill and provide some degree of scrutiny.

The Bill presupposes the validity and correctness of a local government authority model that is based on having 11 local government units for Northern Ireland. Needless to say, the Ulster Unionist Party has reservations about that model. Members said earlier that the choice was between seven councils and 11 councils. However, there was also a 15-council option. Therefore, it is wrong to say that the only choice was between seven and 11 councils when the preferred option could easily have been 15 councils.

10.45 am

The Ulster Unionist Party's chief concern is whether the 11 local government units adequately reflect the local identities and communities of Northern Ireland. It is for that reason that party members have consistently suggested that local government boundaries should be based on Westminster parliamentary units, which would provide a more appropriate form of local government. I remind Members that, in their submissions to the fifth periodical review of parliamentary constituencies — the report of which was published recently by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland — every party represented in the House recognised that the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies reflected the ties and identities of local communities, as they should.

It is essential that local people have an affinity with local government and identify with it so that they can participate and contribute to it. The somewhat abstract nature of the 11 units that are being proposed is not likely to engender that sense of affinity and identity. It is paramount that local government has the buy-in of

local people. There is a real danger that the proposed model of 11 local authorities will overlap with, and become enveloped by, the 15 parliamentary units — the four Belfast constituencies combined into one and the other 14 constituencies. That will cause confusion and breed apathy among the electorate in Northern Ireland.

This entire process set out to strengthen and rejuvenate local government, but there is a danger that, under the proposed model, people may lose interest in, and affinity with, their local councillors and institutions. They may deem that local government has become remote and less responsive to their needs. That would undermine role of local government as a strong force for local democracy and cohesion. Over the last 20 and 30 years, local forums have become a very important way for local people to reflect their views and ensure that they are being represented locally. Moving further away from that process presents real dangers, and I know that many Members share that view.

I want to comment on the proposals from a local constituency point of view, as I am a councillor on Carrickfergus Borough Council. The proposals involve linking the councils in Carrickfergus, Larne and Ballymena. It is likely that the main services would subsequently be centred in Ballymena. The difficulty is that there are very poor transport links between Carrickfergus and Ballymena. Therefore, people from Carrickfergus would have to take a 10-mile detour through Larne or alternatively drive almost to Belfast to join the motorway and travel to Ballymena via Mallusk. Those poor transport links mean that the centre of local government would not be easily accessible to the people.

There is a range of other reasons why Ballymena does not link naturally with Larne and Carrickfergus. As regards transport links, it would have been much better if Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey had been linked together, and that would have fitted in with the proposal for 15 councils. If there had to be a model of 11 councils, it would have made much more sense to have included Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey councils in one council area. The rail links and the main roads pass through those three council areas.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will not give way at the moment. The Member will have an opportunity to speak later.

There would be natural transport links for that area. If there had to be 11 councils, perhaps Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey could have formed one of those 11 councils. Ballymena is closer geographically to Antrim than it is to Larne and Carrickfergus. I do not know what sort of deal happened behind the scenes that is not part of public scrutiny. Sinn Féin and the DUP agreed that particular model of 11 councils and did not allow the necessary public scrutiny and consultation to take place.

There are also important natural cultural links in the East Antrim area that the proposal does not fully recognise.

The natural identities of locations are an important aspect of local government, and natural ties should be preserved.

As a Boys Brigade officer, I am part of the East Antrim battalion. As a result of the local government boundary commission review, part of that battalion may now be linked to Ballymena, while the other part may be split off to be based elsewhere. I am also a member of the Orange Order, which has an east Antrim combine that naturally links the people of the area. That is also being broken up by the proposed 11-council arrangement that was agreed between Sinn Féin and the DUP.

It is disappointing that natural geographic and cultural linkages have been pushed aside. I am therefore interested to hear why Sinn Féin and the DUP decided to split Newtownabbey from Larne and Carrickfergus but added Ballymena.

That is an important matter, because in the future, more powers will be granted to local government. For example, the new district police headquarters will move from Larne and Carrickfergus to Ballymena. A range of other services will be become centred in Ballymena, and people will increasingly have to travel to avail themselves of them. I can talk only about my knowledge of changes in my local area, but I feel that it would have been healthier to debate in detail all the other proposed changes during a Committee Stage.

I am sure that improvements could have been possible. However, sadly, we find ourselves in the situation where accelerated passage is being used to progress the process speedily. More timely proposals could have been made in the past year, and there could have been detailed discussions and consultations. Why has that year been lost? Discussions and consultation could have brought about an improved, long-term change to local government in Northern Ireland to the benefit of all our citizens and ratepayers.

Mr Ford: I support the Bill at this Stage, and I am sure that that will doubtless bring some relief to Members of the DUP. It is clear that we need to reform local government. However, many issues remain to be resolved. Indeed, Mr Beggs and Mr Boylan outlined some of those issues when they discussed accelerated passage being granted to the Bill yesterday.

Unlike Mr Boylan, however, I do not intend to repeat yesterday's speech about accelerated passage. The House has made its decision, and it is therefore incumbent upon all Members to make the Bill workable and to make the significant improvements to it that I believe are necessary.

Furthermore, there has been no convincing argument as to why model 11b is the preferred option. There was no separate or individual consultation on it, and it was never treated as the preferred option until the Executive decided just before Easter to adopt it. The use of that model raises serious issues about boundaries, and Roy Beggs referred to some of those, which is significant for me because I have a similar constituency interest to him.

Speaking as a councillor for Antrim Borough Council and as an MLA for all of Antrim and two thirds of Newtownabbey, I can say that putting Antrim and Newtownabbey together is logical. However, the result of that is the ludicrous grouping of Ballymena, Larne and Carrickfergus into one council area. That area can be crossed only by either entering Newtownabbey — people do not quite have to go into Belfast to reach the motorway — or by crossing one of the worst roads in Northern Ireland, which is frequently closed in winter. That proposal does not seem to have any degree of logic or community coherence.

There would have been merit in examining some of the individual decisions that were made. I am not just referring to what I said yesterday about Newry and Mourne and Down being extended enormously and the fact that that extension will create communication problems; the use of model 11b has resulted in several issues not lying easily together, which should not be the case if we want a pattern of local government that is strong, coherent, logical and easily recognised by the people who live there.

Other wider issues must be addressed. Throughout the whole RPA process there was much talk of coterminosity. However, we have now reached a situation whereby each of the five health and social services trusts will have cross-boundary issues to deal with. Once we moved away from the discredited model of seven councils, we were never going to have one-to-one coterminosity on such issues.

However, it has reached the point where there will not even be simple one-to-two or one-to-three coterminosity between health trusts and district councils. There is a complete amalgam across that. The fact that the Police Service took the unfortunate, premature decision to adopt the wrong model of eight districts, which was driven by its need to rationalise its management structures, has created further cross-boundary difficulties that will add to ongoing problems. It is unrealistic to say that those issues will be resolved by the Bill as it currently stands. Indeed, it may be impossible to amend the Bill in order to create logical boundaries. The Minister must re-examine the issues.

To specify in the list of the proposed 11 councils the whole or larger part of each of the 26 councils that is listed as falling inside one or other of them may not be a rational way to proceed. I did not approve of the

previous notion of the Jeff Rooker-memorial “bent banana” district council that hovered round the north and west of Belfast, and I am not sure that Arlene Foster’s modified “bent banana” district council of Lisburn and Castlereagh, which hovers round the south and east of the city, is any better. There are problems with how that will be dealt with if the legislation continues to specify that the major part of Castlereagh must be joined with the major part of Lisburn. The issue would have merited discussion, which the Assembly has not been able to have. It will have to be resolved in the House in the coming weeks, although that will now be difficult. The Alliance Party will seek to produce amendments that will make some improvements to that procedure. Unlike others, the Alliance Party is prepared to put its amendments before the House and have them tested to see whether they attract support.

There are also concerns about procedures. The Minister has emphasised that the boundaries commissioner’s work is part of long-standing established procedures. However, those procedures are the same as the ones that were used by the previous boundaries commissioner to draw up the boundaries for the seven, now non-existent, proposed districts, which resulted in some most peculiar boundaries.

In one case, a rural ward was created in North Down that managed to span the edges of four towns. In my area, an illogically stretched ward took in a housing estate on the edge of Randalstown and a housing estate on the edge of Antrim, with a large rural area in the middle. Parts of Glengormley were combined with parts of Rathcoole. The current rules would make that possible again. They must be revised. The Assembly must ensure that townlands are not dismembered, and that it does not assume that main roads are logical boundaries in rural areas, when, in fact, they are not. That is what happened in the last assessment. That huge issue must be dealt with. The procedures are wrong. That they were used in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s does not mean that they will work in the present.

The Alliance Party supports the concept of the Bill. The Minister will be relieved to know that my party will not go into the Lobby to vote against her at this time. However, she must deal with several serious issues. In her comments, she failed to respond to the substantive points that my colleague Stephen Farry and I made in yesterday’s debate on the way that the work of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner intermeshes with that of the District Electoral Areas Commissioner, and on how to ensure that the outcome is the creation of logical and coherent district electoral areas. Those must be recognised by people and which meet the needs of natural communities, rather than prolong the current difficulties. What are the Minister’s responsibilities in conjunction with those of the Secretary

of State to ensure that action is taken to improve that process immediately?

Mr Gallagher: Mr Speaker, you will not want yesterday's arguments to be rehashed in the debate. However, at the outset, I want to reiterate the SDLP's opposition to the 11-council proposal and its concerns about accelerated passage. It is all very well for Mr Alastair Ross my colleague on the Environment Committee to dismiss valid concerns that were expressed by the SDLP yesterday as being made only for the sake of opposition. They cannot be dismissed that easily, because when those boundaries are drawn up, the backcloth will be set, against which the new councils will operate.

Important principles of efficiency, value for money, the development of better relations and the building of a shared future are at stake for ratepayers. The SDLP opposed the Bill yesterday, not for the sake of doing so, but because we are against the scrambling through of legislation that moves Northern Ireland to new council arrangements.

11.00 am

Members need only consider today's criticism of Larne Borough Council to be aware that lessons need to be learned. Another example is Craigavon Borough Council, which has never invited public tenders for its legal services department, which performs an important function.

All of those issues come into the picture and deserve careful consideration. I agree with Mr Ford about the previous commissioner coming up with some very peculiar conclusions. As we move forward it is important to preserve natural boundaries, whether parish or townland. I hope that that will be the case.

The Bill deals with the commissioner's appointment and salary, but the Minister and the Department must explain the role envisaged for assistant commissioners. In relation to wrapping up the boundary exercise, has the Minister any proposals for moving to the next stage, which will be to take all of that work and passing it to the District Electoral Areas Commissioner?

Mr G Robinson: I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council. I will be as brief as possible. I support the Minister in her efforts to ensure that the RPA recommendations are fully implemented through the agreement of new electoral boundaries in Northern Ireland.

The RPA proposals to enhance local government have been widely welcomed in my constituency of East Londonderry, but without the will of all parties in the Assembly they will prove difficult, if not impossible, to implement by the target date of 2011. I encourage Members to join me in fully supporting the Minister in

her endeavours to reform and modernise local government.

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

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope that all parties in the Assembly welcome, as I do, the fact that we are in a position to move this process on.

Clearly, there are a number of very complex and interlinked matters regarding the whole question of the review of local government. Over recent years, attempts to reach agreement on a wide range of issues have been made by all political parties and many other key stakeholders, including those involved in wider local government, trade unions and the business community.

The issues involve questions of shared services, how local and regional government relate to each other in the new dispensation, how to obtain efficient and effective local government, and how to get fair and efficient governance arrangements that improve systems and help local government to run smoothly. Other elements include developing a community planning process that gives citizens a say in governance and addressing historical rates disparities so that individual councils can reach a financial balance.

These are complex matters, but thorough discussions and debates have taken place over the past few years. Some of the parties here have not been involved in either the strategic leadership board or the previous task force, but all those who have been represented on those bodies over the past few years have been diligent in their attendance and their attention to the detail of the issues at hand. It is unfortunate that, at times, people in this House seek to misrepresent what other parties have been saying.

We must move forward in a positive spirit. The process of accelerated passage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill has begun, and, in the time ahead, there will be an opportunity to discuss with the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner some of the concerns that have been raised this morning, once that person has been appointed.

I made the point yesterday that no matter how the North is carved up, minority communities of one or other tradition will be created and may feel trapped within a council area dominated by the other tradition. Two important tasks, therefore, lie ahead. First, we must ensure that the appropriate checks and balances are uniformly built into the future governance arrangements of local government, so that all elected members, no matter which community they represent, have a proper and proportionate involvement in their local council that is protected in law. Secondly, we must have a community planning process, and other governance arrangements to allow councils to engage with communities. That is supposed to in some way

address the idea that there will be fewer councils and, some people argue, that people will feel distant from their councillors.

I understand the need of communities to feel an affinity for their local councils, and to relate to, and have access to, those councils. However, listening to some of the comments that have been made in some of these debates, it is easy to think that we are in north Africa or north America. We do not live in such a huge place.

Mr B McCrea: I wish to take the Member up on that particular point. Is there any connection between Rosetta in Belfast, and Moira, which lies at the edge of my constituency of Lagan Valley? If we are serious about creating community engagement, should we not try to examine natural boundaries and do things properly?

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for his intervention. I know that many people have no affinity with some of the established local connections and will be glad that some of those boundaries will be removed. As I keep saying in these debates, there will be anomalies. Some of those can be ironed out, and some may not be the anomaly that people are making them out to be; I simply make the point that no matter how the boundaries are carved up, anomalies may or may not occur. We can all make our own lists of geographical areas in which that might happen.

It is essential to ensure that the future foundations of local government are built on the strongest and most robust legal protection for members of councils, those who work for them, and, most importantly, the people that we are there to serve. It is all about the safeguards, checks and balances that will be built in. That is another day's work for us all, and I look forward to the day when those Members who have cited anomalies will fully embrace the need for full and appropriate governance arrangements that protect not only elected representatives, but the citizens that we are elected to represent.

My party is keen to ensure that local government is considerably revamped by 2011. The Minister of the Environment has said that we are involved in a process, not an event. My party welcomes the commitments that have been made on issues such as timely boundary reviews and timely reviews of the functions that will be transferred and the nature of those functions. I have made the point repeatedly that any one of us could argue for a menu of functions to be transferred to local government. There is always a balance to be struck between what may best be delivered locally and what may best be delivered regionally.

However, it is clear that those proposals are a work in progress and do not represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The Minister of the Environment met all the other Ministers, and there will be future discussions to consider the appropriate transfer of functions and how

those functions can best be delivered by local government. Sinn Féin looks forward to those discussions, and I remind Members that much of that work will be conducted by the strategic leadership board, with which local councillors who represent the parties and Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) representatives will engage directly with the Minister and her officials. Furthermore — and importantly for us — those people will also have the opportunity to engage with the Executive and the Assembly via the Committee for the Environment. In the future, there will be ample opportunities to do our best collectively to get this right.

Rather than taking time to reach agreement, the Executive subcommittee, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party could have said that we were not prepared to reach such an agreement. Most people will welcome the fact that time was taken for careful consideration of complex matters and that we have reached an agreement that allows us to progress much more positively. Most people look forward to 2011, when local government will be stronger and fairer and will have a greater say about the services that it delivers directly or which are delivered via the legislation-based community-planning process, which is about ensuring that the functions over which local government does not have direct authority — such as roads, elements of education and health — can be influenced. Therefore, local government will have much greater input and influence, and, crucially, the new arrangements will afford elected representatives and democrats the opportunity to engage directly with communities, whether in Moira, Larne, Antrim or Crossmaglen.

Irrespective of whether communities are nationalist, unionist or of another ethnic minority, for the first time, local government will have an obligation to work with them in order to ensure that all citizens are treated as first-class citizens and have some say about the functions that are to be delivered on their behalf.

Sinn Féin looks forward to future debates, and it wishes to ensure that the new arrangements are right however long it takes. There has been much discussion, and I am glad that all stakeholders have had opportunities to consult. In the process outlined by the Minister, such opportunities will be ongoing, and the strategic leadership board will enable the outcomes from such discussions to reach the Executive and the Chamber. Therefore, boundaries, functions and governance arrangements will be considered, and Members will attempt to ensure not only that existing regional disparities and bad practices are not reinforced but that work is done to get those matters right. I am confident that, working together, we can get it right and that we will be able to promise the people that we represent, either in the Assembly or at local government level, that, in 2011,

local government will be better, fairer, more efficient and cost-effective. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: Despite yesterday's bluster about the Bill's accelerated passage and about how damaging that would be, if this debate's arguments are a flavour of what we will have at Consideration Stage, the Minister of the Environment need not lose too much sleep about its passage through the Assembly.

The issues raised so far have been special pleading about the positioning of boundaries and about which councils should be affiliated with other councils.

11.15 am

I do not claim to have detailed knowledge of all the areas to which Members have referred, but it strikes me that even those who are opposed to the 11-council model have contradictory views on where the boundaries should lie. I suspect that if there was a 15-council model, or a seven-council model, or any other model, there would still be disputes. *[Interruption.]*

The current 26-council model has been mentioned. If Members want councils that are so small that they cannot have real powers delegated to them because they cannot achieve economies of scale or critical mass, then they can stick with the 26-council model. However, I have not heard any party defend that model, apart from whoever it was who chipped in from a sedentary position — I do not know who that was, but I answered the point anyway. All of the parties want more powers for councils.

Some contributions to the debate have been contradictory, others illogical, and still others just plain wrong — I will come to the plain wrong parts in a minute or two.

I did not have the good fortune to hear all of the speech that Roy Beggs made, and I apologise for that, but I shall respond to the bit that I did hear. He made a plea for the boundaries of a new east Antrim council area to include all of the boundaries of the East Antrim parliamentary constituency — for them to be coterminous. He suggested that that seemed a logical way to proceed. However, Mr Ford then argued that one of the natural and logical council groupings would include Antrim and Newtonabbey. Newtonabbey cannot be in both council areas.

Mr Ford: If the Member reads Hansard tomorrow, he will see that I did not say that that was logical. I said that, speaking as an MLA for all of Antrim and two thirds of Newtonabbey, that suited me, but, in taking account of the effect that that would have on Ballymena, Larne and Carrick, it became illogical.

Mr S Wilson: I do not think that the word "illogical" was in his speech. I will check the Hansard report tomorrow. I believe that we may be witnessing a certain amount of recanting.

Of course there will be differing views on where the boundaries should lie. However, it is significant that those who oppose the Bill cannot achieve agreement even within their own parties. Mr Beggs did not mention that this issue was discussed at a meeting of his own council last night, and that some members of his own party supported the 11-council model.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member explain why he is so keen that his constituents from Larne and Carrickfergus should have to drive to Ballymena as their key centre for local government — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that, in meetings of the new councils, it will be necessary to make all remarks through the Chair, just as MLAs must.

Mr S Wilson: This is the —

Mr Beggs: I was still speaking — Mr Wilson had given way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Wilson, please continue.

Mr S Wilson: At least let me answer the point on which I had given way, before asking another question.

Mrs Long: Answer the question.

Mr S Wilson: I am going to answer it. The argument has been made that every constituent who wishes to make representations to their council will get into their car, drive away from their street, drive up the road, and arrive at the council offices in Ballymena — if that is where those offices are going to be; I did not know that that had already been decided. Have Members never heard of telephones, faxes or emails? — I must admit that email beats me a bit — *[Laughter.]*

There are other means of communication than trotting off to where the council office happens to be, if, indeed, it is going to be in Ballymena. People do not tell me that they should bring Westminster to Carrickfergus so that they can make representations to Parliament. That argument is nonsense.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: Yes, I will. However, I hope that the Member makes a point that is a bit more accurate than his last one: in his intervention to Alex Maskey, the Member asked what Rosetta has got in common with Lisburn.

Some Members: Moira.

Mr S Wilson: Moira; it is the same — it is in the Lisburn City Council area. Unless Lisburn City Council intends to engage in garden-grabbing on a grand scale, Rosetta had got nothing to do with Moira because it is in Belfast. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: It is great to get a lecture on accuracy from the great Sammy Wilson. I said Moira — the Member must get that into his head. I was trying to

make the point that any part of Belfast could be linked with Moira, for example, Castlereagh. What about the great idea of linking Larne with Moira, which was also in the plan? When you asked whether people had not heard of a telephone or of walking — if that is your argument — then why have 11 councils instead of seven? If your argument is about efficacy and about getting people talking, seven councils is the answer.

We want a system in which local councils have some semblance of relevance to the communities they serve and deliver local services to people who know to whom they are talking. That is the key point and it is why Members should debate this issue properly. When it —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This debate is developing into a farce. Members must make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr S Wilson: The Member has made a speech, not an intervention. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Before the Member accepted my intervention, he made a sub-speech, which I am responding to. When the Member and I spoke about the Libraries Bill —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not true that an intervention is supposed to be just that and not an attempt to make a speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Mr Sammy Wilson was not objecting, I allowed Mr Basil McCrea to proceed.

Mr S Wilson: I was objecting. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Sammy Wilson said to me — and he was using the Libraries Bill, which has just completed its Committee Stage, as an example — that there is a danger in letting things go, in that no changes can be made and no discussions can take place. This is exactly the same issue: we will have no opportunity to make any changes to this Bill. People say that there will be plenty of time, but there will not. It is a fait accompli; this Bill will be ramrodded through, and Mr Sammy Wilson should know that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no time limit when an intervention is accepted, so Members take that chance when they give way.

Mr S Wilson: You are dead right. *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it a different point of order?

Dr W McCrea: It is the same point of order, and I ask you to accept it. In any elected Chamber, an intervention is supposed to be an intervention and not a speech. In other places, interventions are time limited.

Mr S Wilson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know if you want to respond to that.

By any stretch of the imagination, the last intervention was not an intervention — if that is not too illogical — it was a speech. In future, I will be wary of Mr Basil McCrea's interventions, mini-speeches or rants. Whatever he calls them, they are usually interesting.

I will answer his point about linking Larne and Ballymena. Having represented the area, I have some knowledge on the matter. Do the councillors and inhabitants of Larne make representations about planning issues to Newtownabbey, Carrick or Larne? No — they make them to Ballymena. Do they make representations about Roads Service issues to Larne, Carrick or Newtownabbey — or Rosetta or Moira? No — they make them to Ballymena.

If Basil McCrea wishes to intervene to provide me with some information — *[Interruption.]*

Let me finish off with him, for goodness' sake. If he wants to intervene, let him at least gain some local knowledge first.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree — bearing in mind that the Ulster Unionists seem to be very keen on parliamentary constituencies — that, for more than half a century, Ballymena was part of the same parliamentary constituency as Larne, but now is being painted as some distant planet that has no connection with Larne?

Mr S Wilson: Those interventions were, of course, cunning ploys to divert me from the point that I was making about last night's council meeting. Do not run away, Mr Beggs. *[Laughter.]*

I shall finish talking about last night's meeting of Carrickfergus Borough Council, at which this issue was discussed. Significantly — perhaps my colleagues from East Antrim will correct me — this issue was of such import to Mr Beggs, who has poured his heart out about it this morning, that the debate was not initiated by him, but by Mr Neeson.

At that meeting, when it came to the vote, even Mr Beggs's own colleagues did not support him unanimously, and, as a result, the motion was defeated. Carrickfergus Borough Council, as far as I know, with the exception of Mr Beggs, voted to work towards making the 11b model work, and to put in place the arrangements for that. We will come to his reason for that in a moment. That is an indication of how strongly his fellow members of Carrickfergus Borough Council feel about this issue.

I suspect, however, that the real reason for his opposition is that the configuration of councils is not to the suiting of Mr Beggs. Under the current configuration, one ends up with two Beggses on two councils, whereas, in the new configuration, there might be room for only one Beggs. I suspect that the passion — if one can call it that — that we have seen from Mr Beggs this morning

is more about self-preservation than concern about boundaries and whether people will have to travel to Ballymena to make representations to their council.

Mr Neeson: Will the Member agree that the combination of Carrickfergus, Larne and Ballymena is the most blatant case of gerrymandering in this Province since the infamous days of Derry City Council?

Mr S Wilson: I find that accusation amazing. Larne and Carrickfergus are unionist-dominated councils. If Newtownabbey Borough Council was a nationalist-dominated council, one could, perhaps, argue that by including Ballymena with Larne and Carrickfergus, and excluding Newtownabbey, there might have been an element of trying to achieve a political balance. However, why on earth, if that is what one wanted to achieve, would one put all unionists in one council, and not spread them around? However, that is not the case — Newtownabbey is as predominantly unionist as Ballymena. Gerrymandering, as I understand it, is the fixing of boundaries in an attempt to achieve a particular political outcome. The political outcome will be no different whether one chooses Ballymena or Newtownabbey.

Perhaps Mr Neeson wants west Belfast to be thrown in with Carrick and Larne to get a community balance.

11.30 am

Mr Kennedy: Or Newry and Mourne.

Mr S Wilson: Or Newry and Mourne. God forbid that Danny Kennedy would be part of the new council. *[Laughter.]* Those suggestions are not logical.

On the one hand, we heard that the boundaries should reflect the parliamentary constituencies, and on the other hand, Mr Ford said that it makes sense that Newtownabbey and Antrim should be together. Regardless of which boundaries are chosen, such disputes will remain.

Mr Ford made a valid point, but he did not follow it through. He said that edges of towns can get caught in one council area, rather than being in the same council area as the rest of the town. That is inevitable, especially when new housing developments are built on the edges of towns, and that is one of the reasons why it will be necessary to review boundaries. Mr Ford asked how that could be dealt with under the existing rules. He said that the rules could have been changed if the route of accelerated passage had not been taken. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr S Wilson: I am only quoting Mr Ford, and he is wrong to say that. If he had taken the time to read the recommendations on how the commissioner should deal with reviewing boundaries, he would have known that. The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, which will be amended by the Bill, states:

“As far as practicable a district shall not be wholly or substantially severed by the boundary of another district.”

That gives the boundaries commissioner the opportunity to consider the edge-of-town anomalies to which Mr Ford referred.

Mr Ford: The Member is completely confusing the issue of a district’s external boundary with my point about the current difficulties that result from the way in which the rules create wards that are not logical or coherent. The issue of whether a district is included in another has nothing to do with my point about trying to get logical wards and, hence, logical district electoral areas.

Mr S Wilson: I will supply a copy of the Act if the Member wants to read it. I referred to districts because, in some cases, the edges of towns may have grown and may finish up in one district instead of another. The boundaries commissioner will work to terms that can deal with that. The rules for determining the numbers and boundaries of wards are the same: they will have regard for the size, population, physical diversity and the desirability for proper urban and rural representation. All those factors will be taken into consideration to deal with the logical boundaries of wards.

Mr McNarry: Are you passing that over to him?

Mr S Wilson: The Member asks from a sedentary position whether we are passing this over to the boundaries commissioner. It just so happens that that is how the boundaries are determined — by the commissioner. They are not determined by us.

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

Mr S Wilson: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The boundaries are determined by the boundaries commissioner. Members will not consider the nitty-gritty of each boundary in the Assembly.

Mr McNarry: Why not?

Mr S Wilson: The law says that a boundaries commissioner is appointed to do that and that that person will produce a report.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: No, because if the Members beside me do not understand how the system works, they should not enter a debate.

Mr Ford made a valid point, but the rules provide ample opportunity to deal with it.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: As I have not yet given way to the honourable lady, I will do so now.

Mrs Long: I appreciate the Member’s giving way, and I thank him for being so liberal with his time.

Does the Member accept that social coherence is not among the criteria? The Alliance Party was making the point that boundaries should take account not only of size and population but social coherence.

Mr S Wilson: It is still possible to cater for social coherence, because the Bill's terms of reference are wide enough to allow the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to take account of all such considerations. I assume that, when the time comes for representations to the commissioner, all parties and their local councillors will make exactly those points to him.

Dr Farry: I will try to clarify the point that Basil McCrea tried to make earlier. Does the Member accept that when the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner was considering a seven-council model a couple of years ago, he made only minor modifications to the external boundaries of council groupings?

There are genuine issues to be considered: for example, it may be reasonable for the commissioner to make significant revisions in the southern reaches of Belfast, because it makes much more sense for services in Castlereagh to be provided from a base in Belfast than one in Lisburn. Given that the DUP is strongly in favour of making efficiencies in Government, surely that should also be a consideration.

Mr S Wilson: I agree with the Member, but the logic of what he said is that the Minister, having appointed an independent Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, should dictate that he or she must make substantial changes. The Member cannot have it both ways: when an independent commissioner is appointed, the best that a Minister and the House can do is to lay down a set of guidelines that allows him or her to make small or larger changes —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: Let me finish the point, for goodness' sake. The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner can make small or larger changes to boundaries. I guarantee that if the Minister were to be as prescriptive as some of the contributors to the debate want her to be, Members would be up in arms. It would be a case of the Minister more or less informing the commissioner of her desired outcome and telling him or her what must be done to achieve it.

Mr Ford: I wonder whether the Member has read clause 1(2) of the Bill:

"The 11 local government districts shall incorporate, respectively, the whole or the major part of the following former local government districts—".

The Alliance Party's point is that by prescribing that at least the "major part" of Castlereagh must be included in a district with Lisburn, the Bill makes it increasingly difficult to draw logical boundaries on the southern and eastern edges of Belfast.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr S Wilson: As far as I understand the clause, the "major part" refers to the geographical area covered by the council. Therefore, any changes to the edges of Belfast would not involve huge geographical swathes. Rather, they would involve including areas of high-density population, such as the Cregagh and Tullycarnet estates. The Bill enables the commissioner to make the kind of changes to which the Member referred. If I am wrong, the Minister will have no difficulty in correcting me, but that is my understanding of clause 1(2).

Mr B McCrea: If the Member does not understand the clause, he should not be here.

Mr S Wilson: I have a better understanding of the clause than the Member, who, in his every intervention, demonstrated geographical and procedural ignorance, and a total lack of knowledge of the subject being debated. I look forward to his speech, when I am sure that Members will be privy to his wisdom.

First, the Minister has been attacked for establishing model 11b, with allegations that the model was agreed without consultation. That is patently untrue; there was extensive consultation on the seven-, 11- and 15-council models. The Minister has not drawn a new model out of a hat; it was discussed widely through consultation during direct rule.

Secondly, the Minister has demonstrated a degree of political skill to guide the Assembly to this point. Sinn Féin was wedded to the seven-council model. In fact, it was so wedded to that model that, when one of its members — who has now been reconciled with the party and given a Deputy Speaker position — dissented —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way in a minute. I want to finish my point and have a go at Sinn Féin, because I have had a go at everyone else. *[Laughter.]*

When that Member dared to dissent from the party line on the seven-council model, he was either expelled, suspended from the party or threatened — something happened to him, anyway — because Sinn Féin felt so sore about it. Against the background that Sinn Féin had wedded itself to, and was prepared to discipline its own members over opposition to, the seven-council model, the Minister had to try to reach agreement.

Those of us who serve on local councils knew that decisions were required. The fact that the Minister was able to reach agreement on a model and a number of councils allowed a proposal to reach the House. She should be congratulated, rather than criticised. If other Executive Ministers — in particular, the Minister of Education — demonstrated similar political skills and tried to reach agreement, the Assembly might make better progress.

The 11-council model is logical; it does not divorce councils from their constituents and retains a degree of locality and local input. Moreover, the council areas are large enough to give councils the critical mass to take on extra responsibilities. I have served most of my political life on local councils, and I believe fervently that it is important that local councils have the capacity to undertake more regeneration work in their areas. However, that can only be achieved with a sufficient degree of critical mass.

Having served on Belfast City Council — a large council, big enough to employ staff with expertise, as opposed to some of the smaller councils that I deal with in the course of my parliamentary work — I am in a position to make comparisons. Smaller councils by their nature cannot — and this is not a criticism — attract the kind of staff who are required, and they cannot attain the critical mass to complete the work that we would like them to do. Therefore, the Minister has hit it right politically by reconciling differences in the Executive, and she has hit it right economically by establishing councils that are big enough to take on those responsibilities. Therefore, I hope that the House will support the Bill. Amendments may be tabled that will improve the Bill; that is the point of this debate. I look forward to examining those amendments at Further Consideration Stage.

Mr Armstrong: During yesterday's debate, Members mentioned the importance of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, who will, undoubtedly, play a vital role in the process.

It is important — perhaps fundamental — that we be clear on the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's remit. That is only fair to the commissioner, whomever he or she turns out to be. We must ensure that the remit set out in the Bill reflects best practice in the rest of the United Kingdom. Moreover, the commissioner must be able to reflect local people's ties and affinities in the structures of local government.

11.45 am

We are all aware of the potential political sensitivities that will surround the commissioner's work. We must, therefore, give him or her the relevant and necessary tools to reflect in those structures local people's will and their affinities. It is crucial that Members establish an appropriate remit for the commissioner. The vast majority of Members are aware of the public ridicule that greeted the former proposals, framed under direct rule, for seven local government units. We all remember the public outcry over the ridiculously abstract boundaries that did not reflect, in any form, shape or fashion, the realities and strengths of local identities in Northern Ireland.

To ensure that such an outcome is not repeated must now be a priority for the commissioner. The mess

made under direct rule underlines and emphasises the fundamental importance of ensuring that the Bill properly sets out the commissioner's remit. His or her success may have a knock-on effect for the success of local government. People who associate with their local representative bodies are more likely to vote in local elections and to become involved in and appreciate those bodies.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Armstrong: I have just finished. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that we are working to the deadline of the 2011 local government elections, a clear need existed for the Bill to be granted accelerated passage. It is important that the process experience no further delays. Sinn Féin believes that equality and fairness must be the cornerstone of the new councils. That fact must be enshrined in any future legislation for the new structures. The proposals for the new face of local government will ensure that, in future, no community in any part of the Six Counties will feel discriminated against.

It is important that local government be effective and that it empower local communities. The community-planning process provides such an opportunity. We should not be hung up on the number of councillors — councils' effectiveness must take priority over keeping seats for politicians. The process has dragged on for far too long, so the Bill is to be welcomed. We now have the opportunity to deliver a more efficient and effective system of local government — one that engages with communities and protects minorities. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Weir: I support the motion. I will keep my remarks brief, because we all anticipate that rare treat — a Basil McCrea speech without a time limit. I do not want to delay that any longer than is necessary.

I listened to the remarks of Mr Beggs Jnr a Member for East Antrim, and I was reminded of the film 'Alive'. For those Members unfamiliar with it, the film involved a plane crash in the Andes. The plane was carrying a South American rugby team, and over 10 weeks, survivors of the crash fought to stay alive. Let me explain, for Members familiar with the film, that I do not refer to the bit of the film in which the survivors resorted to cannibalism. I know that the Ulster Unionist Party can occasionally indulge in a degree of infighting, but even I would not accuse it of cannibalism. Rather, I refer to an incident towards the end of the film, where a couple of the survivors, in a last, desperate attempt to be rescued, spent a fortnight climbing in the Andes in appalling conditions, scaling one peak after another, before eventually reaching safety in another country.

Such was the picture painted of the route from Larne to Ballymena. It is, according to Mr Beggs, a

perilous journey, during which the poor, stranded people of Larne might have to resort to cannibalism.

Mr Beggs: I said that the journey from Carrickfergus to Ballymena was difficult.

Mr Weir: The vast distance between Larne and Carrickfergus obviously negates my point. The Member evidently considers the journey from Carrickfergus to Ballymena to last several weeks.

This is hardly rural America — hundreds of miles will not have to be crossed to reach a council building. The type of nonsense that we have heard today, suggesting that the new council areas will cover a territory that is too vast, does not hold water.

We are told that coterminosity with parliamentary boundaries should be sought. However, no other structure in Northern Ireland is coterminous with parliamentary boundaries, be it health, education, police, or planning structures. Indeed, there is no part of the United Kingdom where the councils are established according to a parliamentary constituency. Therefore, the idea of coterminosity does not hold water.

Mr Beggs mentioned the Orange Order, which is based on a county model. I assume that Mr Beggs is a member of the County Antrim Lodge. If we were to follow the Orange Order structure — based on six counties, plus Londonderry city and Belfast — we would have an eight-council model. Therefore, that argument does not carry much weight.

Local identity and social coherence have been mentioned as two of the key criteria that, it is claimed, are ignored by the seven-council model. Local identity is important, and there is a balance to be struck, because the model cannot be driven purely by local identity or, indeed, by affinity between communities.

Mr Shannon: It was long before my time, but back in 1973, a local government reorganisation took place —

Mr S Wilson: That was not before your time at all. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Shannon: I was first able to vote in 1973, so the Member can work out my age from that.

At that time, there was Newtownards Town Council and Ards Rural Council, and people were concerned when they came together to form Ards Borough Council. In fact, that worked out very well and the people were happy with the changes. We will be quite happy with the proposed changes to take over North Down Borough Council and absorb it into Ards Borough Council this time around. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: I welcome Alderman Shannon's comment. I should have declared an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council — or “greater north Down borough council”, as it will soon be known, when it takes over the Ards area.

In any area, there are communities that are relatively adjacent to one another that do not necessarily share a sense of affinity. I am thinking of my own constituency, where there have been problems with a new community hall, or areas such as Conlig and Breezemount, which are effectively separated by the dual carriageway between Bangor and Newtownards, and where it could be argued that there is no real sense of affinity between the communities. If social coherence is to be a key criterion, how can the areas of the Malone Road and Taughmonagh in Belfast be combined? I do not see a great deal of social coherence between those two areas.

I agree that local identity must be one of the factors that is taken into consideration, but if it is to be the sole driver behind the new council structure, we could end up with 111 councils or 1,111 councils, because people's identification with their own local community goes much deeper than the council area to which they belong. Local identity is important, and that is one of the reasons why I believe that the seven-council model is not the right one. However, a balance must be struck between local identity and the issues of economies of scale, the opportunity for efficiencies of delivery, population and the rates burden. That is why I believe that the 11-council model represents a reasonable solution to the issue.

We must ensure that local government is not only fit to inherit the range of functions that are outlined in the RPA, but that this is only the start of a process and that councils are suitable to adopt more functions in future. If there are too many councils, it becomes difficult to argue that additional functions should be brought down to local-council level. However, if there are too few councils, the argument about remoteness comes into play, so we must strive for a balance.

I wish to deal with one of the points that Mr Ford raised about the need to try to ensure that the right ward boundaries are set. I understand the point that he is driving at, but ward boundaries are needed. As was suggested at one stage — although not in this Chamber — we cannot simply adopt the district electoral areas.

Ward boundaries have to be of relatively similar size because they are the building blocks, not just of local government, but of parliamentary constituencies. Therefore, it is vital that that matter is addressed.

Although it would be useful if ward boundaries reflected local identities, I have yet to meet anyone in North Down who has complained about their ward boundary. The issue is not top of the political agenda.

Yesterday, Mr Sammy Wilson derogatorily referred to members of the Committee for the Environment as “anoraks”. The collective term for anoraks might be “Alliance”; certainly that is the impression that Mr Ford gave today.

There is a range of interpretations of how ward boundaries should be drawn up. Members could draw up precisely the boundaries that they want. I could make an argument that because of natural affinity, areas around Saintfield, for instance, should be in the same ward as North Down and Ards. However, I will resist the temptation of going into too much detail on that issue. However, the boundaries that I would draw up would be different to those of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Boylan — and they would definitely be different to those of Mr Basil McCrea.

Mr Ford: The Member made an interesting point about the procedures for drawing up ward boundaries. I am sure that it is true that his constituents in North Down — like mine in South Antrim — do not particularly worry about the ward in which they happen to have been included. However, wards are used not merely as building blocks; they are also used for statistical purposes. All Members will be aware of instances in which areas have failed to get the necessary social support because they happen to fall within an affluent ward. Such issues are being ignored due to the current procedures.

Mr Weir: Sensitivity can be used when targeting social need. For example, enumeration districts could be used. Therefore, there are solutions to the problem. The pattern of housing in Northern Ireland sometimes makes it difficult to draw up boundaries that entirely reflect a degree of social cohesion. However, the point about ward boundaries should not be laboured too much.

All Members could draw up their own sets of boundaries. However, if I, the Minister, Mr Boylan or Mr Basil McCrea were to draw up those boundaries, the obvious accusation would be that there would be some form of gerrymandering. Even the redoubtable Mr Ford would be accused of some form of gerrymandering were his wish list to be granted.

If the Bill becomes law, which I hope it will, the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will be able to do the job independently. To take local needs into account, it will be important that the commissioner has the level of flexibility that the Bill will provide. The commissioner will be able to reflect the views on the ground and to make any necessary changes.

I particularly welcome the level of flexibility that the Bill will provide in that there will not be a one-size-fits-all system for the number of councillors. That will enable the needs of different populations to be met and will allow for the divergence of any necessary boundary changes. The Bill will afford the commissioner the opportunity to increase or decrease the number of wards per district by up to five, which means that he or she will not be put into a straightjacket on that issue.

The Bill is an important step in the modernisation of local government. I wish it well and I urge Members to support it.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, which will soon be known as the “greater north Down council”; Mr Weir also serves on that council. I also declare that I have left my anorak outside. I have no doubt that wearing anoraks in the Chamber would be deemed by the Speaker to be inappropriate dress. I am interested to know who the second anorak on the Committee for the Environment is going to be, and if he or she would come forward.

Mr Weir: That is making an assumption that the Committee is restricted to two anoraks. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: I hope that the other anoraks will reveal themselves in due course.

12.00 noon

If the accusation of Alliance Party “anoraks” refers to our detailed consideration of legislation and future boundaries, I am quite happy to stand guilty as charged. Those are matters of critical importance.

However, the Alliance Party is content for the Bill to receive a Second Stage. In common with others, we recognise that there is a need to reform local government, and we will not stand in the way of that process. However, we have issues with aspects of the Bill — particularly the number of councils and the approach to the new boundaries. Those issues will be addressed through amendments that the Alliance Party will table later this week.

Members have said that the goal of the Bill is to create strong, modern local government. I am sure that we all buy into that concept. However, I have major reservations about that being achieved on the basis of an 11-council model.

As is the case anywhere else, councils in Northern Ireland provide a number of different functions and services. At a basic level, councils collect bins and deal with waste — and those are the only experiences that some people have of their local councils.

Councils also provide a focus for local identity, civic pride and local representation. They ensure that decision-makers are accessible to the people whom they represent. Whenever distance is created between councillors and the public, potential problems and barriers could result, and people could feel isolated.

Establishing fewer large councils is sensible in respect of economies of scale and efficient service delivery. On the other hand, a greater number of smaller councils would provide a better local focus and more access to decision-makers. Smaller councils would also be less remote from the public. Therefore, a

compromise must be found. My concern is that that balance has not been achieved by the 11-council model.

The decision to establish 11 councils was reached through a political compromise between the DUP and Sinn Féin, and both parties were fairly open about that. That is fair enough, because that is part and parcel of governance. However, a rational analysis of the facts would not lead one to an 11-council model — a 15-council model is a more sustainable solution.

The potential range of additional powers to be transferred to councils and the degree of uplift in the control of councils over public expenditure are not much more significant than the current position. The big difference will be in the area of community planning and general well-being, which is essentially a co-ordination function. That is extremely welcome and much needed, but it does not amount to a major shift in service delivery.

Does a move from 26 councils to 11 represent too big a leap, owing to the fairly modest transfer in the level of services? Does the 11-council model have the potential to lose aspects of local identity, civic pride and access to elected representatives?

I have concerns about the proposed boundary arrangements. I will resist the temptation to talk about my local area, and will instead talk about issues across Northern Ireland. At the moment, an effective pattern is in place, as the current 26 councils are based around large towns and their hinterlands. There may well be exceptions, but that is a general rule, and that provides a focal point for identity and service delivery.

When new councils are created by lumping existing bodies together into groups, all sorts of anomalies will inevitably arise. I have no doubt that, on paper, the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will have a mandate to consider major redesigns of current councils — as long as the major geographical part of the suggested groupings stay together. In practice, however, only minimal changes to the boundaries of the proposed seven super-councils were made in 2006. One such change concerned Coleraine Borough Council and Limavady Borough Council, and the boundaries within which Mussenden Temple would be considered to lie. It was only at that type of level that changes were made, rather than the more radical changes that are necessary to create more logical units.

I refer specifically to Belfast, which is a fairly tightly drawn city by UK and international standards. Many of its suburbs lie outside the Belfast City Council boundary. However, to all intents and purposes, those suburbs are part of Belfast, and the people who live there consider that to be the case. The southern suburbs of Belfast that are in the Castlereagh council area will be lumped in with Lisburn, and

people will be confused about that and will not understand why that should be the case.

More critically, there are major challenges for service delivery. If the reform is to be about efficiency, there will not be council works depots, for example, on every street corner in the new council areas. Instead, there will be some rationalisation. For example, in the proposed Castlereagh/Lisburn amalgamation the focus will inevitably be on Lisburn city. One might question whether it will be more efficient to empty the bins in parts of Castlereagh from a base in Lisburn as opposed to working from a base in Belfast.

There are major challenges to be faced, and although, on paper, those can be addressed by a boundary commission, I have severe reservations about whether the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will make radical decisions. It is not a case, as Mr Sammy Wilson suggested, of the Alliance Party wishing that the Minister would give clear directions to the boundaries commissioner as to what should happen — although opting for option 11b is, in itself, a form of direction — it is about ensuring that the commissioner takes a broad regard of his or her remit and is prepared to make radical changes to create coherent units for future local government.

There are separate processes for examining first, wards and district boundaries, and secondly, district electoral areas. Yesterday the Minister suggested that those examination processes are separate and must take their course. Although I appreciate that they operate under different powers and that different offices are responsible for each process, the two are fundamentally linked. When one is drawing ward boundaries, one must think about how those wards might be fitted together to form coherent district electoral areas in the future. At present, that is not part of the remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner.

According to my analysis of what happened in 2006, difficulties would have been handed over to the District Electoral Area Commissioner, had one been appointed then. At that time, my party made representations about that. However, they were not taken on board by the commissioner, given that “they were” not part of their terms of reference. If we were able to streamline the two processes and have some form of joined-up and efficient government, we would save some time and produce a more logical and coherent process further down the line.

Finally, I concur with Mr Weir’s points about using Westminster boundaries. Parliamentary boundaries are subject to a different review process to that for local government boundaries. Parliamentary boundaries should change every 10 or 12 years, and we will see that happening frequently. At times, radical changes to

parliamentary boundaries can be made. For example, the new constituency of West Tyrone was created in 1997. Given that we cannot simply change council boundaries to that degree, it is important to spend time ensuring that we get it right at the start. We must accept that council boundaries will be in place for 30 or 40 years, and, although we talk about reviewing those boundaries every 10 years, in practice, those reviews may result in minor tinkering rather than reforms on the scale that one might expect to see for Westminster boundaries. We must be clear about that.

I am happy to support the Bill's Second Stage in order that we can move ahead with the reform of local government. However, some serious issues must be addressed at Consideration Stage. My colleagues and I will be happy to table serious amendments, which we hope will be given proper consideration in the House.

Mr B Wilson: I have been a North Down councillor for the past 28 years, and I also declare an interest in the debate. I do not support the Bill, and, in particular, the adoption of model 11b. I regret that the Committee for the Environment did not have an opportunity to take evidence — particularly on the number of councils — because the options set out in the RPA are now obsolete. Those were published more than three years ago, and the parameters have changed.

The proposed 11-council model will reduce local democracy, cause maximum disruption and achieve minimum benefit. The entire RPA exercise has turned out to be a damp squib. Expectations were built up about increased powers for local government, but few significant powers are being transferred. The RPA exercise is based on a number of false premises: the devolution of additional powers to local councils; significant savings for the ratepayer; more efficient and effective delivery of services; coterminosity being central to the provision of effective services. The proposed model will not achieve any of those objectives: no significant powers will be devolved; there is no evidence that any savings will be made; efficiency and effectiveness are not guaranteed; and the idea of coterminosity seems to have been abandoned.

Indeed, with hindsight, it is difficult to understand why coterminosity was promoted so actively when other services now seem to have ignored it. We have five health trusts, seven police districts and a single authority for education. The proposal to have 11 councils is based on the same false assumption that, in providing efficient and effective services, big is beautiful.

It is argued that the critical mass must rise quite significantly if councils are to be allocated additional responsibilities. Sammy Wilson referred to that in some detail. However, recent research into local government reform in Britain by Tony Travers indicates that that is not necessarily the case. He states:

“It does not appear possible to argue a conclusive case for a strong and one-directional link between population size and efficiency and effectiveness ... It is not possible to say that larger authorities perform, on the whole, better than smaller, or that smaller authorities perform better than larger. In fact, the assumption that size is associated with efficiency and effectiveness is far from proven.”

The RPA consultation paper used that assumption to suggest that reorganisation of local government could save between £15 million and £75 million, which is almost 16% of the total local government expenditure. That figure seems incredible, given that the same level of services — refuse collection, local leisure centres, and so on — will still be provided. Absolutely no evidence was given to support that figure.

The RPA's proposals are also based on the premise that the current local authorities are exceptionally small. That is not the case in comparison with local authorities in other European countries. The powers that have been devolved to our regional Assembly are still limited. Therefore, there is no strong case for significantly increasing the size of local government authorities, particularly if it is done at the expense of local democracy and accountability.

In Professor Colin Knox's briefing paper to the RPA, he pointed out that local authorities in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the UK, already have the largest average populations in Europe. The proposed new authorities would have average populations of 160,000. Those would be among the largest in the world and significantly larger than council populations in the rest of the UK. Such massive authorities cannot be sensitive to the wishes of local communities. They would reduce accessibility and democratic accountability, and destroy civic identity.

The proposal to reduce local authorities to single figures is unprecedented and is totally out of step with the rest of Europe. We are proposing to have a council for every 160,000 people. France has a council for every 1,600 people; Germany has a council for every 5,400 people; and the Irish Republic has a council for every 33,000 people.

Many smaller authorities — that are democratically accountable — operate successfully throughout these islands by providing efficient and economic local services. The Green Party believes that the 11-council model will not improve services; it will destroy local democracy and take the “local” out of local government. Can anyone say that they have local government when their local town hall may be 40 miles away?

12.15 pm

Mr Weir: The Green Party is concerned that the 11-council model will destroy local democracy. Will the Green Party put its money where its mouth is and refuse to contest elections for these facades of councils that the Member has referred to?

Mr B Wilson: The answer is no. The boundaries are a result of a number-crunching exercise to achieve an optimum number of councils whilst ignoring local identity, traditional boundaries and long-established communities. The suggestion that it is necessary to have 11 councils to achieve the critical mass and provide major services has no validity. The Welsh and Scottish models refute that. Wales has an assembly plus a single tier of local government, which consists of 22 unitary councils. One of those authorities — Cardiff — has more than 250,000 people, and more than one third of those authorities have fewer than 100,000 people, but they all have full responsibility for a wider range of services than those proposed in option 11b.

In his analysis of the RPA proposals, Professor Colin Knox said that the case made by the review team for single large tier local authorities is not grounded on experience elsewhere. He also referred to the unitary councils in Britain, which were an amalgamation of previous authorities that often lacked any sense of shared identity. Furthermore, he said that many of the new councils appeared superficial because they brought together, in a single authority, towns that in most countries in Europe would be authorities in their own right. However that is what is being proposed here. We are proposing to bring together towns that have no common identity. That has not worked in England, and it will not work here; we should not make a similar mistake.

Unlike Sammy Wilson, I think that the 26-council model proposed by Macrory is preferable to the 11-council model. The 26-council structure provides accessibility, accountability and civic leadership. It also encourages participation in local democracy and promotes a sense of local identity. Councils are the only locally-elected, democratically accountable bodies to have operated continuously and provided services throughout the 30-year conflict.

The Omnibus survey that was carried out by the review of public administration showed strong public support and satisfaction with services provided by local authorities — unlike those provided by the unaccountable quangos in health and education. The review of public administration should be focused in those areas.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that one cannot compare the 11 councils — which will comprise elected members — with quangos, such as health and education boards? It is a nonsense to make that comparison and say that the public would be as dissatisfied with an all-elected council — which will be bigger than the existing councils and have greater powers — as it is with quangos.

Mr B Wilson: I was not making that comparison. The Omnibus survey showed that the public's main

concern with public services related to health and education. Most people were happy with the way local councils were operating, and the statistics show that. The Omnibus survey also showed that councils were accessible. One of the problems associated with education and health boards is that they are inaccessible. Some 16% of the population consulted a local councillor in the past year, and 21% have contact with their local councils. The local councils reflect and reinforce people's sense of place and community. The public use the council as their first point of contact. People go to their local council for issues that are not even the responsibility of the council, because they identify it with the local area.

Under the proposed model, which would take the "local" out of local government, the new councils would lack local identity and, as many Members have already said, result in the loss of accessibility. At present, most residents have easy access to their town hall, but in future they may have to travel 40 or 50 miles. That is contrary to the spirit of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Her Majesty's Government have not adopted this charter in respect of Northern Ireland, but there is no reason why the principle of subsidiarity should not apply here as it does in the rest of the UK and throughout Europe.

As people become more remote from the decision-making process, they are less likely to vote, which leads to the loss of democratic accountability. In Northern Ireland, turnout is at least double that achieved in larger authorities in England, which have a particularly low participation rate. In the UK, few people vote in local government elections, because they do not see it as being relevant to them and they do not identify with the large authorities.

Supporters of the 11-council model argue that critical mass needs to be significantly increased if councils are to be given additional responsibilities. That raises the question of the significance of additional powers given to local councils. Even if the powers exercised by local government prior to the Macrory Report were to be transferred to local councils, populations of 100,000 or more would not be required.

Take, for example, the present situation in Scotland and Wales: although those countries have a Parliament and Assembly respectively, the local authorities, of which few represent populations of 150,000 or more, possess full powers, including control over education, roads and planning. It seems that populations of 100,000 are more common; indeed, one third of councils in Wales and one quarter of councils in Scotland represent populations of less than 100,000, but they possess full powers over services that our councils do not.

In England, 138 councils represent populations of less than 100,000, including Rutland County Council,

which has 34,000. However, that council has powers over education, social services, housing and planning. There is no reason why our councils should not have the same powers.

There is no optimum size for local authorities. In each case a number of factors, including population, geography, identity and history, should be taken into account. In adopting the 11b model, it is clear that the Executive have accepted the need to have a critical mass of 100,000 and, at the same time, to equalise populations as much as possible. That is a bureaucratic number-crunching model which totally ignores traditional boundaries and allegiances.

Instead, the new councils should reflect local communities, which have a wide range of populations. In Wales, Cardiff Council represents a population of 305,000, whereas Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council represents 55,000; in Scotland, Glasgow City Council represents a population of 570,000, whereas Shetland Islands Council represents 21,000; and in England, Birmingham City Council represents one million people, whereas Teesdale District Council represents 24,000 people. It appears that in Northern Ireland we want all our councils to be exactly — or close to — the same size. However, council areas in the rest of the UK are based on their natural boundaries, not on a number decided by some bureaucrat and used as a critical mass for providing services.

Having said that, I accept that we are going to get model 11b, but we should be concerned about how it is executed. I am particularly concerned about the last Local Government Boundaries Commissioner; his review was carried out by a company, Laser-Scan, and referred to sophisticated technology, such as mapping, spatial technologies, and ortho-photography, but did not mention anything about traditional boundaries, local communities or social cohesion. Some very strange decisions were made, because traditional boundaries were ignored.

If we are going to adopt model 11b, we must have maximum flexibility. We must allow local councils to remain within their natural boundaries. However, it makes sense for the natural boundaries of Belfast to expand. Not all councils need to have 100,000 or 200,000 electors. For example, if we take into consideration the natural boundary of Fermanagh, a new council could be created. However, the problem is that the rigid directives set down in the Bill need to be reduced, so that there is as much flexibility as possible to reflect natural boundaries.

Finally, we in the Green Party believe that decision-making should be close to the people. I cannot support the Bill, as it will take decisions away from local communities.

Mr B McCrea: There was a time not so long ago when a certain group of people chanted that it was time to get it right. They said that we should not rush things and that we should take time to get it right, but miraculously their view has changed. Now their chant is that we should do things as quickly as possible and not worry about the consequences. That is an issue.

I declare an interest as a member of Lisburn City Council. Hopefully, in the future, there will not be a dual mandate between those who sit on local government bodies and those who are Members of the Assembly.

I am grateful to Dr Farry for clarifying the point that I made to Brian Wilson about the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner making only minor changes, and that we are not looking for someone to make wholesale changes. If that were the case, we would not specify option 11b — we would simply say that there will be 11 districts and let the commissioner choose. We are giving political direction. Some of us find certain precepts within that direction quite incredible.

Brian Wilson referred to the arbitrary figure of 100,000 electors, but the number of electors varies from one council area to another. In Fermanagh District Council, there are about 50,000 electors. The Newtownabbey/Carrickfergus areas are much tighter. However, there is no doubt that there is a sense of identity in Fermanagh, and that should be protected. I raise that point because it is fundamental to my concerns about the matter.

During a previous debate on the issue, the Minister of the Environment said that she would address Members' concerns about the inclusion of certain areas, such as Castlereagh. My concern is — and perhaps she will address the point in her closing remarks — that if we do not give a clear steer to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner that he can consider making substantive changes, he will be left simply tinkering round the edges.

During an earlier intervention, I raised the issue with Alex Maskey about whether it is sensible to include Rosetta along with Moira. Some Members thought that I had made a mistake, but not so. The point that I was making was that if an arbitrary ward could move to another jurisdiction, where exactly does one draw the line?

I am sure that Members have received their folders containing a map of the proposed wards. Members will see that there is some difficulty, as Rosetta ward, with an electorate of 3,427, is just beside Cregagh ward, with an electorate of 3,363. There is an arbitrary line through the middle of that area, which does not make sense, as one group of citizens would get their services from Belfast and another group would get their services from Lisburn.

Are you getting ready, Sammy?

12.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: I am sorry to intervene.

Mr B McCrea: That is OK. You may intervene a couple of times.

Mr S Wilson: I am sure that it will be the first of many.

Does the Member accept that the whole point of having the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, as I pointed out earlier, will be to focus on cases where, if there were to be a boundary discrepancy, a case could be made to the commissioner to deal with that anomaly?

Mr B McCrea: I thank Sammy Wilson for his intervention. It strikes at the core of the matter, which is that people should be able to make representations — for example, that urban parts of Castlereagh identify more closely with Belfast than they do with Lisburn.

Lisburn is a city; it has a sense of identity and community, and although we like Castlereagh, and the people there, it may be stretching things to claim that it should be included in the Lisburn district electoral area. If we could be assured that the commissioner will try to look after local communities and local identities — if his or her remit is that broad — some issues could be resolved. This debate has been useful in addressing that point, so I thank Sammy Wilson for raising the matter.

I agree that gerrymandering is occurring. Sammy Wilson very helpfully produced a definition of “gerrymandering” — it means producing a set of boundaries in which a certain political outcome is required. It appears to me that natural geographic and community affinities are being ignored in an attempt to try to achieve a balance, and I do not think that that is fair or helpful to the ongoing development of Northern Ireland.

My fear is that the Assembly is abdicating responsibility on this issue — it is rushing the Bill through. The Assembly is saying that the matter will be put into the hands of a commissioner and that it will not be discussed here — so that we will not have to confront some of the very real issues facing our society. I would much prefer to have talked with Members about what makes sense — I will not run away from some of the more difficult issues.

There are issues about the political make up of Belfast that we should talk about; and who better to do so than Assembly Members — particularly once it is clear that they will not be local government councillors also.

I am grateful to a number of Members, Brian Wilson in particular, who provided a considerable amount of detail — several times, in fact. However, the issue is this — as local government accounts for only 5% of public-sector spending and, therefore, does not actually do very much, why we are going through this process?

What we are trying to do is to increase participation and get better engagement from citizens. The aim is to coalesce around a sense of identity so that the democratic process is enhanced.

In the process of achieving that enhanced democratic process, an issue arises regarding making savings. I have severe doubts as to whether the process will actually deliver any savings — it will end up costing us money. The question must be asked — why are we doing this if it is going to cost us money? If there are going to be no benefits for the community, and if situations arise that are difficult to understand, the process is doomed to failure. That is an important point to highlight.

It is important that the citizens of Northern Ireland understand what is being discussed. They will not understand why areas such as Castlereagh, Lisburn and Moira should be linked. The issues that emerged when Larne and Ballymena were discussed — earlier, Larne was to be linked with Glenavy or with Dunmurry — it just does not make sense.

It just does not make sense.

A Member: That is not part of these proposals.

Mr B McCrea: Yes, but they were discussed earlier. We really want to find out where the local community sits on the proposals.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I was waiting for Sammy to intervene.

Mr S Wilson: The Member keeps getting these matters wrong, and I hate having to correct him. Even under the seven-council proposal, the linkages involved Newtownabbey, Antrim, Lisburn and Carrickfergus. Larne never entered into the configuration. The Member mentioned Larne’s being linked with Glenavy, but Larne was never part of that connection. I do not mind the Member illustrating points, but for goodness’ sake, will he illustrate them properly and not mislead the House? Sorry, I am not allowed to say mislead the House. Do not confuse us. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: I apologise for confusing Mr Wilson.

Mr McNarry: I would not apologise for that.

Mr B McCrea: I am apologising because he has been very nice. Anomalies exist in the proposals. It would have seemed reasonable to link Larne to Carrickfergus. If it is not reasonable to do so, that issue must be taken on board.

Similarly, people in Dunmurry are particularly concerned about whether Dunmurry will be classed as part of Lisburn or of Belfast — or of west Belfast for that matter. Many areas have particular issues. It would be useful if we could accept in principle that we should try to consider geographical areas that are meaningful to people who live there. In turn, it is to be hoped that those areas will be coterminous with the council areas

in which services will be offered. The Minister may be able to give some reassurance on that matter.

It is regrettable that Mr Alex Maskey is not in the Chamber. He seems intent on politicising the matter. He does not seem to care what the boundaries are, as long as legal safeguards are in place. His entire speech was a political fudge, and such fudging has been the problem with the entire process. This proposal is a political fudge by a cosy coalition that is more interested in maintaining power and avoiding any form of election than in improving local government or serving the people of Northern Ireland.

I was about to sit down, but if Mr Sammy Wilson, who is noticeably quiet at the moment, wants to have one last go at me, I will take an intervention. I have outlined what is really going on. The debate concerns not local government but the Assembly and political gerrymandering. It ill behoves Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Both Members thoroughly enjoyed the debate.

Mrs Foster: I thank most Members for their contribution to this important debate. I again emphasise that the Bill is an essential and urgent step towards bringing our local government arrangements into the twenty-first century.

I will deal with some issues that Members raised, because some need answered well. Alastair Ross started the debate and talked of the importance of moving ahead, and he mentioned the DUP position on the seven-council model. He also talked of the need for checks and balances in new governance arrangements, which will, of course, come before the House for full consideration.

Cathal Boylan continued the theme of checks and balances. He also mentioned the need to enhance service delivery. Service delivery is the key to everything that we do. Our citizens are the important element in all aspects of RPA, and it is important to have service delivery centred on them.

Roy Beggs commented on the long process of local government reform. He said that the Ulster Unionist Party felt that local government should be strengthened and renewed. He felt that local communities and identities were satisfied only by being based on Westminster parliamentary boundaries. I completely and utterly disagree with those remarks, and research will back me up.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: If the Member lets me finish my point, I will give way to him. Research backs up my position. When initial research was being conducted, people were very clear about the fact that their local identity was not based on Westminster parliamentary boundaries or local council boundaries. In fact, they felt connected to much smaller areas, and those findings have been

reflected in some of the considered speeches that we have heard about townland areas.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for giving way. Although I stated a preference for the 15-council model, will the Minister acknowledge that, if there were to be 11 councils, the area comprising Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey in my constituency would be a more natural geographically linked area? I did not refer exclusively to what the Minister said previously; I said that if the 11-council model were to be adopted, better geographical units could be created.

Mrs Foster: I am sure that the Member will make those points to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner when he or she is appointed. The Member indicated that he felt that having 15 councils was a more appropriate model; indeed, several other Members made that point.

A 15-council model would delay implementation incredibly, as it would mean that little and larger parts of councils would be taken, as opposed to entire or major parts of councils. That would create great difficulties for asset and liability splits because smaller parts of councils would be taken rather than larger parts.

The Member's point about the Grand Orange Lodge was completely fallacious. I would have thought that living in Carrickfergus, he would have been a member of the County Antrim Grand Orange Lodge. However, perhaps the Carrickfergus Orange Lodge has made a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) of which I was not aware.

David Ford moved on to look at model 11b and stated that he needed me to spell out why that model was chosen. It was selected for several reasons, including the service delivery scale; the desirability of councils having common boundaries with other organisations; coterminosity, which I will come back to; equality; social need; rural issues; population distribution; and employment patterns. Other reasons included access to services, given the existing public-sector infrastructure; local identity; the influence of natural geography in creating communities; rating the wealth base of possible council areas; and the influence of other key strategies, such as A Shared Future and the regional development strategy.

Mr Ford recognised that it was always going to be difficult to have one-to-one coterminosity with major service providers. However, we have been working with the other service providers to find a way to deliver services to the new local councils effectively. I believe that we can do that. Examples of how that works in practice are the new health and social care trusts that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety established. The Minister has made it clear that he is willing to work towards a model that can provide the accountability that is necessary for local government.

We had hoped that the police would wait before establishing new policing districts, but they decided to proceed. However, I understand that they may revisit their decision, and I have already held a meeting with the Police Federation about the issues that have been raised.

Mr Ford also referred to the boundaries of the “big banana” as opposed to the “small banana”. All I can say is that I am glad that he is not naming the new councils and that someone else is dealing with that. *[Laughter.]*

There are issues about the naming of the new councils, and the Member knows that the Local Government Boundary Commissioner will present the names of the new councils, but that is entirely open —

Dr Farry: Will the Minister elaborate on the process of the naming of the new local councils? The previous time that the Boundary Commissioner considered names, Lord Rooker had already allocated a name for the commissioner to consider. The commissioner took the approach that if he found a better name, he would consider changing it, but in the absence of that, the existing name would remain.

The names that were suggested were not linked to identity but to big concepts such as the south-eastern region, inner Belfast and outer Belfast. Can the Minister ensure that a proper process will be implemented to devise the council names and that unlike in the previous period, when the public made no suggestions, we can have a proper debate on the matter?

Mrs Foster: That was the point that I was going to develop before the Member intervened. The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will make recommendations about names or he or she may simply decide to number the names. Essentially, it will be up to the new councils to determine their names. In my view, that is the proper way to do it, as it provides local ownership of the names.

Mr Ford raised an important point about the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and the District Electoral Area Commissioner.

Before the previous review of local government boundaries, the Department and the Northern Ireland Office discussed that issue, and whether work could be done at the same time. The Northern Ireland Office introduced legislation to allow the District Electoral Area Commissioner to be appointed earlier, rather than wait until after the Local Government Boundary Commissioner had been appointed, so that the two commissioners could be in post at the same time.

12.45 pm

As Mr Ford will be aware, the District Electoral Area Commissioner was not appointed because of the impasse in respect of local government. I am happy to discuss that issue with the Member. I hope to ensure, with the Secretary of State’s assistance, that the District Electoral Area Commissioner will be appointed much

sooner than next year. Progress can be made on that matter. I have listened to the Mr Ford’s comments about the District Electoral Area Commissioner, and I hope that I have also responded to his and his colleagues’ questions on that matter.

Discussion also focused on what is meant by the term “readily identifiable”, which is included in schedule 4 to the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and is part of the remit of the Local Government Boundary Commissioner. That term does not have a specialised meaning — it has not been given a definition. I hope that the commissioner will be able to take evidence during his consultation on what people on the ground consider to be readily identifiable boundaries. If people believe that a point needs to be made about social cohesion, and that it is readily identifiable on the ground, I cannot see why the Local Government Boundary Commission could not take that on board.

Mr Gallagher discussed contracts. In particular, he mentioned Craigavon Borough Council’s legal services. I understand that the majority of councillors are in a similar position in respect of legal services. That has certainly been my experience of local councils. In any event, the modernisation legislation will deal with that matter. The strategic leadership board is examining the issue of procurement. Given the day that is in it, that is no bad thing.

Mr Gallagher also raised the issue of assistant commissioners. It will be for the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to decide whether there is a need for assistant commissioners — I would have thought that there will be. The commissioner will also decide the assistant commissioners’ responsibilities. If the commissioner decides that assistant commissioners are needed, he or she will make a request for their appointment to the Department, which, with DFP’s approval, will determine whether its terms and conditions are met.

I thank George Robinson for his comments in support of the Bill. Councillor Alex Maskey mentioned that all parties were represented on the local government task force and the strategic leadership board. He said that no matter how Northern Ireland is divided up into local government districts, not everyone will be pleased. Indeed, this morning, I listened to Radio Ulster’s ‘Thought for the Day’, which mentioned Benjamin Disraeli’s comment that it is possible to please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time. I cannot please everyone when it comes to difficulties over boundaries. However, I will try to do my best for the entire community of Northern Ireland.

George Robinson welcomed the timely boundary reviews, which are referred to in clause 2 of the Bill. The reviews will be carried out to re-examine boundaries every eight to 12 years. I acknowledge the work that

has been done and will continue to be done by the strategic leadership board. I want to ensure buy-in from local government.

In a long speech that had many interventions, Sammy Wilson discussed the 11-council model. He referred to the fact that the Ulster Unionists on Carrickfergus Borough Council were split last night and that some of them voted for the 11-council model. Roy Beggs and Basil McCrea seem to have conceded that the headquarters for the Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne council would be in Ballymena. The fact is that service centres will be spread throughout the new council areas. It is right and proper that that should be the case.

Basil McCrea said that there was no opportunity to make amendments to the Bill. I am sorry that he does not understand the process that is taking place in the House. I am sure that the Business Office will explain to him that he may put down amendments. Mr Ford has said that he will do so, and I look forward to seeing his amendments.

The Department is alert to the boundary defacement issue to which Sammy Wilson referred. Clause 2(2) states that that is dealt with every eight to 12 years through provision for a periodic review, which Members should welcome.

After listening to some of today's comments, I am glad that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner is independent. The former commissioner took the view that the "whole or the major part" of a district mentioned in clause 1(2) means the geographical area of a council rather than its population level. However, the terms "whole" or "major" are open to interpretation and may be defined differently by the new commissioner, subject to advice. Sammy Wilson also referred to previous models that were consulted on extensively from 2001. I thank him for his kind words of commendation.

Billy Armstrong talked about the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's tasks, which are set out in schedule 4 to the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. He also talked about best practice, examples of which I expect the commissioner to study.

Mr McKay talked about effectiveness being a priority, which of course it will be.

Mr Weir considered the coterminosity between parliamentary constituencies and other services. He is correct to say that services are far from being provided on a parliamentary basis and right to urge a balanced approach to reform. He referred to the flexibility on boundaries engendered in clause 2(3)(c) and the fact that the commissioner can recommend, within a range of plus or minus five, 60 electoral wards for Belfast and 40 for all other councils.

Dr Farry indicated that he was guilty as charged when it came to being an "anorak". Members are

certainly doing their bit for anorak sales. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be very pleased with our support for the Northern Ireland economy. Dr Farry felt that the balance between powers and the number of councils is wrong. I have said repeatedly, and will continue to say, that the Bill is the start of a process for local government. The addition of £25 million to local government's budget is not a bad beginning. I disagree with Dr Farry's contention that £15 million is more sustainable. The Bill plans for the long-term future of local government.

Dr Farry talked about revised boundaries pulling different areas together and said that the Bill failed to deal with the issues. However, that is not what is happening; this is about reorganisation. A wholesale reorganisation of planning is taking place as part of the new council set-up. I envisage that there will also be reorganisation in housing and policing, and interaction among health bodies will be improved. The Minister for Regional Development is changing the structure of Roads Service so that it is better integrated with local councils.

Dr Farry talked about the separate process for council wards within electoral areas. I hope that I have answered him on that issue. Attempts to change the procedure in district electoral areas would mean amending the competence of the Assembly under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which would result in a huge delay. I hope that he accepts the fact that we are going to work with the Secretary of State to ensure that a District Electoral Areas Commissioner is appointed as soon as possible.

Dr Farry made the fair point that parliamentary boundaries were set up on a completely different basis to council boundaries and that they would probably change in different cycles. He welcomed the boundary reviews envisaged in clause 2, which, as I have already said, are essential in order to deal with boundary defacement.

Mr Wilson was completely against the proposals in every which way. *[Interruption.]*

I am referring to the Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson. He was against the proposed number of councillors, and felt that the parameters had changed. He is correct — the parameters have changed, because we now have an Executive in place, which we did not have three years ago. That had to be taken into account when examining the new model for local government, and that is what we have done.

Brian Wilson may want to add levels of government, but I certainly do not. I want to ensure efficiency and effectiveness, while at all times taking into account the citizens who are at the centre of our concerns. Performance-management arrangements will be put in place and developed so that key drivers will ensure efficiency in the new councils. I reiterate that this is a process, not an event.

Brian Wilson said that he was happy with 26 councils. I got the feeling from his speech that he would like to see the introduction of parish councils. He was the only Member to say that he felt that the 26-council model was sustainable in the long run. He pointed out that Wales has 22 councils. Even though the population of Wales is 3·5 million, and our population is nowhere near that, Brian Wilson said that we needed 26 councils. I thought that the Green Party was against waste, but it is obviously not. I have been called many things in my life, but I have yet to be called a bureaucrat.

Mr Weir: Wales has 22 councils for 3·5 million people. Surely, if we are to follow the Welsh example, which Brian Wilson seems to be keen on, 1·7 million people should have 11 councils. That represents half the Welsh numbers. Maths may not be a strong point for some Members, but clearly, if we followed the Welsh example, we would end up with 11 councils.

Mrs Foster: Brian Wilson said that he had a difficulty with the Belfast boundary — a theme that was taken up by Mr Weir. Belfast will remain as one council area, but it could be expected to expand in future in order to recognise the natural growth of the city and its community boundaries. Belfast should be allowed to expand. It is strange that Brian Wilson said that he wanted that to happen, but also expressed a desire for smaller councils. He cannot have it both ways.

Basil McCrea began by completely misunderstanding a point that was made by Dr Farry, who talked about a boundary review every eight to 12 years. Basil McCrea took that to mean that such a review was the responsibility of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, who can examine entire council operations or parts of those councils. The commissioner's remit is not restricted in the way that Basil McCrea understood it. He also said that there were 50,000 people living in Enniskillen. There may be more than 60,000 people in Fermanagh, but Enniskillen certainly does not have a population of 50,000.

The remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner is as stated in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, with which I am sure Basil McCrea is very familiar. He referred to a previous boundaries commissioner, but I am more interested in what the new commissioner will deliver for local government. Basil McCrea then looked into his crystal ball, and said that, geographically, and from a community point of view, people would be ignored. I have no idea what the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will present to me, save that which falls within his or her terms of reference as stated in schedule 4 of the 1972 Act. Basil McCrea obviously has some inside knowledge of the new commissioner's intentions.

I do not accept Basil McCrea's contention that local government does not do very much. He may be speaking for himself when he talks about not doing very much, but there are a great many councillors in this country who do a lot of work, and have carried the burden of this country for the past 35 to 40 years.

Basil McCrea made a final point about not wanting elections.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister acknowledge that, in anticipation of her attack on him, the Member has fled the House?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that he is watching the debate on a monitor, with great interest.

1.00 pm

Mr McNarry: The Member to whom the Minister referred asked me, if the matter arose, to apologise to her for his absence owing to the fact that he is hosting an event in the Long Gallery, and I am sure that the Minister will accept that.

Mrs Foster: The Member will be able to read my remarks in the Hansard report, as I am sure he always does.

With regard to the elections that that Member claimed the Democratic Unionist Party is afraid of, the majority of councillors who asked me not to hold council elections next year were from the Ulster Unionist Party. That said, there will be elections next year — European elections — and this side of the House looks forward to them greatly.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister be standing?

Mrs Foster: No, I will not be standing. I have a job to do in the House, and I intend to do it.

I urge Members to support the motion. It is right for the country and will benefit local government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill (NIA 14/07) be agreed.

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill

Consideration Stage

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): The Consideration Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill will not be moved today. The First Minister and deputy First Minister will issue a statement, and junior Minister Kelly and I will brief the Business Committee. Furthermore, we have asked for the opportunity to brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister tomorrow about the current state of play with regard to the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Consideration Stage of the Bill will not be moved.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

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

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: Point of order.

Mrs D Kelly: Who to?

Mr Kennedy: As Chairperson of the —

Mr Deputy Speaker: So that I am not accused of being partisan, I call Mr Kennedy.

Mrs D Kelly: I believe that I was first, and not because I am a woman —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Everyone, please sit down. I call Mr Kennedy first.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I accept that I have been called first, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

I welcome, at least, the indication from the junior Minister that he and junior Minister Kelly intend to address the Committee tomorrow on this important matter. It is vital that the matter is clarified as quickly as possible.

As a Member of the House — and not in my capacity of Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — my point of order is: given that accelerated passage should be used only as an emergency measure in exceptional circumstances, given that the House was previously informed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) that accelerated passage was essential to the early progress of the Bill, and given that this is the second occasion on which this piece of Government legislation has been withdrawn at the last possible moment, are you, Mr Deputy Speaker,

able to confirm, or give an opinion as to whether such actions are an abuse of the accelerated passage procedure, and what steps will you take to protect the House from such an abuse? Furthermore, in light of today's events, will a statement be made to the House in order to explain the reasons for the delay and to inform members of the Business Committee, whose job it is to arrange the business of this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Speaker; as the Member has already said, it is a matter for the Executive to bring before the Business Committee for consideration in due course.

Mr Kennedy: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The important point is whether the abuse of the accelerated passage process in these instances can be tolerated by you as Deputy Speaker of this House.

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

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have witnessed what is known in common parlance as “an absolute Horlicks” in relation to the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. Further to the point of order made by Mr Kennedy, will the Deputy Speaker now give a direction to the Executive that this is an abuse of the House, and also, more importantly, an abuse of the victims and survivors?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Once again, that is not a matter for the Speaker, but for the Executive and the Business Committee.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that Mr Kelly gave us some warning of this statement, and that Mr Donaldson is in the Chamber, but is it not an abuse of the procedures of this House that the two responsible Ministers — who are failing to take action to deal with the urgent needs of victims over a long period of time — are not in the Chamber? We have heard from Mr Donaldson that they are proposing to make a statement. Is it not your role, as Deputy Speaker, to insist that they come to the House to make a statement to the people of Northern Ireland through their elected representatives, and not allow them to sneak something out to the press, when they have patently failed to give victims the priority that they said that they would?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not have the power to do that.

Mr Ford: Further to that point or order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I ask that you make that request to them, whether or not you have the power?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Ford will be aware that the Business Committee is meeting at 1.00 pm, and I

suggest that that issue can be raised there. That leads me on to the next point —

Mr McNarry: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Following your rulings, which I respect and understand, will you give the House a sense of what the matter is that you say will be referred to the Business Committee, and how it will progress through that Committee? We have no sense whatsoever of what you are talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I am not the Chairperson of the Business Committee, I can give no undertaking to anyone. If there are no other legitimate —

Mr Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that it is the practice in Westminster that the Speaker makes it clear to Ministers that their role is to relate to the House in the first instance, and the press on a secondary basis. Is it not possible for you to remind Ministers in this place that they have a duty to report to this House and not to the press?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Ford, I believe that you have made your point. If it is possible, I will move on.

Mr McNarry: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Again, respecting your rulings and your decision, noting the point that you are not the Chairperson of the Business Committee, and understanding who the Chairperson of that Committee is, can you indicate to the House that, following the meeting of the Business Committee, the Chairperson of that Committee will make a statement to this House as to what transpired at that meeting?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is an experienced Member of this House, and knows very well that I cannot do that. I have tried several times to say that 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 1.09 pm.

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm*

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the House suspended for lunch, several points of order were raised about the failure to move the Consideration Stage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill. Have you had a chance to consider those points of order, and will you be responding to them? If so, when will that be?

Mr Speaker: I listened to the points of order that were raised just before lunch. The Executive are responsible for the matter. If a Minister decides that a Bill is not to be given a legislative stage on a certain day, that is the business of the Executive and that Minister, not the business of the House. We must try to bring as much clarity as possible to the matter.

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not the case that the Committee on Procedures is struggling to streamline the work of the House? To allow written ministerial statements to be made in lieu of oral statements is one option that is being considered. It will be difficult to persuade Members to accept such changes if current procedures are surrounded by doubt.

Mr Speaker: The party Whips attended the Business Committee at lunchtime, and the Bill's Consideration Stage has been provisionally scheduled into the business of the House. That is all that I can say. Members should move on. I have listened to the points of order that have been raised, and I will not accept any further ones. It is for the Executive and the Minister concerned to give a Bill a legislative stage. It is not up to the Speaker to determine whether that is right or wrong. The Minister has not moved the Consideration Stage of the Bill, so the business of the House should proceed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Graduated Driving Licensing

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Ross: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the positive impact that graduated driving licences have had on reducing road traffic accidents in other parts of the world; and believes that a similar scheme should be introduced in Northern Ireland to combat the unacceptably high number of deaths on our roads.

There has been significant media interest in the motion, which has been the subject of some misreporting. To clarify, if the motion is approved, we want a consultation on the graduated driving licences scheme. That would present us with a menu of options, and we could choose the ones that apply to Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has more road accidents and suffers more road deaths than any other United Kingdom region. Driver deaths are 40% more common in Northern Ireland than they are in England, Scotland or Wales — there was another tragic road accident in Loughgall last night. Therefore, road safety is one of the biggest issues on the political agenda, and it seems that every week we hear of another tragedy on our roads.

I imagine that every Member has been affected by a road tragedy through the death of a relative, friend or someone known to us in our constituencies. We often hear of young people having their lives cut short because of a car crash, and, more often than not, there are young teenage passengers in the car who also die or are seriously injured, sometimes for life. In the summer after I left school and before I started university, three people whom I knew lost their lives on the roads: a close friend; someone with whom I played hockey; and someone who went to my church. They were all 18 years old.

The 17- to 24-year-old age group is more likely to be involved in a serious road accident than any other group. Sadly, there is a boy-racer and girl-racer culture in Northern Ireland. That is not to say that every young driver is a bad driver or that every young driver is irresponsible.

However, the figures show that young drivers are particularly at risk in Northern Ireland. More than a quarter of drivers killed or seriously injured between 2001 and 2005 were between 17 and 24 years old. The Department of the Environment (DOE) must be congratulated for its efforts to tackle the issue, and significant progress has been made. Through

correspondence with the Minister, I am aware of the many schemes that are run by DOE to promote road safety and to educate teenagers in schools. Most of us are also familiar with the graphic road safety television advertisements. The DOE is working closely with the Department of Education on this issue, and that is to be welcomed. The PSNI, too, has worked with the DOE to delivery the road safety message through the Roadsafes roadshow and other PSNI-sponsored schemes such as 'The Right to Drive: the Right to Life' teaching resource pack.

Education in this area is important. The best way to learn how to drive responsibly, however, is through practical experience. There is, perhaps, scope for driver-type classes in schools, similar to those in America. However, those must be accompanied by other initiatives. This is where there is a role for the graduated driver licensing scheme. I well remember the day that I passed my driving test and went home to put my R-plates on my mum's car and take a group of friends for a drive. Although I contend that I was, and still am, a sensible driver, the feeling of freedom and independence that a young person gets when he passes his driving test is an important step in becoming an adult.

Although the graduated driver licensing scheme might not, at first, be popular with 17-year-olds, it is a practical step that can be taken to reduce the carnage on the roads. When those young people grow up, they will be glad that the Assembly took steps to ensure that their friends were still around when they were 27 years old.

The graduated driver licensing scheme is fairly straightforward, and it has proved to be successful in other countries. It began in the United States in the mid-1990s, and has since been extended to most states in the US. The scheme is also in New Zealand and Australia. Road deaths and accidents have fallen sharply in all countries that operate graduated driver licensing schemes. In the United States, for example, road deaths among 16-year-olds have fallen by 20%, while in New Zealand, car crash injuries among 15- to 19-year-olds have fallen by 23%. Such figures suggest that the scheme can make a real difference.

The scheme does not specifically target young drivers: it targets inexperienced drivers and helps them to gain the experience that they need behind the wheel so that they can drive safely. Young people make up the vast majority of new drivers. Due to a mix of inexperience and lack of maturity, however, they are also the most likely to be killed on the roads. Many studies have found that young drivers lack the judgement required when driving. They overestimate their physical and driving abilities, and underestimate the dangers of the road by performing high-risk manoeuvres, speeding or tailgating.

I am not outlining detailed proposals today. I am opening a debate on this scheme and introducing the

broad principles behind it. There are three main steps to graduated driver licensing. The first is the learner's licence. At present, there is no time limit before a learner driver can apply to do a driving test. Under the proposed scheme, there could be a six- or 12-month timescale for learning, during which there would be a minimum number of hours of driving with an accredited supervisor. Studies in Canada suggest that the time period should be a minimum of one year, and that there should be at least 50 hours of certified supervised practice. However, we can decide on our own model if the scheme is implemented in Northern Ireland.

Accredited supervised learning is provided by a qualified driving instructor. However, given the requirement of a minimum number of supervised hours, driving instructors would be required for only a certain percentage of the time, otherwise there could be a significant financial burden on learners. Other accredited supervisors could include those who have held a full driving licence for five years, and they do not have to be parents.

In addition, learners would benefit from having supervised experience of driving on motorways or dual carriageways at higher speeds. Someone on the radio this morning suggested that that would be a good idea, because for many drivers their first experience of driving in a fast stream of traffic comes on the day that they pass their test. Northern Ireland has many rural drivers who might not live near a motorway or who do not drive on motorways or dual carriageways regularly. Nevertheless, this option should be considered.

Once learners' requirements are met, they can apply for their test. If the driver passes the test, he enters the second stage of the scheme.

In Northern Ireland, a stepping scheme towards the driving licence has already been in place since the late 1960s, when R-plates were introduced. Those must be displayed for one year and, during that time, novice drivers are restricted to driving at 45 mph. For the first two years after drivers pass their test, they face tougher penalties for breaking the laws of the road, only requiring six penalty points to lose their licence.

The graduated driver-licensing scheme aims to introduce driving in a low-risk way, and it would add further restrictions to the current laws. Statistics demonstrate that the most dangerous time to drive is between 9.00 pm and 6.00 am. More accidents occur during those times than at other times and, because of the darkness, it is a more challenging time for new drivers. Under the scheme, restricted drivers would be prohibited from driving between certain hours. That would not have to be between 9.00 pm and 6.00 pm, but new drivers could be prohibited from driving at night for any period of up to a year. There could, of course, be some exemptions for practical reasons.

A further restriction is that new drivers who are under 20 years of age could not take any teenage passengers, or would be limited to taking only one teenage passenger, for the period during which they must display R-plates. The theory behind that is that passengers can be a distraction, and young passengers can create the peer pressure to cause drivers to engage in unsafe driving, such as speeding, to try to impress others. Evidence shows that teenage passengers increase the crash risk for young drivers, especially for male young drivers. There could also be exemptions to that proposal, perhaps to allow immediate family members to travel with young drivers for practical reasons.

It is also appropriate to introduce a zero alcohol limit for novice drivers, although the merits of that should be rolled out to all drivers. Zero tolerance for new drivers is operational in countries that currently have a graduated driving licence.

I have heard the suggestion that the engine size that new drivers can drive should be limited. I reject that idea as unworkable and potentially discriminatory against people whose only access to a car is to borrow a parent's car, which may have a bigger engine. That is not a practical way forward.

Once the period of displaying R-plates is up, a driver would be awarded a full licence. The R-plate restrictions would be lifted, although those could be imposed again if the driver were convicted of a road offence or were to gain a certain amount of penalty points.

The scheme may not be popular with young people; I cannot be accused of playing the populist card with them. However, it would be popular with parents, and any measure that aims to reduce the number of young people who are killed on the roads must be given serious consideration. I look forward to hearing Members' views, and I hope that the House will unite in backing my motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I support the motion, and I thank the Members for tabling it. I am glad that Mr Ross clarified that the scheme he mentioned should form part of a review; I look forward to bringing proposals and recommendations. I declare an interest as a member of the all-party working group on road safety. As Sinn Féin's spokesperson on road safety, I welcome, at any time, the opportunity to discuss ways in which improvements can be made and measures that can be introduced to reduce the fatalities and serious injuries to motorists, passengers and pedestrians.

The graduated licence system is in place in many states, including Canada, the USA, New Zealand and Australia. There are three stages to the system: the supervised learning period; an intermediate licence after passing the test, which limits driving in high-risk situations, except under supervision; and a licence with

full privileges that is available only after completing the first two stages. We have some elements of that system here in that there is a provisional licence, a period of restriction and a full licence. However, the statistics show that that system is not working, so I welcome the debate.

The measures of the systems that work in other countries should be considered. I have previously raised the point with the Minister of the Environment that early education of young people would be a major benefit. In other countries, they learn at 15 and 16 years of age. We learn the theory here, but other countries get practical education. The practical side of those courses would give people at 15 and 16 years of age a gauge on braking distances and how to handle a car, and would be more effective at an earlier age.

2.15 pm

Many young people cannot afford driving lessons. At 17 years of age, they have to pay approximately £25 a lesson, which is a lot of money, but that cost burden would be eased if schools started to provide driving lessons. When young people finally get their licences, they discover that their insurance costs three times more than their vehicle.

Mr Ross: On this morning's 'BBC Breakfast', a representative of the insurance companies suggested that they would be likely to reduce the premiums for drivers who complete the scheme, as has happened in other countries.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for his intervention. The insurance companies have a major role to play in reducing the costs that are incurred by young drivers, and they must take their share of responsibility. Teaching driving skills to those of a young age will reduce the cost of lessons.

I am aware of the Minister's commitment to the ongoing review of road safety, and the Committee for the Environment also has a role to play. I welcome Mr Ross's announcement of a review, in which the Committee should play a major part. However, some measures that Mr Ross mentioned, such as preventing 19-year-olds from driving during the hours of darkness, may be too extreme. I do not want to go down that road, and we must bear in mind that we all had to learn to drive. However, there was merit in some of Mr Ross's suggestions.

Perhaps the Assembly should consider making it compulsory for all learners to be taught to drive on all types of road and in all weather conditions, as I have suggested to the Minister. That would involve driving in all circumstances: at night; at peak times through towns and cities; on motorways; and on dual carriageways.

Sadly, the success of any system is measured by statistics. The proposals are geared towards 17- to

25-year-old males, but first-time drivers who fall outside that age bracket must also be considered.

The Assembly has an opportunity to target resources at a younger age group: teaching young people driving skills at an early stage will enable them to become better, safer drivers. I hope that Members accept that point and recognise that the Department of the Environment must resource the venture adequately. If that is the case, I will support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member who secured the debate on such an important and innovative motion. Every Member is aware of the horrendous carnage on Northern Ireland's roads every year. So far in 2008, some 31 individuals have lost their lives on the roads. That is not a mere statistic: those people were parents, sons, daughters and friends. The loss of each life irreversibly alters many others.

In Northern Ireland, young male drivers between the ages of 17 and 24 are over-represented as victims and as drivers responsible for fatal collisions. Throughout the UK, young drivers account for more than two in five road deaths, despite owning only one in eight licences. It can be argued that young people are involved in, and are responsible for, so many deaths and accidents because they are inexperienced. The fact that they are often unaware of how to deal with dangerous situations and simply want to show off to their friends should not be ignored.

The implementation of a graduated driving licence is a possible solution. As it has proved successful in various parts of the world, such as America, New Zealand and Canada, it should be given serious consideration.

For a year after passing the driving test, new drivers in Northern Ireland must display R-plates, and they are not permitted to drive faster than 45 miles an hour — that is one component of a graduated driving scheme.

Has the R-plate system been successful? In fact, in the mid-1990s, research by Queen's University found that the restrictions did not reduce collisions, and cameras located on two major roads recorded a driver with R-plates speeding every two minutes.

More must be done to save the lives of young people and others on our roads.

The graduated driving licence comprises three stages. During the initial learner stage, an individual must only drive while accompanied, and a minimum amount of time in the driving seat is required. Research conducted by the UK Government demonstrates that the more time an individual spends in the driving seat the less likely it is that he or she will be involved in an accident. Normally, the individual must pass a test to advance to the next stage.

During the next stage, individuals can drive while unaccompanied but with some enforced restrictions. They are often not allowed to drive between 11.00 pm and 6.00 am — the hours when most young people are involved in accidents. They cannot carry passengers, and the engine size of the vehicle they are permitted to drive can be restricted. I disagree with Mr Ross's earlier assertion: young people are inclined to drive large cars belonging to their parents in an attempt to show how fast they can drive.

The stages often last a year, and individuals must pass a test before they can claim a full licence. By the time an individual claims a full licence, he or she is, hopefully, older and wiser and should have gained increased driving experience in a more controlled setting. In all countries in which such a scheme has been implemented, young drivers' crash rates have decreased significantly. In the first year of implementation, figures indicate a decrease of between 10% and 40%. However, studies in New York show that the effect is greater at night, resulting in a 60% reduction in collisions.

Implementing such a scheme may cause inconvenience to young drivers, and there may be arguments about freedom and economics. However, those factors must be weighed against the cost of road accidents for families and society. Initially, young people may not respond positively to such a scheme as it is restrictive in some respects. However, we must look at the long-term picture. A short period of restrictions is better when, in the long term, lives can be saved. The implementation of this scheme could produce a generation of better drivers, which could result in a long-term reduction in the number of fatalities on the roads. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I am delighted that the Minister is in the Chamber to listen to the debate; I pay tribute to her for recognising that road safety is a serious issue. Essentially, the licensing scheme has not changed much over the last 50 years, apart from the addition of the theory test. Driving instructors have been calling for a radical overhaul of the driving test for some time. I hope that today's debate on graduated licensing will encourage rapid, focused and clearly directed progress.

Graduated driving licensing creates opportunities to reward young drivers for making progress. However, it must not be considered to be a big stick with which to whack young drivers over the head, but rather as a carrot to encourage, cajole and entice them to view driving as a process that rewards those who take it seriously and stimulates positive thinking among those who do not see the benefits first time round.

The development of a new system of licensing based on the principles of graduation must incorporate a partnership between the young driver, his family, the Department of the Environment and, most importantly,

the insurance companies. The insurance companies have enormous power to promote positive thinking among young drivers, and, frankly, they do not do it well.

New drivers are immediately penalised for being young, and insurance premiums are overloaded to such an extent that most young drivers are covered by policies taken out under their parents' names. Young drivers cannot find a company that will insure them until they are 25 years old: that is crazy. Where is the incentive for young drivers to be responsible and feel rewarded for being accident-free? There are none.

Parents can also be an important element in the partnership which directs young drivers through the stages of graduated licensing. In that, new technology can play a part. For example, new drivers could be required to have an electronic device fitted to their car which alerts parents if the car is not being driven within the law — for example, within speed restrictions imposed on the young driver. It would be far better for parents to receive a text message informing them that their car had broken the speed limit, rather than visitors who tell them that their young one has been killed or seriously injured.

However, I emphasise that young drivers' involvement in the partnership should be honoured by the reward of moving on to the next stage in the graduated licensing scheme, which must be designed to encourage responsibility in a new generation of drivers. Insurers could play a role in that by lowering premiums and increasing no-claims bonuses.

Working together, we can reduce the carnage on our roads. That is important, considering that more have died on the roads than through the 35 years of violence. If we can reduce the need for late-night visits from police officers, accompanied by family clergy, to break the bad news that loved ones have lost their lives in an avoidable traffic incident, then the time spent on this debate will have been well worthwhile. However, I emphasise that any graduated licensing scheme must be positive, attractive and rewarding to the young driver, and that requires partnership the whole way through.

We are all aware that road safety is being reviewed, and that is welcome. The way in which we license people to drive on the roads is a critical part of that. It had been a long time since a person carrying a red flag was required to walk in front of a horseless carriage, since Bridget Driscoll became the first road traffic victim in London, and since the driving test was seriously revised. Now is the time to begin that process, in a way that makes the test relevant to the modern world.

I support the motion in principle, but reform can be achieved only in a spirit of partnership with driving instructors and the others to whom I have referred. There has to be more carrot and less stick.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party supports the motion as a good starting point for a debate on the best way forward. As others have mentioned, the original attempt at a graduated licensing system, the R-plate restriction, has been with us for many years. It seems that other countries have made progress in this respect, though they have had different priorities and have achieved different levels of success. We encourage the Minister and her Department to consider all examples. The R-plate system has worked to some extent: perhaps it has now had its day. There are many other ideas out there, and we should look at them all.

The motion does not specifically mention young drivers, but there is no doubt that it is aimed at them. They are the most likely recipients of a new driving licence. There is no doubt that young male drivers cause a disproportionate number of serious accidents.

Several Members have mentioned the attitude of insurance companies. As a recently-retired insurance man, I have something to say about that. Insurance companies are ambivalent in the way that they handle the situation. On the one hand, they will not insure young drivers because they cannot make a profit from them. On the other, if a young driver's father buys a new Vauxhall Corsa, he will probably receive free insurance for his 18-year-old son with it. The garage which sold the car will have paid perhaps £600 to finance that insurance, yet the same insurance company would rather not give cover at all if the customer approached it directly, or might charge £3,000 for it. There is a clear anomaly there which must be addressed at some point. Commercial companies must make their own decisions, but that position is contradictory.

In this country, there is a perceived right to drive. It is hard to lose one's licence and almost impossible to be banned from driving for life. The public attitude needs to change: a driving licence is a privilege, not a right. Serious offences should mean serious penalties and, ultimately, the permanent loss of a licence.

That attitude should be encouraged from the start when the provisional licence is awarded. The graduated process recommended in the motion would mean that obtaining a full licence would probably take between three and five years.

2.30 pm

I hope that the debate will open up a discussion about what other steps should be taken. The R-plate restriction, particularly as it affects motorway driving, has become a nonsense in this day and age. I have heard suggestions about the number of passengers, night-time curfews and various other ideas from around the world that are all worth considering, including some fairly wacky ideas from the United States. However, I want to highlight the model used in the Netherlands, where any serious offence committed during the first

five years of a person's being awarded their licence leads to the withdrawal of that licence and a requirement to do a retest. It is too early to assess the effect of that policy as it was only introduced in 2002, but I like the sound of it.

My suggestion is that any infringement in the early years of a person's having a licence should result in a driving ban — it could be as short as a month for something not too serious or as long as a year. If the ban is for more than six months, the person should have to do a retest. Apparently that is how the German system works — I am not saying that we can always learn from Germans, but their system could be considered. Such a system would give our young, and occasionally headstrong, male — and sometimes female — drivers a clear indication of the value of their licence as they progress from their probationary period through to having a full licence.

The Alliance Party supports the motion and would be willing to contribute to any consultation on the matter, and I thank Mr Ross for tabling it.

By way of an aside, the Lisburn road safety committee was recently reconstituted after a break of a few years, and I am glad to see the Assembly taking a direct interest in it and in other local groups.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to check that their mobile phones are switched off. There seems to be a mobile phone ringing somewhere — I do not want to name anybody at the moment, but I ask Members to check them.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is a timely debate on an important topic because, for a small area, the place that I come from has a terrible number of road fatalities among its young people.

It is important to consider whether graduated driving licences should be introduced; however, perhaps more important for us to consider is our young people's attitude to cars. It is absolutely different, Mr Speaker, from yours and mine. We see a car as something fundamental that costs us far too much money and we think of the cost of keeping it in tyres and fuel; but, for young people, a car is a symbol of who they are. They identify one another by the cars that they drive. If I ask a young fellow in my part of the world who someone is, that person will be described to me according to what car he drives, where he bought it, how many lights he has on it, and how low its suspension is.

When considering how to reduce the number of young deaths on the roads, we must understand our young people's perspective. We must also make them understand that we will not introduce legislation simply to punish them or to put them off the road or to be hard on them; we must convince them that we are concerned about keeping them safe on the roads.

It is clear that the use of prolonged licences has paid dividends in other parts of the world. The highest figure that I am aware of is from Canada, where, after introducing graduated driving licences, a 31% downturn in fatalities was recorded. That is a huge decrease. Some of the states in America identified an 8% decrease in the number of serious accidents and fatalities.

A balance has to be struck between how young people view cars and how they deal with their driving. There are not many young people in the Chamber, but they can drive cars better than we can; apart from Cathal Boylan of course — they have only recently been introduced to the car in Keady. *[Laughter.]*

Watching young people driving is similar to watching a circus act; they can manoeuvre cars in all sorts of ways. They also know all about their cars. However, when they first get their licences, they do not have experience of driving on roads.

The type of driving lessons that young people receive before gaining their first restricted licence would have been fine 50 years ago when roads were not as dangerous, when cars were not as fast and when not as many young people owned cars. Nowadays, we have to reconsider young people's lifestyles and, as I said previously, their attitude to cars.

We must convince young people that, although they may be handy drivers, they need more time, they do not know everything, they do not know all about driving the roads at night or in wintry and wet conditions, and they do not know about driving on motorways at high speeds.

An important point was made on a radio programme this morning about young people not realising how long it takes to stop a car when they are driving at 60 mph or 70 mph.

I am supportive of —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Brolly: Thank you. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: I commend Alastair Ross for proposing an important motion, and for the approach that he has taken to the debate. I agree that there has been a lot of press speculation about what the motion aims to achieve. However, much of what was reported was inaccurate. The SDLP also wants a major consultation on the graduated licensing scheme to ascertain what options are available.

Last year, 112 people were killed on our roads, which equates to more than two deaths every week. During the first three months of 2008, 2,009 people were injured, 270 of them seriously, which wrecked their lives. When I last checked, yesterday, 31 people had lost their lives on the roads this year. Alastair reminded us that there was an overnight fatality at Loughall in Armagh, bringing the number to 32. Had that number of people been

killed as a result of our conflict, we would be blocking roads, there would be protests and outcries and it would be featured on the international news.

As Members know, young people, particularly young males, present the greatest risk, and are at the greatest risk. A male in his late teens or early twenties is 10 times more likely to be killed on our roads than a man in his forties. It is clear that that age group needs to be targeted for a change in driving habits, attitudes and ability. Sadly, as we all know, young people, particularly young males, have no fear of driving. We can see that with our own family members as they grow.

A wide range of actions should and could be taken. It is not just for Arlene Foster's Department to advance those; a wide-ranging approach across all Departments is required. Housing estates should have speed limits of 20 mph, and greatly reduced speed limits around schools should be imposed, especially at times when pupils are leaving school. Better footpaths away from busy roads, especially on school routes, are also required.

Many of us have good friends who are driving instructors, and they tell us that when they teach people how to drive, they are mainly teaching them how to pass a test, and that it is up to the learner to get the experience of driving on the roads. Such experience is gained only over time.

The penalties for people who are caught speeding — particularly for those who are caught driving significantly over the speed limit — should be much heavier. There should also be much heavier penalties for drink driving. Hundreds of roads need to be re-evaluated and their speed limits reduced. Cars being sold to inexperienced drivers should have their performance restricted. Car companies should stop marketing cars as if roads are race tracks, and they should stop associating engine performance with virility, because, unfortunately, that is what is happening.

The list of possible actions is long, but there should be a new cross-cutting structure put in place to design and build safer roads. An all-island public body should be established to improve road safety and harmonise the penalty points systems on the island. The SDLP welcomes the recent announcement that driving bans will be mutually recognised North and South and that there will be greater co-operation in areas on a North/South basis, but the pace of that work needs to be increased.

The proposals for graduated driving licensing should be implemented without delay. Many international studies show which systems work best, and which model is best to work from. The evidence of their effectiveness is overwhelming. Graduated driving licence schemes involve restriction and control and will be resisted, particularly by young people. Therefore, a wide and vigorous consultation process will be needed to achieve the highest level of buy-in.

It is important to acknowledge that the Minister of the Environment has actively responded to a number of Members' concerns on road safety. I expect nothing less from her in relation to carrying out an effective consultation with all people involved in the industry.

This morning, the press homed in on graduated driving licensing as a way of placing curfews on young people — that is not the case. Curfews would not work. There are too many young people working in the hospitality industry or on night shifts for such a measure to be effective. In addition, many young people are carers who depend on their cars day and night.

The SDLP urges the relevant Executive Minister to cut through bureaucracy and engage with partners in the British and Irish Governments. That Minister should do whatever is necessary to introduce this scheme urgently. On a broader basis, the SDLP urges the Executive to set up the necessary cross-cutting structures, and research and implement a raft of road safety measures in the North of this island. If we can save a significant number of lives on our roads, that would be an achievement that everybody in this House could be proud of.

Mrs I Robinson: I congratulate my colleagues on securing this debate in the House today. Road safety is a very important issue, as is what the Assembly can do to reduce the number of accidents and fatalities that occur on Northern Ireland's roads. Those are challenging issues for all of us.

As was already mentioned, 32 people have lost their lives on the roads in Northern Ireland this year. Although the figure is down on the equivalent figure of recent years, it still represents a dreadfully high statistic, and requires further analysis. Of the 32 people who lost their lives this year, 22 were killed in rural areas. That is already more than were killed in the whole of 2006, and is only two short of the figure for the whole of 2007, with the Cookstown, Omagh, Dungannon and Fermanagh areas being worst affected.

Analysis of the figures for the 2006-07 period shows that there were 5,615 road traffic collisions — an increase of more than 500 on the previous period. The most common causes of those collisions were: inattention, 17%; excessive speed, 11%; and emerging from a minor road or driveway without care, 10%.

The current minimum age for learning to drive is 17 years old. In addition to driving lessons, learners can drive while accompanied by an experienced driver who is at least 21 years old and who has held a licence for three years. The incidence of road traffic accidents is known to be much higher when young novice drivers between the ages of 18 and 24 are behind the wheel.

The risks associated with young drivers can be due to a number of factors: immaturity; the novelty of driving; being more open to dangerous behaviour; drugs and alcohol; lack of driving experience, especially under

difficult circumstances; new and unknown traffic environments; a limited capacity to recognise hazardous conditions; and over-estimating their own driving skills.

2.45 pm

Improving basic learning has been shown to provide a solution to the problem in countries across the globe. Since the 1980s, in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, the learning phase has been lengthened in what is known as a graduated licensing system. The graduated licensing system usually comprises three phases, and it aims to provide novice motorists with driving experience so that their driving restrictions are lifted as their skills improve.

The first phase in a graduated scheme is the learner phase, which means driving only when accompanied and taking lessons from an approved driving school; that phase lasts between six months and approximately one year. The second, intermediate phase may involve driving in the dark and with passengers who are not younger than the driver. In some instances, a test is required before the learner can progress to the next stage. That phase lasts from three months to one year in the USA, but it lasts for three years in Australia. Finally, there is the novice-driving-licence phase, during which stricter rules apply to the novice than to experienced drivers in that the punishments for driving offences are more severe.

Leaving aside, for a second, the human cost of road traffic accidents and the lifetime of grief to which families and friends are condemned, there are huge financial implications. In GB, the average cost of a fatal accident in 2003 was reported as being almost £1.5 million, and the average cost of an accident that resulted in serious injury was £175,000. Of the £18 billion estimated total cost-benefit value of prevention of road traffic accidents in 2003, £13 billion was attributed to accidents that involved personal injury, and the remaining £5 billion was attributed to accidents that led to property or vehicle damage only. Although no one would ever put a price on life, it would be much better if accidents did not happen in the first place.

In countries in which there is a graduated licence system, the effects have been marked, and the accident rate among younger drivers has decreased substantially. In Sweden, it is claimed that the introduction of that type of scheme has reduced the number of accidents by 35%, although the validity of that evidence has been questioned. However, in circumstances where the methodology has received greater support, the figures show a reduction in accidents of 10% to 20%. Therefore, I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion, which addresses an important topical issue. As other Members have said, the death toll on our roads is still unacceptably high. All deaths are tragic, but there is something about

the death of a young person that is particularly difficult to accept, as is the suffering of a family grieving for lost years and unfulfilled promise.

Statistics show that young people, particularly young male drivers, are most at risk on the roads. Young male drivers aged 17 to 24 are consistently over-represented among road-death victims and among drivers who are responsible for fatal collisions. Sadly, where statistics are available for drivers or motorcycle riders who are responsible for deaths or serious injuries due to being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, young male drivers aged 17 to 24 are also consistently over-represented. Staggeringly, they are five times more likely to be responsible for such accidents.

Research by the road safety organisation Brake found that young people aged between 15 and 25 accounted for more than 40% of road deaths, yet they accounted for just 12% of licence holders. It seems that young people in the company of novice drivers may lose their lives by encouraging drivers to drive dangerously or in a way that is beyond their capability. The high crash rate of novice motorists is due to lack of driving experience and overconfidence.

Graduated driving licensing is a system in which those most at risk — young drivers — gradually gain driving privileges as they mature and develop the necessary skills. Various countries have implemented such schemes. Measures include restrictions on young people carrying passengers younger than themselves, and on driving between midnight and 5.00 am.

New Zealand, Australia and several of the Canadian provinces operate versions of graduated licensing. Most states in America also have graduated licences; Florida was the first American state to introduce such a scheme, in 1996. Statistics indicate that graduated licensing schemes have been successful in those countries. Studies in New York and Pennsylvania suggest that the number of night-time crashes has been reduced by more than 60%. Research in New Zealand showed a 23% reduction in the number of car-crash injuries sustained by 15- to 19-year-olds, and a 12% reduction for 20- to 24-year-olds.

Some people may have misgivings about the introduction of graduated licensing, particularly young people, who are likely to be directly affected. However, the findings of a 2002 study by the injury prevention unit in New Zealand are heartening. It showed young people to be reasonably accepting of the restrictions; restrictions on passengers were found to be the least acceptable element of the scheme.

We cannot allow the current situation to continue. The evidence suggests that graduated driving licences can play an important role in reducing the carnage on our roads. We would be failing our young people if we did not seriously investigate the practicalities and

implications of adopting graduated driving licensing in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: The outcome of this debate has the capacity to save lives, reduce the level of horrendous injury, and reduce the number of families suffering the loss of a loved one due to an accident. We must send the right message. The debate is not aimed at making it more difficult to obtain a full driving licence. Rather, we are trying to ensure that young drivers are well trained, thereby reducing their risk of being involved in an accident.

Sadly, road accidents and fatalities are most common among young people. There are more fatalities among 17- to 24-year-olds than among any other age group. That does not mean that every young person is a bad or irresponsible driver — many circumstances can lead to a fatal collision.

I commend the Minister for the efforts that she has already made to reduce the death toll on the roads. However, she and I are aware that there is still much to be done. The introduction of a graduated driving licence would be a step in the right direction. Many European countries, the United States, Australia and New Zealand all have graduated driving licensing systems, and their road death tolls are much lower than ours. There is a direct link between graduated licences and death toll reduction.

Some of the successful approaches have included restrictions on inexperienced drivers: a night-time restriction on driving; a ban on carrying passengers; and zero tolerance of drink-driving. Indeed, I should like zero tolerance to be applied to drink-driving for all motorists. Those are all measures that we should consider introducing in Northern Ireland.

The additional requirements will, no doubt, be portrayed as a restriction on new drivers. However, a driving licence represents a big responsibility at a young age. This motion is not attempting to deprive young people of a learning experience. It is attempting to ensure that our roads are safer, and to prevent young drivers from becoming another sad statistic. Nobody wants members of the younger generation to be appallingly maimed in road accidents, and I make no apology for trying to prevent that.

I urge the Minister to consider the graduated licence scheme — drivers should be trained and skilled to the highest level. This motion is a positive step in that direction. If the motion saves one life every year, it will have achieved its intended goal. However, the consequences of the motion will be much greater than that. I thank my colleague, Mr Ross, for bringing this important motion to the House. I support the motion and I urge every Member to support it.

Mr Shannon: Las' yeir, i the UK, thair wur 1,000 fowk at dee'd i road miscanters quhar the driver wus

aiged atween 17 an' 25. Men aiged atween 17 an' 20 ir 10 times mair apt tae bae kalled ir get bad hurts nor men aiged fae 40 tae 59. Neir 1 in 5 drivers hes a crash i thair furst yeir o' drivin'. These ir awfu' nummers, but still, they mak' yin thing gyely clear – experience maks aa the differ i drivin'.

Last year in the UK, 1,000 people died in road traffic accidents in which the driver was between the ages of 17 and 25. Males aged between 17 and 20 are 10 times more likely to be killed or seriously injured than 40- to 59-year olds. Almost one in five drivers has a crash in his or her first year of driving. Those are horrible statistics, but they make one thing clear: experience makes all the difference.

It is a long time since I was 17, but when I was that age, Mini cars ruled the world. I was fortunate to have one, and fully comprehensive insurance for the car was £140. To my discredit, I had an accident a couple of days after I got my licence.

Mrs I Robinson: Was it a babe machine?

Mr Shannon: That tells us one thing: accidents are not new to today's 17-year-olds, but the factors relating to them are as important now as they were then.

By the way, Iris, it was a babe machine — at least, I thought that it was. *[Laughter.]*

Northern Ireland has a form of graduated driving. People — regardless of their age — who pass their driving test are obliged to use R-plates for a year; that means that they are restricted drivers and not permitted to drive above 45 miles per hour. The thinking behind that rule is that restricting the speed of drivers who have no real driving experience will reduce speed-related accidents; experience is important. However, the results of that rule are not always positive. Drivers may be confident driving around the town for the first year after receiving their driving licences, but they are not always able to cope with motorway conditions. That inexperience carries through to the next stage, so it is clear that our limited graduation is not enough to cope with real driving conditions. It is for that reason that I fully endorse the principle of a graduated driving licensing system.

I am a member of the Ards District Policing Partnership, and we visit secondary schools, for instance, around the country to give demonstrations on traffic accidents. Representatives from the Ambulance Service, the Fire and Rescue Service and the PSNI attend to tell their stories to the young drivers. At the end of the presentation, a road traffic accident victim, who, unfortunately, is confined to a wheelchair, tells his story. Those presentations have had an effect on some young drivers, but more must be done. I have stood with the families of young men and women who lost their lives in traffic accidents, and it is time to speak for them.

A minimum number of structured lessons should be given by licensed instructors, and the time between the first structured lesson and the practical test should not be less than one year. I endorse the zero blood-alcohol-level policy for the two years after an individual passes his or her test. It is hoped that when drivers acquire the habit of not drinking and driving, that habit will continue and drink-driving levels across the Province will be reduced.

We are aware of the Californian schemes and schemes elsewhere, about which Members have spoken. There are statistics that prove that the scheme will work and improve our situation.

I am not convinced of the legitimacy of a ban or restriction on night-time driving. As Pat Ramsey said, many young people need to drive at night because of their jobs or because they are carers.

Mr Ross: That concern was highlighted in the media this morning, but, the countries that operate a night-time ban or restrictions on night-time driving offer exemptions. If one was creating criteria for graduated driving licensing in Northern Ireland, one would limit the restriction or ban on night-time driving to a period of up to two or three months. That way, the driver would obtain experience behind the wheel and would progress to a lower risk. The restriction or ban does not have to be for a year, as some media reports suggested this morning.

3.00 pm

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention and explanation; it takes some of the sting out of that issue. Statistics show that in Michigan in the United States, there has been a 53% reduction in night-time crashes, proving that the system can work. The Member has explained how such a scheme might go ahead.

In conclusion, although it may seem that there are an awful lot of rules and complications, when we consider the success of schemes in other countries, it is evident that a bit of thought will save lives. It is for that reason that I urge Members to support the motion to ensure that a safer system is implemented in the Province as a matter of urgency to save lives and to safeguard our children's lives.

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

Mr Craig: I support the motion and commend my two honourable friends for bringing the motion to the House.

On 4 October 2007, well-renowned road safety charity, Brake, revealed that 60% of 17- to 24-year-olds exceed the 30 mph speed limit — which will not surprise any Members in the House — whereas just 37% of older drivers break that same limit, illustrating the extremes that exist. Indeed, Brake has renewed its call for graduated driving licences.

Ulster's youngest drivers regularly admit to speeding in urban areas. The latest research into speeding shows that someone hit by a car at 35 mph is twice as likely to die as someone hit at 30 mph. I am sure that Members have seen those television advertisements, which I find very disturbing, that highlight that fact.

The research also indicates that action should be taken to stop younger drivers taking such risks. This is a serious matter; breaking the speed limit by just a few miles per hour can mean the difference between life and death for an individual.

As road crashes are the single biggest killer of drivers aged 17 to 24, Brake has campaigned for graduated driving licensing. It is a licensing system, as has already been stated, that is used in several countries including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and many states in America. Those places have seen reductions in accident rates among teenagers and young people.

In America, many states have guidelines that do not permit drivers under 18 to progress from a learner's permit to a full valid licence until they have undergone a graduated process of licensing, which includes several steps. In fact, in some states, it may take a period of six, eight or 12 months to obtain a full licence. In some cases, it may take even longer if, during that period, learners break traffic regulations. They are also given the option of taking part in more driver education courses and — as we discussed earlier — some have restrictions placed on the hours during which they are allowed to drive at night. None of those measures are meant to persecute the driver. The idea behind the graduated system is not to persecute young people.

The difficulty is that most young people do not recognise their lack of experience. We have all been there — the minute that people get their driving licences, they think that they are the world's greatest expert on driving. Unfortunately, the world lives with the consequences of that. The system is designed to put sensible restrictions on drivers to give them the experience that only comes with time and to learn that roads are genuinely dangerous. At present, one of the great failings of our system is that those who have a restricted driver's licence cannot drive on a motorway, so how can they gain experience of driving at high speed?

All those matters must be considered and incorporated in the proposals.

Teenage drivers will not be happy with the new licensing system, but we care more about the lives of those teenagers than about their feelings. Unfortunately, many teenagers end up not only killing or injuring themselves, but others, and, regrettably, many families are devastated by their actions. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr B McCrea: The motion is wide ranging, and its intent was to stimulate debate, which has been the

case. It may be necessary for us to narrow the discussion and come up with some useful measures.

It may seem as though we are patronising young people and trying to persecute them, as the previous Member to speak said, but that is not our intention. We are merely recognising the risks. However, when we discuss such matters, we must be careful that we do not enter into some sort of Orwellian nightmare in which curfews are imposed on people. If that were to happen, where would it all end?

If we want to win the hearts and minds of young people, we must be clear about what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to go about it. Future debates on this matter should include the issue of alcohol and our attitude to it. That is the most important issue, not only for young people, but for their parents. Underage drinking and binge drinking seem to go hand in hand with having a good night out.

There is no doubt that accidents are caused by drink-driving and by other factors that supposedly make up a good night out. There is an issue about how people respond to alcohol. The evidence is quite stark. Young men, in particular, are prone to taking risks, because they show off and try to impress their friends, and their ability to make judgement calls is diminished, particularly if they have consumed alcohol. Statistics show clearly that the risk element is five times greater when young people are in a group — as a group dynamic takes over, and they all try to outdo one another. Therefore, we must persuade people not to partake in such damaging exercises.

Many advertisements encourage people to not drink and drive, but persuasion is not enough. Effective sanctions must be put in place. There should be an absolute ban on alcohol consumption for drivers under the age of 21.

Mr Ross: At the beginning of his speech, the Member referred to the need to narrow the focus of the motion. However, the two issues that he has raised in his contribution so far, namely a ban on alcohol and restrictions on passenger numbers, were both specifically mentioned during the opening speech. Therefore, both issues have been addressed in the motion, which he said is not narrow enough.

Mr B McCrea: I heard the points that were raised, and I was coming to the issues of R-plates, restricted speed limits and curfews, on which I am not keen.

I am not keen on night-time restrictions, not because they are ineffective but because they restrict civil liberties and remove responsibility from the individual. People can marry and vote at a young age; they can choose their educational path and A-level subjects. To tell them that they cannot go out at night may be heavy-handed.

Mr Weir: I appreciate the Member's point, but will he also acknowledge that the same argument about restricting civil liberties was made when the wearing of seat belts was made compulsory? Many people initially resisted wearing seat belts because they considered it a restriction of their civil liberties. A balance must be struck.

Mr B McCrea: That was the point that I was trying to develop before I took interventions. There comes a time, however, when persuasion alone is not sufficient. Some form of sanction must be imposed in order to make it clear that people who disobey the law will feel serious repercussions.

There should be zero tolerance on alcohol consumption for drivers under the age of 21. It should be made clear that that will not be allowed. Most people would accept that as a reasonable intervention. I know that other Members have discussed the fact that in the US — where, in many states, it is illegal for a person under the age of 21 to buy alcohol — road-accident statistics from state to state differ, depending on when particular bans were introduced.

When I was in Washington a couple of weeks ago, its chief of police told me quite categorically —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps you can tell us about your American experience later.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I congratulate Alastair Ross for tabling the motion. I welcome his clarification that he wanted to start a discussion on the issues involved, and this has been a timely discussion. When such issues are discussed, sometimes the media would have us believe that new laws are to be introduced tomorrow or next week. I welcome today's debate because it gives me an opportunity, first, to reaffirm my commitment to improving road safety and, secondly, to introduce new measures to reform driver training, testing and licensing in Northern Ireland.

To date, there have been 32 deaths on our roads this year, and, as we are all aware, young and inexperienced drivers are over-represented in road-traffic collisions. More than a quarter of all drivers who were killed or seriously injured between 2001 and 2005 were aged between 17 and 24. Newly qualified drivers were responsible for 7% of fatal or serious collisions in the same period, even though they account for only approximately 1.5% of licence holders. Although it is encouraging that the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads is decreasing — we must remember that fact — much more can, and should, be done. I am committed to doing everything in my power to save lives on our roads.

Pat Ramsey made the point that, even though it forms part of its portfolio, road safety is not just an issue for the Department of the Environment. Other

Departments have a role to play. He mentioned speed limits outside schools. I understand that the Department for Regional Development is running a pilot scheme — I think that it is in County Londonderry — that entails operating a 20 mph speed limit outside schools during school opening and closing times. It is a very important trial, which, if successful, will be extended across Northern Ireland. As the Member may be aware, a similar scheme operates in Scotland.

We have also been working with the Department of Education on the issue of school buses, which was brought to the fore earlier this year for all the wrong reasons. My Department has a road safety working group, which Department for Regional Development and Police Service of Northern Ireland representatives attend. Representatives from the Ambulance Service have recently been invited to join that group. Much partnership working is taking place, but I accept Mr Ramsey's point, which was well made.

It is worth noting that Northern Ireland is unique in the United Kingdom in having a set of restrictions already in place for novice drivers. The restricted driver scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1968, and it requires newly qualified drivers to display R-plates and to drive at no more than 45 mph during their first year of driving.

There are also more severe penalties for new drivers who are qualified for fewer than two years. For example, if they accumulate six or more penalty points, their licences will be revoked and they will have to resit the theory and practical tests.

3.15 pm

Times have changed since 1968 — and for the record, Mr Brolly, I was not around in 1968. Traffic is now much heavier, cars are more powerful and people are commuting greater distances. On the other hand, driver testing has been improved in recent years; cars have many more safety features than ever before, and more resources are being directed at enforcement. Although existing measures have no doubt had an impact on driver behaviour, it is recognised that the restricted driver scheme has been in place for 40 years and needs to be reviewed.

This will not be the first time that the learner and restricted driver schemes have been reviewed. In June 2000, the Department consulted on the proposal to remove the 45 mph speed limit on learner drivers to allow them to be trained at higher speeds. Following on from that, it was intended to progress to the next stage of the process with a review of the restricted driver scheme. Unfortunately, that review was postponed to allow for the outcome of the March 2002 Department for Transport consultation on its document, 'Introducing a more structured approach to learning to drive'. The purpose of that consultation process was to inform

both the review and a wider consideration of driver training and testing in Northern Ireland.

At the beginning of 2004, and in the absence of firm decisions in Great Britain following the March 2002 consultation, the Department proposed to proceed with its own consultation on the proposed removal of the 45 mph speed limit for restricted drivers. However, the direct rule Minister decided that the time was not right for such a consultation and that she would consider it only when there was a significant reduction in the number of fatal and serious collisions involving 17- to 24-year-olds.

However, although the reduction in the number of such collisions has not been as significant as we would like it to be, we cannot afford to drag our feet on the issue. That is why one of my priorities since coming into office has been to hold a comprehensive review of all aspects of driver training, testing and licensing in Northern Ireland, not just speed limits.

Much work has already been done to review the current arrangements and to consider what other countries are doing, and doing well. In Europe, several very popular measures are in place, such as a probationary period for new drivers, reduced speed limits and passenger restrictions. Elsewhere in the world, restrictions such as night-time curfews, lower blood-alcohol limits and compulsory professional lessons are very common and have been successful. We have heard several Members comment on those measures. We constantly review the vast amount of research on those initiatives to see whether they could be applied in Northern Ireland.

Graduated driving licensing aims to restrict learner and novice drivers as to when, where, how and with whom they drive, according to expert research. The ideal system of graduated driving licensing will contain many elements, including a learner stage of at least 12 months. We have heard Members say that sometimes learners take lessons just to pass the test and not to become good drivers. I am particularly concerned about that issue.

Other elements will include mandatory supervised practice periods and night-time curfews. I recognise that there is some controversy about night-time curfews. Some Members mentioned hospitality workers and people who need to be out at night. My friend Alastair Ross is correct to say that in America, there are exemptions to the curfew rule. However, consultation on the proposals will give people the opportunity to put forward their views on those issues. I am sure that young people will let us know how they feel about night-time curfews. Do not forget that this consultation will not only be for people over the age of 24 — I imagine that 17- to 24-year-olds and schoolchildren and young people will have a view, too.

Other elements of the graduated driving licensing scheme include teen passenger restrictions and zero blood-alcohol limits, which Basil McCrea mentioned earlier.

We must be mindful of the constraints when considering graduated driving licensing in a Northern Irish context. We have a large rural population who do not routinely drive on motorways or dual carriageways — more is the pity; we do not have enough dual carriageways, but that is beside the point. We have more rural roads than the rest of the UK, and we drive more miles per capita than the rest of the UK, too.

It is commonplace for learner drivers in Northern Ireland to be taught mainly by family members or, indeed, by friends.

We should be mindful of the impact that such social and environmental factors can have and of the fact that compliance with any of the measures that we introduce must be easy. That said, 70% of all road deaths in the past five years have occurred on rural roads. Therefore, it is vital that we find a way to address what is a very specific Northern Ireland issue.

Driver training and testing must ensure that new drivers are equipped to deal with solo driving and all the risks that that entails. We also have a duty to reduce risk exposure for new drivers in the first two years of solo driving, which is, as we know, the most dangerous period for new drivers.

We are already reaching out to young people through road-safety education. Mr Boylan mentioned that at the beginning of the debate, and I feel that it is important that we continue with our positive work in that area.

I take Mr Dallat's point about working in partnership with insurance companies and about having more carrot and less stick. I am happy to follow through with the insurance companies on that to see whether something can be done. However, I also appreciate what Mr Lunn said about insurance companies taking a commercial point of view, but I hope that they will also consider the social context.

My Department is in close contact with the Department for Transport in London. That Department is also considering reviewing driver training and testing in GB. However, it will not go down the route of introducing graduated driver restrictions. Our research indicates that imposing post-test restrictions has merits in that lives can be saved and the frequency and severity of collisions can be reduced. I would like to think that we could lead the way for the rest of the UK in implementing tried-and-tested measures. We are, of course, keeping our options open, and any measures that could improve our road-safety record and save lives are of interest to us.

I, again, welcome the support of Alastair Ross for the scheme. I assure him that work is well under way

in the Department to produce a shortlist of proposals and that my Department will continue to work with the Department for Transport in England on the matter.

I am sure that Mr Ross will appreciate that the introduction of the scheme will not happen overnight. The Department has a great deal of work to do prior to the consultation, which I hope will happen very soon. We will then have to assess the findings of that consultation, table legislation and finally look for the co-operation of partners in the scheme.

I assure the House of my personal commitment and the commitment of my Department to act on these proposals and to make Northern Ireland a safer place for all road users.

Mr Weir: I thank the House for the very sober and constructive manner in which the debate has been held. The debate on local government issues this morning caused great banter in the House, but it is important that road safety is addressed with appropriate sobriety and reflection. Although it may be a cliché to say that few issues could be described as being more life or death than road safety, it is important that the House speaks with one voice on the issue.

I appreciate that Members across the Chamber have, broadly speaking, supported the motion. Not surprisingly, many Members raised caveats about some elements of graduated driving licences. In many ways, that is not surprising, given that research on the various schemes that are in place across the world shows that this is not a single-scheme option.

Indeed, the purpose of the debate was not to provide a single option that would be introduced within a matter of weeks, but to stimulate discussion. As the Member who moved the motion stated, although such schemes may have similar elements, some may differ and can be interpreted in different ways.

It is important over the weeks and months ahead that, as the Department moves towards consultation, it examines the most appropriate mechanisms. It must also consider what is best for Northern Ireland, and if particular options are employed, it must examine how best those can be implemented.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the merits and demerits of a night-time curfew. However, such a curfew is not one upon which we can place either a set period of time or a set regulation. Application of night-time curfews in other areas of the world has shown a range of variations; for example, timescale, the restrictions that are placed on the driver, the number of months for which it can be applied, whether there is a complete ban, whether the driver should be accompanied, and the level of exemption. That is just one element of a wide range of issues.

I want to deal with some of the issues that arose during the debate. The proposer of the motion, Alastair Ross, detailed the high level of casualties as a result of road accidents in Northern Ireland. Indeed, unfortunately, our level of road traffic accidents is around 40% higher than that of the rest of the United Kingdom. Mr Ross explained the various components of a graduated driving licence. He was correct to highlight the fact, which was also pointed out by several other Members, that to tackle such a multifaceted problem requires a multi-agency approach. It is not simply a matter for the Department of the Environment.

Mr Ross also highlighted the fact that this is not an issue that concerns only young drivers, but inexperienced drivers. Sometimes, the debate has tended to focus purely on young drivers. Cathal Boylan referred to his experience on the all-party road safety group, and highlighted a range of issues. He is right to say that it is important that the Assembly learns from best practice and experience elsewhere in the world. The graduated driving licence is one of a range of road safety measures that have been tried and tested. It is important that the Assembly puts all that research to good effect.

Mr Boylan also emphasised early education for drivers, which I agree is important if the culture of driving, to which several Members referred, is to change. He mentioned the problems of insurance, which Trevor Lunn also discussed in considerable depth. That is an important matter. The Minister has given her commitment to work on that. However, it is also important to realise that if schemes and measures were put in place that significantly reduce the level of road crashes among inexperienced drivers, it would have a major effect on insurance premiums.

Sam Gardiner brought the discussion back to the human cost of road safety problems. Many inexperienced drivers face peer pressure, which is why several elements are aimed at addressing that issue. He emphasised the need for reform of the R-plate system, which was also highlighted by the Minister and other Members. A theme has emerged time and again in countries where schemes of that nature have been introduced. Although they have varying levels of success, the one common factor is that all of them have seen a reduction in the numbers of crashes and fatalities. The only issue is how success rates of, say, 10%, 20% or 30% could be measured. However, all those schemes have been reasonably successful.

John Dallat said that such a scheme must be positive and attractive, which is also true. It is important that the Assembly takes people with it, as far as possible, and that it works in partnership with them. Therefore, the scheme must be made as attractive as possible. However, as Basil McCrea and other Members have pointed out, it must be appreciated that any new measure, like

almost every road safety innovation that has been introduced during the past 50 years — the introduction of seat belts; belting up in the back; breathalysers; anti-drink-driving campaigns; speed cameras, etc — will meet a degree of resistance. Initially, people felt suspicious of the merits of those measures and sceptical about their effects on civil liberties. In the long run, however, they have become part of society's culture and, indeed, have been broadly accepted.

Trevor Lunn highlighted the situation in the Netherlands, the merits of which are worth studying. He mentioned the importance of sanctions and of drivers getting it right from the start.

Francie Brolly discussed the need to engage young people. That returns us to a point that was made on several occasions, namely that the Assembly must aim to change the culture of driving and, in particular, impact on young people's attitudes towards driving.

Pat Ramsey discussed in great depth the frightening statistics of road traffic accidents and their human cost. Any approach must involve all Departments working together through effective consultation.

He highlighted that whatever is done to reduce the danger posed by inexperienced drivers must be complemented by measures to cut down on drink-driving, speeding and other motoring offences. There is no golden bullet to solve the problem; a range of measures is needed.

3.30 pm

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the Department for Regional Development has a major role to play in ensuring that road conditions help to reduce accidents, regardless of the age of those involved?

Mr Weir: I agree. I understand that the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development are working closely on what the Executive consider an important issue.

Iris Robinson highlighted the human and financial cost of crashes and warned that a reduction in the number of deaths on roads must not lead to complacency.

Billy Armstrong pointed out the disproportionately high number of young people killed. Scepticism on the issue of night-time curfews or restrictions for young drivers was countered by statistics from the United States showing that the measures have saved a significant number of lives.

George Robinson said that much remains to be done but that ensuring the safety of young drivers must be a priority.

Jim Shannon conjured up the nightmare image of him as a 17-year-old in what was described as a "babe machine". [Laughter.] That image will haunt me for many a year. On a serious note, he contrasted the situation between novice and experienced drivers.

Jonathan Craig made the same point and highlighted a range of worldwide experience available to Northern Ireland.

Basil McCrea spoke of the significance of alcohol in accidents, which is another issue being considered by the Minister.

An holistic solution involving a range of elements is needed. We cannot focus on graduated driving licensing at the expense of considering alcohol, speeding and road safety in general; we must balance persuasion with enforcement.

I welcome the Minister's proposals and her review of the restricted driver scheme. I urge the House to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Having seen the film, I can only begin to imagine the babes. [Laughter.]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the positive impact that graduated driving licences have had on reducing road traffic accidents in other parts of the world; and believes that a similar scheme should be introduced in Northern Ireland to combat the unacceptably high number of deaths on our roads.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Schengen Agreement

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the Schengen Agreement contains advantages for all parts of the United Kingdom, and for the Republic of Ireland, particularly in relation to policing, security and opportunities for the free movement of people; calls upon the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to sign up to, and implement, the agreement; and considers that this will be critical to maintaining a common travel area between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

There are good, solid reasons why the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland should sign up to the Schengen Agreement: it would maximise freedom of movement across the continent and improve our collective security.

Particular concerns relating to Northern Ireland should encourage both jurisdictions to sign up to the Schengen Agreement, along with other countries in the European Union and beyond.

The common travel area that gives UK and Irish nationals the ability to move relatively freely across these islands is under threat. That threat to the common travel area should focus our minds and encourage a rethink away from the narrow perspective that has dominated border and immigration issues in these islands. Let us make that leap and recognise that our true interests lie in a broader common European response to issues relating to freedom of movement and security. In doing so, we can preserve a common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which is of critical importance to the people of Northern Ireland.

The Assembly occasionally discusses matters that lie outside its direct area of responsibility. We are not calling today for additional powers to be transferred to the Assembly, although we have done so in the past. These issues are best addressed at a national and, potentially, European level. Rather, this is a case in which the needs and interests of the people of Northern Ireland are not particularly well served by the perspectives that have been adopted by the UK Government and, to an extent, by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, there is a responsibility on the Assembly to speak out.

Before the First World War, it was possible for someone to travel freely from Paris to Prague. That

possibility has now been effectively restored through the Schengen Agreement. The agreement provides for several matters. First, and most importantly, it provides for the abolition of border checks at common internal European borders. Those checks are balanced by a more stringent check on external borders. Schengen and non-Schengen traffic are separated at ports and terminals. Entry terms and short-term visas among countries that have signed up to the agreement are harmonised. Cross-border rights of surveillance have been established, as have common databases and hot-pursuit protocols that allow law enforcement from one jurisdiction to cross over into another, within prescribed limits, in pursuit of suspects. It is important to stress that the agreement does not remove the ability of states to control their own immigration and nationality policies.

The Schengen Agreement dates back to 1985, when it was signed by France, Germany and the Benelux countries. It went live in 1990 and was formally incorporated into the European Union legal framework in 1997 through the Treaty of Amsterdam. New accession countries to the European Union are expected to demonstrate an ability to comply with the terms of the Schengen Agreement. Today, all EU states, except for the UK and the Republic of Ireland, are fully signed up to the agreement. Indeed, several non-EU states participate as full members of the agreement, including Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, the last two countries joining this year.

It is interesting to note, when considering our own common travel area, that there had previously been a Nordic passport union between Norway and Iceland. Those countries recognised the need to sign up to the Schengen Agreement in order to preserve that *de facto* union when the other Scandinavian countries became part of the European Union. The United Kingdom has not signed up to the Schengen Agreement, due more to a Euro-sceptic bias than any logical reason. There is a false fear of people gaining access to Europe from the east and travelling unchallenged to Britain. The Republic of Ireland was forced to follow suit, in conjunction with the United Kingdom, in order to protect the common travel area.

The common travel area, as we know it, is an informal arrangement that goes back to 1922, when there was no attempt to interfere with the movement of people between the new separate jurisdictions when the South of Ireland got home rule. The UK and Ireland are limited to participating in some aspects of the Schengen Agreement that deal with policing and judicial co-operation. There are also a number of other disadvantages that arise from the UK and the Republic of Ireland's non-participation in the agreement. First, and most critically, there are limitations on the free movement of people. That wastes time and creates unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to travel, which result

in economic disadvantages. I look forward to a situation in which I, as a European citizen, can move freely around the Continent. I would like to think that citizens of other European countries could do likewise in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Secondly, we are paying opportunity costs for security and, in particular, for terrorist threats. The UK is denied access to shared databases in the Schengen Agreement's information system. Indeed, that disadvantage may worsen if a common biometric system is introduced under the aegis of the agreement.

Thirdly, both states are excluding themselves from some aspects of justice, immigration and anti-terrorism decision-making in the European Union. I stress that there is no trade-off to be made between, on the one hand, the freer movement of people and, on the other, losing the ability to introduce tougher measures to combat security threats. Under Schengen, they go hand in hand; there is no threat.

Terrorism is as much a problem in Madrid as it is in Manchester and in Barcelona as it is in Belfast. If one suspects that adopting the Schengen agreement would be a threat to security and anti-terrorism measures, one must merely anticipate Sinn Féin's remarks about that matter.

From Northern Ireland's perspective, the common travel area is particularly important. In addition to local people's ability to move from one part of the UK to another, the common travel area allows free movement across the Irish border, which enables social and economic relationships to be more easily preserved. The common travel area is under threat from the proposed e-border system, which was first mooted in 'Confident Communities in a Secure Britain: The Home Office Strategic Plan 2004-08'. Furthermore, the UK Borders Act 2007 was passed. Consequently, the threat of an e-border hangs over us, potentially to be implemented in 2009. It could result in an artificial border being created down the Irish Sea and identities having to be proven by travellers moving from either part of Ireland to Great Britain. That would inhibit the free movement of people and would create political problems for unionists and people of other political persuasions.

Similarly, the creation of a stringent e-border within the island of Ireland would interfere with current arrangements and create major political difficulties for nationalists and others. Both outcomes would be perverse for Northern Ireland, and, given our particular circumstances, there is an onus on us to speak out, ensure that we recognise the circumstances in which we find ourselves and maximise our citizens' ability to interact with the different jurisdictions to which we are bordered.

In addition, the common travel area only applies to UK and Irish nationals. Travellers who require visas for either jurisdiction have a major problem. Such

people cannot legally travel to the other jurisdiction without breaching the terms of their visa, unless they apply for a second visa, and that applies even to people in transit. For example, a person from India who wishes to travel to Northern Ireland can only enter through a UK port or airport. Such a person cannot legally go to Dublin and then travel to the North. A businessman from India who wishes to decide between investing in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland cannot easily travel legally across the border. That is a needless barrier to our development and our interaction with the wider world, and it is important to recognise the realities of globalisation and move with the times. Within the Schengen zone, a common Schengen visa, which deals effectively with that problem, now exists, and, no doubt, we are missing out on major economic advantages for the European Schengen states.

There are other potential benefits. The introduction of a hot-pursuit protocol between the PSNI and the gardaí has obvious benefits in combating terrorism and organised crime. As we know, those evils do not respect borders. Why should we handicap our law-enforcement personnel, who are attempting to combat those serious problems?

Switzerland has even greater historical hang-ups than the United Kingdom about sovereignty, yet it has signed up to the Schengen agreement. Iceland is a remote island in the North Atlantic, separated from the rest of Europe by vast distances. Nevertheless, both of those countries understand that it is in their best interests to be part of Schengen. Northern Ireland requires a similar level of sound judgement from the Governments of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. To sign up to the Schengen agreement, which recognises Northern Ireland's particular situation and the realities of a globalised world, would be the liberal, progressive and modern thing to do. From Northern Ireland's perspective, it is the only logical action to take.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the second "Agreement".

Generally, I support the Alliance Party's motion; however, the SDLP is not convinced that the Schengen agreement is critical to maintaining a common travel area between the UK and the Republic.

3.45 pm

It is a matter of considerable contention whether, in fact, that last statement is true. One could argue that the reason that the UK and the Republic have not fully signed up to the Schengen Agreement — although they are part of the arrangement to some extent — is due to concerns about protecting the common travel area. I am not absolutely convinced by Dr Farry's argument that the British Government have taken their stance largely as a result of a Euro-sceptic position. I do not

think that that is correct; it may be an element, but there are other reasons.

As Dr Farry pointed out, the common travel area predates the Schengen Agreement, predates the Common Market, and, of course, predates the European Union in its present form. It has been, and hopefully will remain, a permanent feature of travel and movement between these islands, and is a sensible and beneficial arrangement for the people of Ireland and Britain. It is very important that we in this House recognise that agreement, are supportive of it and encourage both Governments to preserve it, because it has been of great benefit to people in Northern Ireland and throughout these islands.

The Schengen Agreement, as a part of the European law, arose out of the Amsterdam Treaty, which came into force in 1999. In its original form, it has an earlier genesis in 1985. The agreement was essentially an organic development among a number of European Union member states that wanted to increase co-operation and freedom of movement for their citizens. That was an important, good and solid development, but I stress that it was an organic development that arose out of the particular circumstances of those European states. It has been shaped and formed both by the common geography of those states on the European mainland, and by the internal policing of European states at large. Ireland and Britain organically developed their own system of free travel, again due to common geography and the stylistic differences in internal policing arrangements within these islands.

The Schengen Agreement is a good development, and provides significant benefits by allowing much freer travel for millions of EU citizens. It does not, however, allow absolutely free travel for people within the European Union. There is a problem in respect of citizens of third-party countries outside the European Union. That complicates the freedom of movement of people within the European Union and within the area covered by the Schengen Agreement. As with all such developments, the Schengen Agreement has its upsides and its downsides.

It is important to remember that, although the agreement is progressive, good, and certainly liberal in comparison to previous arrangements, it is not perfect. It is a system that has been criticised by many people, because it is seen in some aspects of its operation to represent an infringement of people's human rights. It is important, however, that we support and acknowledge its benefits for many Europeans, in particular for full citizens of the European Union, although not necessarily all residents of the European Union — I draw a distinction between those who are residents and those who are citizens. Britain and Ireland have, in part, signed up to the Schengen Agreement, but not fully. One hopes that, with

the passage of time they will do so, and will implement the agreement as have our European partners.

Although the two Governments have not fully signed up to the Schengen Agreement, they have the option to participate fully in its provisions through the protocol in the Treaty of Amsterdam. That is an important capacity for both countries to have in what is an important aspect of European law. It is important to remember that both countries have that capacity: they can now examine what is happening and make arrangements to reconcile their desire to preserve a common travel area with their responsibilities regarding the provisions in the Schengen Agreement. It is a complex matter that cannot be easily resolved in this debate. It is important to remember that that reconciliation must happen because the Schengen Agreement has — whether we like it or not — complicated the common travel area.

Neither country can implement the provisions in the Schengen Agreement without the participation of the other partner state, so it is impossible for Ireland or Britain to proceed unilaterally. Implementing the provisions must be a bilateral process. Unilateralism will not work, and I do not detect any desire from Britain or the Irish Republic to act unilaterally. However, the Schengen Agreement does complicate the common travel area, which is why Britain and Ireland have not exercised their opt-in facility. Preserving the common travel area is a priority for both jurisdictions.

The commitment of the UK Government to the establishment of an e-border system further complicates the free-travel arrangements between our islands and the implementation of the Schengen Agreement. The e-border system will be rolled out between 2008 and 2014, and we will have to see how that develops and study its implications for these islands.

Of the 30 states that have signed up to the Schengen Agreement, only 15 have implemented it fully. Fifteen states are, to varying degrees, outside the full implementation of the agreement, and whether the development of an e-border will be an indefinite obstacle to the agreement is unclear — we will have to examine its consequences.

Members should be concerned about the preservation of the common travel area and, in particular, the free movement of people between the North and South of Ireland — it would be nonsense and regressive to have border controls between the North and South of Ireland. That must be the top priority for Members. Both Governments are committed to the operation of systems that protect the common travel area, which should be supported and encouraged.

There are aspects to the Schengen Agreement that I have not mentioned. Dr Farry mentioned hot pursuit, which is a policy that contains good ideas. Although I am not certain that we are at the stage where hot pursuit

could be fully implemented, I cannot see any objection in principle. However, relations between the Garda Síochána and PSNI are excellent and may negate the need for that type of arrangement.

Mr Hamilton: Although the sparse attendance in the Chamber indicates otherwise, this is a serious matter. Perhaps it is a sign of the progress that our society is making that a debate on borders does not have Members ranting, raving and slinging insults across the Chamber at each other. We are in danger of making the progress that Dr Farry started.

It is good to have a serious debate on border controls, and I hope that I do not lower the tone set by Dr Farry and Mr Maginness.

I oppose the motion and the amendment — this is where the tone starts to slide. The UK's policy towards the Schengen Agreement is sensible. It is a positive thing that we can opt into parts of the agreement that benefit the UK and which enhance our security and safety, yet can opt out of other parts of the agreement that might have a negative impact on our security and safety. It is right and proper that the UK is involved in sharing information across borders and between law enforcement agencies on matters such as drugs, illegal immigration and organised crime. However, giving up control of visas and elements of immigration is not in the interests of the UK and must be opposed.

Some issues are particular to the UK, which is why we should be cautious about the Schengen Agreement. Some of those issues derive from the fact that we live on an island, and we are part of a country that occupies another island. In the area of national security, there is no doubt that the UK is a target for terrorism and for illegal immigration, and that is not a false fear. The new Schengen Agreement zone, which was recently expanded to include the eastern European secessionist states in the EU, now has a 1,800-mile border running from the Baltic to the Adriatic. Mindful of some of the countries through which it passes, that is a potentially very porous border. If we sign up to the Schengen Agreement, we would be subcontracting elements of our border control to other countries. Various media reports highlight the severe and worrying weaknesses in the border controls of some eastern European countries. Agreeing to Schengen would cede control of the entry of non-EU citizens into the UK, irrespective of the country through which they enter the EU in the first place.

Some interesting points were raised in an article by an academic at the National University of Ireland in Cork about what he called the Schengen Agreement's radical civil liberties implications. Everyone knows that there is a difference between the common law system in this part of the world and the continental civil code. If we move from strict border controls and into other areas to control those coming into the country,

there are implications that might include national ID cards, with which I assume the proposer's party rightly disagrees.

There is also the issue of national sovereignty. There are few issues that define national sovereignty as much as border control. As a representative of a party that is sceptical about the intentions of the EU in any agreement of this kind, I noted with interest the comments of Lech Walesa, the former President of Poland, who, before the new year and the extension of the Schengen area, said:

"An improbable thing has happened: in many areas, Europe is becoming one state."

That is something about which those of us on this side of the House — and, indeed, probably others as well — would have concern.

I want to touch on the issue of the common travel area, which was raised earlier. We have serious concerns at the implications of the electronic border control system that the UK Government want to introduce and which would include Northern Ireland. That would have serious implications for business travel and short breaks. Those were issues that the Government ignored or did not see, but they are now well aware of them and their practicalities. Those issues must be resolved, but the Schengen Agreement is not necessarily the way to go about it.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh míle maith agat. It is an interesting sign of the times that although we are talking about borders and border controls, we are not having an argument. Simon Hamilton talked about someone occupying someone else — I was not quite sure who was being occupied, but it would be interesting to hear his thesis later.

That is an appropriate tone for the debate. Sinn Féin opposes the motion and the amendment; I am sure that Stephen Farry has been waiting with bated breath to hear that.

4.00 pm

Dr Farry: We are glad to bring Sinn Féin and the DUP together.

Mr A Maskey: Well, this is it. I was not sure how to vote until I heard Simon Hamilton speak. Our parties have the wit and maturity to reach agreement when it makes sense for everybody — hallelujah for that.

Sinn Féin has a number of reasons for objecting to the Schengen Agreement. Mr Farry and Mr Maginness gave a potted history of the Schengen Agreement. It emanated from Luxembourg in 1985, and it was agreed under the Amsterdam Treaty in 1990 and ratified in European law. As has already been said, Britain and Ireland have opted out of the agreement, but they opt in when it suits them. Perhaps that is fair enough.

Sinn Féin's primary objection to the arrangements of the Schengen Agreement is that the information that

is gathered and shared by the states is available and accessible to a range of agencies. Given our circumstances, which Stephen Farry mentioned, a lot of us are alert to the dangers inherent in that type of system. In recent times, illegal renditions have resulted in people being taken away by states in the guise of state security. Sinn Féin recognises that every country and state must protect itself and its borders and look after the interests of its citizens. We support the right to, and the need for, common travel, and we want to protect that. We want to ensure that each country has the necessary authority and judicial powers to protect itself and its citizens.

However, the Schengen Agreement allows for the collection of information on people without their being aware that that information is being collected. People have no idea whether the information is factual, inaccurate, erroneous or even mischievous. That sort of information is available to all sorts of agencies, never mind countries. Even the author — the national authority that originally collected the information — does not have to be asked for permission to release that information.

A wide range of information is collected on individual citizens and shared among all sorts of agencies without the knowledge of the individuals. There is no means of redress, because the individuals do not know what information has been collected and have no way of challenging the collection. People have been turned away from airports and barred or deported from countries. High-profile Members of the US Congress and Senators have been stopped at airports because their names have appeared on mysterious lists.

Sinn Féin is opposed to this country's adopting the Schengen Agreement until such a protocol has all the necessary appropriate safeguards built in for all its citizens. No democratic country wants to aspire to, or avail itself of, an unaccountable, invisible system. We oppose the motion and the amendment on those grounds. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Cree: I will address European and UK issues relating to the Schengen Agreement, and, hopefully, my colleague will deal with the common travel area. Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom, has a strong and important place in the European Union. We benefit greatly from being part of the European Union, and the UK is a major leader in EU institutions. On some issues, however, the United Kingdom — and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland — retain the right to respect the wishes of their Parliaments and indigenous citizens. The Governments of the UK and the Republic of Ireland are correct not to have signed up to all aspects of the Schengen Agreement.

The security of the United Kingdom's borders should be of the utmost importance to the UK Government. The Schengen Agreement effectively dissolves the internal

borders of countries in the European Union and some other signatory countries.

The agreement's logic is that it makes life easier for businesses, travellers and tourists on the Continent. However, it also pushes all border security and immigration checks to the edges of Europe. Therefore, if the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland were to sign up to the Schengen Agreement, they would have to rely on the existing security in Portugal, Italy and eastern Europe.

The argument that having no borders makes travel easier is lost on the British Isles, due to the large expanses of water between them and the Continent. As the UK Government recognise, frontier controls are the most effective way to control immigration and to combat terrorism and other crime. The borders in the UK and the Republic of Ireland provide much internal security in the region. The Alliance Party seeks to jeopardise the security and sovereignty of the United Kingdom by having it sign up fully to the Schengen Agreement.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: I will not give way just yet.

Stephen may not want to hear this next wee bit, but even the Alliance Party's sister party, the Liberal Democrats, does not want to sign up unequivocally to the agreement. In its European election manifesto, it says that it will sign up only under certain conditions:

"When we are satisfied that strong and effective EU external border controls are in place".

Can the Alliance Party guarantee that such external border controls exist? I do not think that it can.

Dr Farry: There is a move towards establishing strong external borders in the Schengen area, and the Liberal Democrats in Great Britain are moving in the right direction.

My point concerns security: certain individuals have entered the United Kingdom and posed a security, and even a terrorist, threat. Had the United Kingdom been part of the Schengen information system, those individuals would have been flagged up. As a consequence of being excluded from the Schengen Agreement, the United Kingdom has lost out and allowed people to enter.

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for his point.

The Liberal Democrats' manifesto goes on to state that, were adequate external border checks implemented, Britain would be able to benefit from, for example, "passport-free movement".

For such miserly benefits, the Liberal Democrats and the Alliance Party are prepared to fly in the face of security, sovereignty and public opinion. The Alliance Party, in its attempt to highlight its liberal European credentials, has made an error of judgement. I consider the United Kingdom to be one of the most liberal and

welcoming societies in the world, and particularly in Europe.

The Alliance Party has ignored the feelings of the people in the United Kingdom. It has also ignored the fact that society in the United Kingdom, which is outside the Schengen Agreement, is, in many respects, much more open to indigenous people and immigrants alike.

As I often found when travelling, countries in the European Union that have removed their internal borders and immigration checks are now required to make greater efforts to implement surveillance away from the border areas. The measures that they employ include national identity cards; more stop-and-search mechanisms; the registering of immigrants at addresses; and potential raids on immigrant quarters.

That is not only my view; it is shared by the academics from the Centre for Migration Studies in Cork. They consider that the adoption of the Schengen regulations would have “radical civil liberty implications”. The differing legal traditions in the United Kingdom and the European Union mean that there is a danger that signing up to the Schengen Agreement might jeopardise legal securities that exist in the UK, such as the right to trial by jury.

At present, strong external border controls ensure internal security and control immigration, and they simultaneously facilitate a liberal and welcoming society. The Alliance Party would have the UK move from that to having no direct control of borders — in exchange for identity cards, increased surveillance, the potential loss of legal safeguards and even more of the unwanted suspicion that surrounds immigrants in this country.

The UK signed up to those security aspects of the Schengen Agreement that allow it to participate in the Schengen information system. To go further would jeopardise the integrity of its borders and its sovereign ability to act according to its own immigration policy by securing and policing those borders. Therefore, I oppose the motion.

Mr Shannon: I also oppose the motion. I researched the Schengen Agreement and its implications for member states. The motion refers to the advantages of its implementation in the United Kingdom, but I find it difficult to see any such benefits. In fact, the motion encourages less control over illegal immigration.

National security is beyond the remit of the Assembly and is, rightly, the responsibility of the Westminster Government. The motion demonstrates that many Members cannot understand security matters or work with them. National security is at stake, and implementing the agreement to follow the majority is a bad idea.

At present, 30,000 immigrants enter Northern Ireland each year, even with border controls in place. As outlined in a response to a question in the House of Commons,

the number of illegal immigrants is difficult to determine because of the common travel area that operates between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Ninety-three illegal immigrants were sent home recently — a paltry number.

Tony Blair’s open-door policy exceeded all expectations. The Labour Government expected approximately 5,000 to 13,000 workers to come to the UK in 2005. However, more than 700,000 Polish workers came. The door was closed firmly when it became clear that the UK could not handle such a volume of immigrant workers. Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from immigrant workers, but we cannot adopt an open-door policy. Although the Schengen Agreement does not advocate immigration, its implementation would, undeniably, result in less border control and, subsequently, increased opportunity for illegal immigration. Furthermore, if we cannot sustain large numbers of migrant workers who contribute taxes, how can we handle an increase in the number of people who do not pay taxes and live off the land illegally?

There are more than 8 million illegal immigrants in the EU, the vast majority of whom travel throughout the Schengen area. Housing and health services cannot cope with more stress, and that is one reason why the implementation of the Schengen Agreement would be detrimental to the Province. Moreover, the threat of global terrorism has not decreased — indeed, we receive monthly updates on new terror cells and threats discovered throughout Europe, yet people claim that the Schengen Agreement will increase security. That does not make sense. Border controls are instrumental in keeping a rein on security, and, now more than ever, we should be grateful for security checks that act as deterrents to terrorists.

Some people claim that security is increased through information sharing under the Schengen information system, which is an international database of information on asylum-seeking aliens, criminals and stolen goods. It is undoubtedly a useful tool to reduce international crime, and the UK has been an active member since 2000, when leave was granted by the EU to share information. The Republic of Ireland joined shortly after, and we have benefited from membership for the past eight years. The information system is advantageous to everyone, so adopting all the provisions of the Schengen Agreement to increase security seems redundant.

Northern Ireland is tightening security through the introduction of electronic border controls in 2009, and, therefore, it is senseless to dumb down by asking for the Schengen principles to apply in the UK or Ireland. Outgoing Taoiseach Bertie Ahern resoundingly stated that Ireland would not join the Schengen Agreement because he was satisfied with the structures that allow freedom of travel between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

The motion is illogical. The shenanigans of the Schengen Agreement would severely restrict the benefits that we already enjoy. It is abundantly clear that the detrimental effects of completely open borders far outweigh any potential benefit. Therefore I urge Members to put the motion and the amendment where they should be — in the bin. The safety of the UK and the Republic is a priority, and for that reason any implementation of the Schengen Agreement would be questionable at best and downright foolish at worst. I urge Members to reject the motion.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the amendment. The motion refers to the benefits that the Schengen Agreement would have on policing, security and free movement. Sinn Féin supports international co-operation where it is necessary to fight crime — in particular drug and human trafficking, and we are in favour of the free movement of individuals throughout Europe.

4.15 pm

However, that is not what the Schengen Agreement will deliver, nor is it what it was intended to deliver. Let us be clear about what the agreement will mean. The Schengen information system (SIS) is already in place in many countries throughout Europe: it has been for some time. The unaccountable nature of it has drawn consistent criticism from respected human rights organisations. The second generation of the system consists of a centralised database, containing a wealth of information about citizens of the various nations that signed up to it.

According to the leading watchdog Statewatch that information will include so-called intelligence and supposition. Effectively, as my colleague Alex Maskey said, the Schengen information system is an invisible, unaccountable, European-wide electronic network of truly Orwellian proportions. As already stated, its massive database can be accessed by completely unaccountable bodies, such as Europol, which will have access as of right. They will not be required to request access from the relevant national authority, nor will they need to explain why they want the data. The information acquired can then be shared with other nations. In the era of illegal CIA abductions and extraordinary rendition, it is easy to see how the system is wide open to abuse.

Supporters of the Schengen Agreement claim that it is a necessary replacement for the physical barriers of old, an effective method of allowing freedom of movement while maintaining security. However, with virtually no democratic control or oversight, the use and operation of the SIS has grown more ominous, and there is evidence that it has been used to suppress legitimate political opposition.

A well-documented example of that relates to a member of Greenpeace from New Zealand, who was en route to that organisation's Amsterdam headquarters, only to be turned back at Schiphol Airport, because the French had entered an alert for her, as a consequence of her anti-nuclear-testing activism.

Despite the rhetoric hailing SIS as an essential safeguard against cross-border organised crime, the system has been used overwhelmingly for the tracking and exclusion of immigrants. According to statistics released in 1998, 80% of the 1.2 million entries on SIS related to non-Europeans who should be deported and/or rejected at the common-entry EU frontiers. All that the Schengen Agreement has achieved is the replacement of the physical barriers of old with an even more sinister and repressive digital barrier.

As I have said, Sinn Féin supports any measure that genuinely combats international crime and assists freedom of movement. However, any such system must be accompanied by the necessary accountable checks and balances to ensure that it is not abused. The Schengen information system clearly does not meet the basic democratic standard, and Sinn Féin will, therefore, oppose the motion and the amendment. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: We have just heard a speech that appears to be going in the same direction as my party, in the sense that the Ulster Unionist Party opposes the motion and the amendment. Yet, the more I heard, the more I doubted that I was going in the right direction.

I affirm categorically that every country has a right to defend itself. If people enter a country to undertake illicit activity — whether it be economic, terrorist or drug-related — that country must have some way of protecting its citizens.

Let us consider the common travel area, which was agreed between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The agreement is eminently sensible; since the 1950s, it has been possible to travel between the two countries without a passport, because there is much commonality and cultural agreement. The common travel area was born of common sense.

The problem is that recent changes on the part of the United Kingdom, especially the inclusion of electronic elements in the passport, threaten the common area. That is important.

Bertie Ahern, as mentioned in Mr Shannon's speech —

Mr A Maginness: The Member rightly praises the common travel area agreement. Will he not accept that the Schengen Agreement substantially accommodates and affords that freedom of movement to people in the European Union, in the same way that the common travel area accommodates those of Ireland and Britain? He and his party ought not to object to it.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for that intervention, because it allows me to emphasise the point that I want to make about the law of unintended consequences. Members who have already spoken made the point that the Schengen Agreement does not do anything that the Member claimed. What it does is introduce identity cards and raids on immigrants' houses, and bring about an absence of civil liberties.

When I visited Virginia — I did not get to tell my story earlier, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will do so now — I learned that the local police have been told to implement the immigration policy. Therefore, every time that the police stopped someone they checked whether that person was an illegal immigrant. Criminals there call immigrants "walking ATMs", because although they might be robbed, they will not go to the police. That is an example of a situation that was not thought out resulting in unintended consequences.

If someone were to ask what we have here to protect our borders, I would argue that, being an island, we have a fair chunk of water surrounding us. I understand that certain difficulties arise in Germany, France or any other place where there is a huge common border, but we are at an advantage. It is important that we are able to defend our country, our citizens and our economic interests. Of course, we all like to have some common pathways, but a system has already been worked out to facilitate that. Therefore, the Alliance Party motion presents the wrong solution — it is akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Common sense must prevail, and we must ensure the free passage of persons between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom by sorting out electronic tagging on passports, or whatever system is required, and that should be the end of the matter. The challenge that comes from Bulgaria, international terrorism or international drugs trafficking should not be underestimated, as recent events in Glasgow have demonstrated. Our country and our people cannot be denuded of a way in which to manage that exercise.

To adopt the Schengen Agreement, given all its associated problems, would result in a complete loss of civil liberties. We have got things right since 1950, and there is no reason to change now. I urge the House to reject both the SDLP amendment and the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I do not understand Mr McCrea's position, which is contradictory. The common travel area is a model for the Schengen Agreement. We can criticise how it operates, for example, but the agreement is all about providing freer travel for people in the European Union. If we believe in the European Union, it is sensible and appropriate for the House to support the motion. Of course, if we do not believe in the European Union, and that seems to be the Democratic Unionist Party's view —

Dr Farry: But it will take EU money.

Mr A Maginness: Yes, of course it will. *[Laughter.]* The DUP will fete President Barroso whenever he visits here, and it will accept his assistance and the support of his office, but it will not buy into the spirit, or the constitution, of the European Union. The same goes for Sinn Féin — I listened very carefully to Ms Anderson and Mr Alex Maskey's speeches, both of which were anti-European.

Of course — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr A Maginness: We repeatedly hear from Sinn Féin —

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I am going to run out of time.

We repeatedly hear Sinn Féin Members say that they are now converts to the European Union. However, they have opposed every expansion of the European Union, including the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon. They now oppose the Schengen Agreement. Is there any treaty of the European Union in recent years, or, indeed, in preceding years, that Sinn Féin has supported? I cannot understand how Sinn Féin Members can genuinely and sincerely claim to support the European Union while opposing all its substantive decisions.

At least the DUP is straightforward and honest in its opposition. I am unsure as to whether the Ulster Unionist Party is truly opposed to the European Union or whether it is simply Euro-sceptic in its views.

The SDLP does not disagree with the substance of the Alliance Party's motion, which is sensible and supportive of the Schengen Agreement. However, the emphasis that the motion places on that agreement's helping to maintain a common travel area between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland is something that we find difficult to accept.

The Schengen Agreement creates complications for the common travel area that have to be ironed out. Furthermore, the agreement has to be reconciled to the common travel area, which we cannot afford to lose. The top priority for people who live in Northern Ireland, Ireland or Britain is to preserve that common travel area. It would be disastrous, regressive and unhelpful to all of us if that were lost.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I want to finish.

The caution expressed about the Schengen Agreement by the British and Irish Governments is well founded, provided that their objective is to preserve the common travel area, which I believe is genuinely the case.

The SDLP has grave concerns about the establishment of an e-border. That is an issue that we all must take on board and examine critically and seriously in order to preserve the liberties of the people on these islands and throughout Europe.

In conclusion, I hope that Members support our sensible amendment to the motion.

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

Mr Neeson: We are prepared to accept the amendment, and I hope that the rest of the House does likewise.

Mr McNarry: That is the new coalition.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Assembly Research and Library Service for once again preparing the Members' information pack, which I found useful. I welcome the opportunity to speak about an important European issue. Bearing in mind the importance that Europe has on our everyday lives, the Assembly does not deal enough with European issues.

The UK and the Republic of Ireland are the only EU member states that have not signed up to the Schengen Agreement. To reinforce what Stephen Farry said earlier, the UK has opted out of the Schengen Agreement because of the opposition of Euro-sceptics. There are plenty of Euro-sceptics in the Chamber today.

Mr McNarry: Name them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Neeson: The Republic of Ireland was forced to follow suit in order to protect the common travel area.

4.30 pm

Although some Members disagreed with the motion, there was general agreement on the importance of the common travel area, and that it should be protected.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Neeson: If both countries signed up to the Schengen Agreement, that would provide greater security cover in these days of the threat of global terrorism. It would provide for hot-pursuit protocols, which would allow law enforcement personnel to cross into another jurisdiction, within prescribed limits, to pursue suspects. One only has to look at our recent history to recognise the advantages of such a system.

I thank Members for taking part in the debate, irrespective of whether they were in favour of the motion or were against it. It was no great surprise to see the DUP and Sinn Féin in agreement — although the Ulster Unionists were out to spoil the party today.

Alban Maginness, in his — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Neeson: Alban Maginness recognised that the Schengen Agreement is a sensible arrangement. He looked on it as an organic development among different European states. He said that the Schengen Agreement was progressive and good, but created problems for the common travel area.

It is no surprise that Simon Hamilton opposes the motion. He said that the UK policy towards the Schengen Agreement is a positive one — I do not understand that view. He also stated that the UK is a target for terrorism. By signing up to the Schengen Agreement, the fight against terrorism would be strengthened. Members who spoke in favour of the motion stressed the importance of strengthening the fight against global terrorism.

Simon Hamilton also referred to the possibility of ID cards being introduced. Some countries have issued ID cards, but they are not compulsory under the Schengen Agreement. I agree with his concerns about the creation of an e-border — that would create major difficulties for the citizens of both the UK and Ireland.

Alex Maskey's speech did not come as a surprise. We know that Sinn Féin is anti-Europe.

Mr A Maskey: I am curious to know what words I used to indicate that so-called anti-European stance in my last remarks. We could always refer to the Hansard report, but I am curious as to how you can interpret what I said as being anti-European.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should refer all of his remarks through the Chair. The Member is long enough in the tooth — and long enough in this Chamber — to know that all remarks should go through the Chair.

Mr A Maskey: My brother said that I am big and ugly enough, but I am sorry about that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Neeson: During the recent debate on the introduction of the Euro into the UK, Sinn Féin came out very strongly against the idea in a series of meetings. That underlines the entire approach of Sinn Féin to Europe.

Mr Alex Maskey also stated that he was worried about information gathering — I wonder why. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Neeson: Leslie Cree said that both countries were correct not to sign up fully to the Schengen Agreement, and he asked whether sovereignty would be undermined. Sovereignty is not at risk. It is clear that some Members today have misrepresented what the Schengen Agreement stands for. Moreover, Jim Shannon said that the Schengen Agreement would make illegal immigration easier. Once again, that shows that Mr Shannon does not understand fully what the Schengen Agreement is about.

Unsurprisingly, Martina Anderson expressed concerns about information gathering. Although she agrees with tackling international crime, will she take the same stance on tackling international terrorism? That is one of the main reasons why we tabled the motion. Basil McCrea in his usual inimitable —

Mr B McCrea: Style.

Mr Neeson: — style, stated that, basically, the Schengen Agreement was using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. He certainly knows plenty about nuts.

The issue is important in many ways. The main reasons for bringing the motion to the Assembly are to strengthen border controls, to strengthen the fight against global terrorism, to provide for easier movement across Europe, and to bring the UK and the Republic of Ireland into line with other EU countries.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main question put and negatived.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Interfaces in North Belfast

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for selecting interfaces in North Belfast as the Adjournment topic.

Mr McNarry: Will the Member give way? What I wish to say has nothing to do with the debate, but I am sure that she will find it worthwhile.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That sounds interesting; I will give way.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Member for giving way. I apologise on behalf of my colleague Mr Fred Cobain, who is a Member for North Belfast. Unfortunately, he is suffering from toothache and has had to go to the dentist. He sends his apologies to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the other representatives of North Belfast.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fair play. I was speaking to Fred about North Belfast at an event in the Long Gallery this morning. I am happy to accept his apologies, and I am glad that they have been recorded, because people will follow the debate. Scepticism has been expressed about the validity and effectiveness of some of the debates that have taken place in the House. This debate gives us an opportunity to be effective.

Violence is a legacy of the conflict, and is rooted in sectarianism. That is the case regardless of where or how the violence occurs, whether it is petrol-bombing or someone being beaten unconscious, and whether the damage is physical or emotional. We must make sectarianism history.

I will use the Adjournment debate to highlight some of the issues facing the people who live and work in interface areas in North Belfast. A small minority of people are intent on causing mayhem and destruction, but they do not reflect the vast majority of people in our community.

The courage of people who live and work in interface areas should be a constant source of inspiration. They challenge destructive behaviour and attempt to end violence in interface areas. Those brave people are from various backgrounds — republican, loyalist, nationalist,

unionist, protestant, dissenter — and some are paid activists. Together, they work all year round to reduce the potential for conflict in and around interface areas. The work of preventing riots, which sometimes involves physical intervention, is often undertaken in difficult and fraught circumstances. Incidentally, that rioting should not always be attributed to children and young people.

Irrespective of the political situation that we are experiencing now, we must confront that legacy. I urge political leaders in the Assembly, particularly those from North Belfast, to show support and to lead by example. I call for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to convene a forum — comprised of elected representatives, community activists, community leaders, residents' groups and statutory bodies — aimed at solving the all-year-round problems that are experienced in interface areas.

Projects designed to do that are ongoing, and many people are doing a lot of very good joined-up work. We, as elected representatives, need to do more of that work publicly, so that people can see what we are doing. We will, no doubt, hear about the cost of division, and about the walls and barriers that divide us, later in this debate. We must address sectarianism and historical neglect together.

The political and military conflict was black and white in many respects. There was clear recognition, across the board, of what was going on. However, the post-conflict era has been a grey area. The end of conflict has not yielded benefits and uplift for some people, particularly in North Belfast.

Unless we harness the opportunity collectively, we will not attract investment or encourage development, and the potential to regenerate our communities will have been lost. That would mean that people living in certain parts of our city, such as North Belfast, would be left behind.

Many people experience fear and mistrust. North Belfast is a patchwork of interface areas; each is a small and distinct community, often demarcated, some more obviously than others. Fear builds walls and creates territories. Trust and confidence will bring those walls down, and that is a goal that we must work towards, collectively. We must be brave and support those people who are afraid — standing still is not an option.

Interfaces are often situated in highly-deprived areas — that can impact on the health and general well-being of people living there. Many people live on their nerves, with fire extinguishers and buckets of water in their halls. That is not conducive to good health and well-being.

Anecdotal and factual evidence points to poor indicators of deprived areas, and that is well known. What are often overlooked by those indicators are the

experiences of the people who live at interfaces and the poor quality of life that families there face.

4.45 pm

I have mentioned the potential for regenerating our areas that might be missed. Some areas have been clearly neglected, and have lacked inward investment. Members are aware of health-related statistics, but economic development levels in those areas are equally poor.

Members present will understand that, often, families leave their homes because they feel that they have had enough — and their homes are left vacant. Due to the heavy demand for social housing in North Belfast, houses at interfaces are often allocated, and some people are so desperate to get a house that they are prepared to live there. In the past, the Housing Executive and housing associations have been unwise in their allocations: problem families, or families who were considered by other communities to have little community spirit, have often been housed at interfaces. I urge the Housing Executive and housing associations to be sympathetic to the needs of families when making allocations.

Children and young people have become involved in what has been described as recreational rioting at interfaces. A small number of the children organise riots over the Internet and through text messaging. That is shocking. We must do our best collectively to reduce the potential for conflict and to ensure, above all else, that our children and young people are safe and stay out of the criminal justice system.

I am sure that most Members have met with the groups that work with all sections of the community at interface areas. They also work with the conflict resolution projects. I will be shocked if at least one Member does not congratulate those groups for the work that they have done and are continuing to do. I call on Members, as political leaders, to meet those groups on a collective basis. Rather than our meeting them separately, the groups need to see us working together outside the confines of the Assembly. They need to see us as part of a strategy and a plan that can help to develop a programme of work in which we can all be involved.

Regardless of what Members say during the debate — and I assume that their remarks will be well intended — we need to go beyond the rhetoric. Good work is being done, but more needs to be done. The Assembly must lead by example.

It is imperative that we make progress beyond the small opportunity that exists before the chaos of the summer months kicks in. People who live and work in the New Lodge, Tigers Bay, Mount Vernon, Skegoneill, Ardoyne, Glenbryn, Ligoniel, Ballysillan, Rathcoole, Greencastle, and Carrick Hill — I am sure that I have left out some areas — need support.

We must ensure that funding for diversionary work, for example, is not agreed to, or granted, at the eleventh hour. Groups need to know from the earliest opportunity that their applications have been successful so that they can make plans to take children and young people out of problem areas and away from interfaces. Members can assist by making sure that groups know where they stand from the earliest opportunity.

We must also work towards resolving the issues that accompany the marching season. Together, Members must stand up and step forward for North Belfast. Most of the activities involved are organised through the community empowerment partnerships — most of which are in our areas. We must ensure that those activities and other projects are given a hand up — not a handout — and they must not be treated as if they are coming to us cap in hand.

It is almost May, and those groups are trying to prepare work for June and July. It would be beneficial to convene a meeting with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Department for Social Development, Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) and other funding bodies so that the groups can see where they stand and ensure that they will have the funds to make plans for their diversionary work.

I urge the people who live and work at the interfaces and those who are tired and burnt out — and who are, perhaps, cynical of what we do — to step forward. I also ask those who want to help us address the problems — but do not know how — and elected representatives and statutory bodies with responsibility, to step forward, because step forward we must.

I ask the junior Minister to consider the idea of setting up a working group or task force to address that perennial issue in our communities. Such a group could examine the potential for reducing or eradicating violence at interfaces. We must uplift and regenerate those communities and ensure that we do everything possible to address the legacy of the past. I ask Members for their support. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr McCausland: The issue of interfaces has particular relevance to North Belfast. As the previous contributor said when she referred to locations in the north of the city, there are more interfaces and peacelines in the constituency of North Belfast than in any other.

There are particular problems for those who live at interfaces — the police, politicians and people from other organisations go home in the evening, but those who live at interfaces suffer every day. Even if there have been no sectarian attacks or interface incidents for some time, people still live in constant fear that tonight might be the night.

Interface trouble covers a wide range of activities, from recreational rioting to more serious incidents. Twaddell Avenue has been targeted in the most sustained

and systematic way over the years. In fact, in recent days, there were attacks on Protestant homes there. However, such attacks have been ongoing for many years.

Records show that there have been several hundred attacks on homes in the Crumlin Road area. Clearly, there is a serious problem in that area and in many other areas. The problem is also reflected in the fact that there are still demands for peacelines to be erected in parts of North Belfast where new houses are being built. A peaceline was erected beside a school on the Whitewell Road, and a wall is being erected between new houses on a site near Somerdale Park and old houses near Twaddell Avenue. In fact, the wall may have been largely at the request of an SDLP member. We recognise that there is a problem.

There is a grey area between interface violence and antisocial behaviour. Those who participate in interface violence may also participate in antisocial behaviour. What is not interface violence at one point in the Waterworks may become interface violence at another point in the Waterworks.

We must also consider the issue of displacement. When people are displaced from an interface for engaging in antisocial behaviour or interface violence and they are moved elsewhere, quite often they take the violence with them. Therefore, interface violence should be examined in the broader context of antisocial behaviour, because, for the reasons that I have just given, there is a grey area of uncertainty. Interface violence at one point can become non-interface violence a short distance away, yet the same people may be involved.

Antisocial behaviour and interface violence, in particular, require a coherent, comprehensive approach. Too often, the approach is ad hoc and short term, and it generally involves just one agency. A coherent and comprehensive multi-agency approach is needed. Youth services and youth providers should certainly be involved in tackling this. It is deeply regrettable that the Minister of Education did not give greater priority to youth work in her budget. I point that out, not for any party political reason, but because it is a fact.

I sit on the Belfast Education and Library Board and on its youth committee. At the moment, we are trying to set a budget for this year. The initial budget that was put before us for one area that experiences significant levels of deprivation — namely the greater Ballysillan area — gave an allocation of just 66p for each young person. Some of the young people and youth workers stood outside the Belfast Education and Library Board offices with placards that said “66p – is that all I am worth?” However, in other areas of North Belfast, as much as £36 was allocated per young person for youth work.

We must be careful to ensure that there is an adequate and equitable allocation of youth funding across the city. We have managed to get an increase on

that 66p — the allocation is somewhat larger now — but only by redirecting an underspend in the budget for the Renewing Communities initiative. There was no change in the core budget.

We must put more carefully directed resources towards youth provision in the north of the city to ensure that there is equitable and adequate provision of youth services. This is not simply an issue of one community losing out. For example, in the Oldpark electoral area, the unionist community at Ballysillan was losing out and the nationalist community in Oldpark was doing rather well. However, there was also under-provision in the lower Whitewell Road, which is a nationalist area. This is not a simple issue, but we must find a much better way of allocating and directing youth resources.

Youth work has a role to play, because, if young people are left standing around on street corners with nothing to do, there is every possibility that they will be drawn into antisocial behaviour. Instances of such behaviour can be related in some way to the lack of provision of youth services. Antisocial behaviour hot spots tend to be in areas where there is inadequate youth provision. I am in no way trying to justify or excuse antisocial behaviour; I am simply stating a fact.

We must also acknowledge the police's role in dealing with the problem. The Police Service is experiencing manpower pressures, and it does not have the resources that it should have. Nevertheless, a better response is required from the police. I do not want to dwell on that issue today; it is better to take that matter up directly with the police.

Furthermore, parents have a responsibility. Those young people all have homes and parents, and those parents must take some sort of responsibility for their children. I have heard that comment made recently with regard to West Belfast, but it also applies to North Belfast.

My final point is only one sentence. The Planning Service should take a look at those interfaces and ensure that any new designs do not encourage or facilitate antisocial behaviour. We should commend those who are doing all that they can to prevent violence at interfaces, and whatever can be done to ensure that there is a comprehensive approach should be encouraged.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate Carál Ní Chuilín on securing this Adjournment debate.

She has done a valuable service in highlighting the problems of interfaces in North Belfast. I do not like the term “interface”, because it gives a cloak of respectability to naked division in society. In a way, it almost legitimises that division. I listened carefully to her constructive proposition for a forum for North Belfast that involves politicians and civic society. It is a worthwhile proposition that deserves consideration by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I give it my support.

5.00 pm

It is important to remember that, as politicians, we have a duty to lead all of the people of North Belfast; those who voted for us, against us or not at all. It is important that we give that leadership. The interface problems to which previous Members referred are not just violence and antisocial behaviour. Violence is simply a symptom of the divisions that exist in society. Politicians have a duty in the institution of the Assembly and its processes to give leadership and to end those divisions. Politically, we are different. However, to push those differences to the point of division is wrong. We must respect one another's differences, whether they are political, religious, social or otherwise, and not allow them to divide society.

North Belfast is clearly accepted to be the most divided part of the city, and, perhaps, of Northern Ireland. Sectarianism expresses itself most forcibly in the divisions that exist. As politicians, our duty is to counteract that and to create conditions in which all people can come together and build a shared society. We must make efforts to do that now. We must state that we are opposed to division and to its manifestations, particularly the peace walls and security barriers that are erected in North Belfast. Our task must be to remove them. Of course, it will not be easy and will take a long time. However, collectively, we must commit ourselves now to removing the physical barriers that are a manifestation of the political divisions that exist in North Belfast. We can turn it around from being a model of division and sectarianism to being a model of unity and reconciliation. That must be our aim as Assembly Members if the damage of division is to be repaired and its legacy of suffering alleviated.

There are simple tasks that we can undertake as politicians. For example, there are steel barriers in many streets in North Belfast that could be removed tomorrow. We can find creative ways to remove them and to create security for the people who live in those streets and areas. We need not have great chunks of walls pulled down, but can start by having the less profiled physical barriers that have afflicted society removed more easily. We can also encourage people to live together by sharing housing. That may be difficult to achieve. However, we must be brave, imaginative and courageous and encourage people to share living space. Although that may seem unimaginable at present, we must be creative if we are to give leadership.

It is important that we do that and that we set an example to the rest of the community, because that filters down. The more that the junior Ministers work together to create something better for all our people, the greater the impact that it will have. That is a very important lesson.

It is unfortunate that forces that are beyond our control sometimes act against the creation of a shared space. For example, the post office at Carlisle Circus serves both communities, yet it is under threat of closure from Post Office headquarters. We must have areas in which people meet one another and are able, in comfort and security, to share services. That is just one example of how officialdom is threatening what little shared space we have.

We also have the seasonal problem of sectarian clashes. It may be, as Mr McCausland said, that those clashes are simply examples of antisocial behaviour, or recreational rioting, as was pointed out by Ms Ní Chuilín. However, we must tackle that problem in an imaginative way, through youth work and good policing. People who use the Waterworks Park regularly tell me that antisocial activity is continuing there. What are the police doing about that? The police must be proactive in dealing with those types of problems before they get out of hand.

I agree with Nelson McCausland that we must adopt a multi-agency approach in dealing with those problems. However, in the past few months, a further barrier has been created in Old Throne Park, which divides our people. We should be working towards the removal of those barriers in order to advance the interests of all our people. There is nothing to lose by uniting people; there is everything to lose by dividing them. Therefore, I conclude by welcoming the positive proposals that have been put forward in the debate. It is important that we all work together in order to counteract divisions in North Belfast.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm a bheith anseo le cúpla rud a rá ar an ábhar seo.

I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for securing the debate. There are two Ministers from North Belfast in the Chamber, but I am speaking as an MLA because all politics is local. Jeffrey Donaldson will speak on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

It is worth beginning by saying that there have been several attacks in North Belfast in recent times. Whatever we say about the history of the area or what happened there in the past, there have been terrible attacks at Twaddell Avenue, and there was an incident in which a young man was beaten to within an inch of his life. It is important to put on record that all MLAs will condemn those attacks, no matter how they are described. It is clear that they were sectarian attacks, but whether any such attacks are sectarian or otherwise, they are entirely wrong. The same applies to racist attacks. We are in a new society, and we should take the opportunity to say that, although society is changing and North Belfast has the highest numbers of immigrants in the city, the

people who are joining our society must know that we want to protect them as well.

It might have been Nelson McCausland — I am not sure — who said that MLAs are there to represent everyone. Whether something happens in Ardoyne, in Twaddell Avenue or in Whitewell, MLAs' offices are open to all. MLAs' display today of similar attitudes in the Chamber in itself sends a message.

North Belfast is a small constituency. It is a series of satellites, and earlier it was described as a patchwork quilt. The suffering that people on all sides there endure has been ongoing for generations, not just in the immediate past. There is political and sectarian violence, multi-deprivation that involves housing shortages and bad housing stock, poverty, and low educational attainment. It is fair to say that in proportion to any other constituency, North Belfast has suffered more for over 30 years. Four wards in the constituency are in the top 20% of deprived wards, and the area has taken more than its fair share of casualties over those years.

Nevertheless, in common with other MLAs, I praise the area's community workers. Now and again we hear headlines about incidents such as the petrol bomb that was thrown or the young man who was recently beaten, but in fact, people have been working in the community for as long as I can remember — perhaps 15 or 20 years — and they still go out almost every night. It is only because of such people's work that there are not headlines every night of the week. Their work involves not just standing around interfaces; it consists of rapping doors to talk to parents about matters such as whether rioting is recreational, or having a dialogue with young people in an attempt to understand their motivations. Community workers have been successful with such activities. Therefore, although people still face attacks and we can by no means feel complacent, it is worth pointing out that, year on year, things have improved. It is also important to highlight that such work is labour-intensive and carries on throughout the year. Those community workers should therefore be praised.

The people who suffered should also be mentioned. Someone said earlier that one must picture interface areas. Interfaces are situated in specific streets, and although the people who live there experience pressure 24 hours a day, people who live two streets away are able to go back to bed. That is how concentrated the problem is. Unfortunately, in North Belfast, because of the number of what are euphemistically called "peace walls", such problems affect many streets.

I also praise the work that goes on between communities. North Belfast has a reputation for divisiveness, but in fact, there is inter-community contact, and talks are ongoing and have been for a long time.

We are in a new dispensation; the institutions are up and running, and they have local representation. It is fair to say that most people want progress, and, if people want a scientific gauge, that has been proved at elections. However, what do those people demand from us? They demand that not only must we set up institutions, introduce legislation and supply funding, but that those measures form part of a strategy and make a difference.

Such measures must be strategic and multi-departmental. Several community empowerment partnerships have been established — and junior Minister Donaldson will talk about that later — including the North Belfast Community Action Unit and the CEPs. Indeed, the interdepartmental good relations panel met a couple of days ago to discuss North Belfast, which illustrates that it is able to hone in on particular areas and not just take an overview.

Members spoke about leadership, which is the key issue for MLAs. There are many demands on Members, but the key demand is that we lead by example and display leadership. That means that we must discuss relevant matters — there must be genuine dialogue that makes a difference, and we must ensure that, when possible, we are singing from the same hymn sheet. People are watching us, and they know that if we adopt attitudes that exclude other political opinions, we cannot blame people on the ground for taking similar attitudes. Whenever there are talks, they must be genuine and involve targets and strategies that are designed for perhaps 10 or 20 years.

People tell Members about funding that does not come on time or that comes at the last minute. If we are serious about moving the process forward, we should be thinking five, 10, 15 or 20 years ahead. There are issues that still need to be resolved — I do not need to go through them here. However, at the heart of the matter is the need for dialogue. The problems will not be solved simply by my speaking to Nelson McCausland, Alban, Nigel Dodds or Carál, although that is part of the solution. Dialogue must be encouraged in all areas and at all levels.

Alban spoke about peace walls, and I want to make some remarks about them. Peace walls are a symptom, so it is the causes that should be dealt with; if they are, peace walls will not be a problem.

Recently, a respect week was organised in North Belfast to deal with the causes of our problems. When dealing with almost any group, whether older people, young people, disabled people or ethnic minorities, all of them will use the same word: respect. If there is respect, everything can be resolved. That also goes for north Belfast and for the respect due to the different sections of our community. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and to those responsible for securing

it. I also appreciate the fact that the junior Minister from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister is here to respond. Those of us who represent North Belfast — most of us are here, as we usually are when such matters are being discussed — have raised matters that are vital to the future of the people of North Belfast.

5.15 pm

I want to join with others in paying tribute to those who do great work, day in, day out, not just in the summer but all year round. Yesterday evening, I attended a meeting at which I was told about the work that is going on, even over the last week, much of which is unsung. Unfortunately, it involved people distributing fire extinguishers and fire-protection blankets to residents in Twaddell Avenue. The attacks there last Monday and over the weekend were adverted to, and we all absolutely deplore them. The people in Twaddell Avenue have suffered terribly from attacks over the years; they are not alone in that, but they have borne a disproportionate number of attacks.

Even as we speak, a meeting is taking place with the police and local representatives to deal with the issue. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can at community, political and security level to bring those attacks to an end. The priority for people living on interfaces — no matter what side they are on — is security. Youth provision, education and housing are vital, but more important than everything else is security. People want to feel that they can live without the threat of a petrol bomb or a stone coming through their window and without the fear that their kids will be attacked. That is why I welcome the developments on peace walls that the last Member spoke about.

None of us wants more walls to be built in north Belfast or anywhere else, but we recognise them as a reality. Things take time, and we can only move at the pace with which communities in those areas are comfortable. Alban Maginness referred to a security fence recently built in the Whitewell area. Of course such developments are regrettable, but we must remember that they stem from the demand of local people. Local people persuaded the Northern Ireland Office Minister — not a person given lightly to spending money on such things — and they made representations across the board. They wanted protection, and that must be recognised.

When I hear proposals — some of which are PR related and others part of a political agenda — to mark the anniversary of the Belfast Agreement by tearing down peace walls, I remind people that we must move at a pace that the people who live in those areas are comfortable with. First and foremost, those people demand protection and security. It is incumbent on all of us to try to achieve conditions in which people start

to feel sufficiently comfortable, safe and secure so that the peace walls can come down. However, that should not be imposed on them, and I will fight for their right to have the protection that they feel they need, within reason. Although the provision of CCTV and other physical elements of security have helped to lower the frequency of attacks in interface areas, we must acknowledge that such protection often cannot be provided in other ways.

As well as Twaddell Avenue, there has been ongoing trouble on the Limestone Road in recent days. Trouble at interfaces does not have as high a profile as it used to, and it is on the news less. We welcome the reduction of tension and trouble on the streets, compared to a few years ago. However, there are still major problems for people living along the interfaces in North Belfast, and we must be conscious of that.

I agree that there should be a multi-agency, co-ordinated and strategic approach to interfaces in North Belfast, and we must think carefully about how to make progress. Although there is considerable merit in that approach, we must recognise that there are differences between the White City and Whitewell Road areas, and the Twaddell Avenue, Limestone Road, Alliance Avenue and Glenbryn areas. I join those who condemned the appalling attack on the young man in the Alliance Avenue area the other night. Although we can put in place overarching strategies and plans involving politicians and officials, we must recognise that there are different dynamics at work in different areas and that things will play out differently in different areas. Therefore, local communities must to be involved closely in those strategies.

A couple of years ago, the Renewing Communities initiative was established by the Government to address the lack of community capacity, particularly in Protestant areas. That issue was recognised by DSD a while ago, and it is still an issue that is recognised by Government and needs to be addressed.

Some of the funding from the Renewing Communities initiative is leading to excellent work — it is helping considerably in education and community issues. However, the Minister and his Executive colleagues should examine how to bring some of those programmes and projects into the mainstream. That would ensure that the good work that has been started — with people becoming more involved and taking on greater responsibility for their community — can continue, instead of programmes that have been started being left high and dry. That message was emphasised during a meeting that I had with school principals in North Belfast, when I was told about the extra help in teaching provision that the initiative had provided, and the noticeable difference in the kids that attended those schools. That should be built on. There is a range of

issues that we could talk about, but I wanted to make that point in particular.

It is timely that the House has revisited the issue of interfaces in North Belfast because it is evident from the general thrust of the remarks in the Chamber that, although the situation is better, people living along the interfaces still face many difficulties, even if they are not under physical attack. There are many other issues that, when combined, mean that the quality of life in interface areas is worse than in other areas.

If the Assembly, the Executive and politicians are to mean anything, we must ensure that all of our people experience the benefits of the political process. Although I am not speaking in my ministerial capacity, I say that as one of the Ministers responsible for jobs and investment. We all want to see investment in our communities, but we must ensure that that happens. If it does not, we are storing up trouble for the future.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I congratulate the Member for North Belfast Ms Ní Chuilín on securing the Adjournment debate, and I thank colleagues who represent North Belfast, from both sides of the House, who have spoken in the debate.

The issue of interfaces is a serious business, and I know that we are all united in our support for the continuing work to tackle the difficult issues in that part of Belfast. I acknowledge the important points that Members made.

The debate revolves around a number of key issues: safety, and how that is best achieved; relationships, and how trust can be enabled to develop; opportunity, and how our improving economy benefits everyone; and support, and how we facilitate rather than complicate the good work that people are already doing, and to which Members have referred.

In every society, how people live together is a major challenge, for Governments as well as for individuals. In a society that is moving out of conflict, that challenge is all the greater. We recognise that North Belfast has experienced great trauma over the years.

Dr Johnston McMaster has said that fear is a block on the road to peace. It was fear that contributed significantly to separating communities and to the building of the physical barriers of separation and segregation. The existence of those walls and barriers created a greater sense of safety and security. We must also recognise that many people in that area still value their presence. People find it difficult to envisage life without the barriers and walls, and there are still those who would fear for their safety were the barriers removed.

It is unfortunate that the walls have become a stop-off point on the growing tourist trail. With all due deference to my colleague who is responsible for tourism, I am

sure that he would agree that that is not for what the people of North Belfast want their area to be best known. There is much talk about taking down the barriers, but, as Mr Dodds said, the reasons for their need must first be addressed. Furthermore, we must ensure that the need for such barriers does not arise again.

Some key principles must be developed and applied. First, nothing is done by statutory bodies without the involvement and engagement of local people and communities. Initiatives that originate in communities are the most effective. Secondly, genuine safety concerns must be tackled. We will develop transparent guidelines and criteria that inform communities and agencies when the time is right to remove a barrier. Thirdly, our aspirations should be to see a Belfast without barriers, both physical and psychological.

The creation of safe, shared spaces requires sensitive and practical planning. Safety is best secured by people and relationships. Several Members referred to the taking-down of the peace walls. As the Member for North Belfast Mr Dodds rightly said, it is not about choosing some arbitrary date or anniversary on which to do so but about creating the right conditions in which the walls can come down at the right time. I understand that the Northern Ireland Office is involved in an interdepartmental, inter-agency group, convened by the Community Relations Council, to review issues surrounding the peace walls. Consideration includes developing criteria to consider requests for new barriers or walls, and indicators to help in assessments that relate to their removal.

Walls are man-made structures. We are responsible for their existence, so we must take responsibility, in time, for their renewal — sorry, their removal. *[Laughter.]* Well, we may have to do them up on the odd occasion.

The Member for North Belfast Ms Ní Chuilín mentioned the need to develop indicators. We already have a set of indicators to measure the impact of our policies, and we intend to develop those to have information that is relevant at a local, neighbourhood level. She also mentioned social housing: the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development are involved in a number of regeneration projects in North Belfast. The Member will be aware of some of those projects.

We recognise that developing good social housing — and the regeneration of local communities — is essential to increasing and improving the well-being of those communities.

5.30 pm

As I said, safety is best secured by people and relationships. The Programme for Government commits us to continue our efforts to address divisions in our society. The people of North Belfast know better than we do about how they need to work together to build

and mature the relationships that will secure the peaceful and prosperous society that they want for their children's futures. There are many encouraging stories — for example, the New Lodge and Mount Vernon communities' joint event during the respect week in March and the developing greater Greencastle relationship involving communities from Greencastle, Rathcoole and the White City. In 2007, a cross-community campaign took place to discourage young people from involvement in what has been described as "recreational rioting".

That is not the tea-and-buns work that many people perceive community relations to be; it is hard, challenging and long-term work. It needs ordinary people showing real courage, and North Belfast has that in abundance. There are people in North Belfast who are well down the road of helping communities to move forward. Members of this House owe it to those people to recognise their efforts and to continue to put our shoulders to the wheel and accept the value of the work that they do.

The Member for North Belfast Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned the possibility of OFMDFM forming a group to focus specifically on North Belfast. In 2002, the north Belfast community action unit was established to tackle the problems facing communities there. The unit aims to address interface issues and to work to build trust between communities. It continues to work with the interface working group and is facilitating the group in developing an application to the International Fund to help take forward the key recommendations that are contained in the action plan. However, we will consider the points that the Member has made, and we are looking to develop a more cohesive, inter-agency approach with regard to North Belfast.

In recent years, we have enjoyed a succession of peaceful summers. Although that must not be taken for granted, that is evidence of the value, impact and importance of building relationships on the ground, for which we have a responsibility. The Member for North Belfast Mr Maginness referred to the need for people to work together. Recently, junior Minister Kelly and I have attended a number of events where the theme of good relations and working together was at the heart of discussions. Last week, we attended the good relations panel, which is chaired by Sir Nigel Hamilton, and yesterday we attended a meeting to consider how to tackle issues specifically in North Belfast. We recognise the need to work together at departmental level and to create a more cohesive approach across Government that will ensure delivery for the people of North Belfast.

The Programme for Government pledges to bring forward a programme of cohesion. Detailed proposals for that programme are at an advanced stage. Integration for a shared and better future, which is also signalled in the Programme for Government, is at the heart of what we are trying to do in North Belfast and in other areas.

I welcome the points that were made by the honourable Members for North Belfast Mr Dodds and Mr McCausland. I welcome the contribution that they have made, particularly in the unionist community, to helping build community confidence, creating the infrastructure and empowering those communities to move forward and reach out across the community divide to engage with other sections of the community in order to build a more stable and peaceful society in North Belfast. I recognise the contribution of all colleagues in that regard.

Mr McCausland mentioned the important area of youth provision. We must ensure that funding of youth provision in North Belfast is equitable across the board. As the Member said, it is clear that that is not currently happening.

OFMDFM is delivering important funding for projects to promote good relations in several areas in North Belfast. Our work on a shared and better future will be based on building strong confidence in the community, urging respect for difference, promoting shared interests and tackling the difficult issues. Although the work is highly demanding, and not only is it achievable but the process has begun.

I thank the honourable Member for tabling today's useful Adjournment topic, and I thank those Members who contributed. Above all, I hope that the debate helps the people of North Belfast.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

2 April 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Declan O'Loan
Ms Dawn Purvis

Witnesses:

Mr Declan Allison	} Friends of the Earth
Dr Ian Humphreys	} Conservation Volunteers
Ms Eithne McNulty	} Trócaire
Mr Brian Scott	} Oxfam Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): I welcome the representatives from the Climate Change Coalition to the meeting. If you make your presentation, members will ask follow-up questions.

Ms Eithne McNulty (Trócaire): Thank you very much for receiving us; it is a pleasure to be here. We have a short presentation that will take no more than 10 minutes, and then we will have a discussion with you, which will probably be the richer part of the meeting.

The Climate Change Coalition for Northern Ireland comprises a wide range of environment and development groups who all wish to see Northern Ireland play its full role in combating global climate change. The coalition claims that, without urgent action, climate change is likely to devastate life on earth as we know it. That is a very powerful statement, but that is exactly how it is. Importantly, the world's

poorest and most vulnerable are, and will continue to be, affected most. In fact, it is those who have offended least — those in the developing world — who will be punished most.

Species and habitats are also at risk. Northern Ireland will not escape negative impacts, and we must think about that when planning for the future. High-emitting countries must reduce their emissions. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are among the high-emitting countries, and the onus is on us to reduce emissions. Additionally, there are strong moral, economic, social and environmental imperatives for Northern Ireland to bear its fair share of global energy cuts. We would welcome a discussion on the finer points.

We ask the Northern Ireland Assembly to support the international negotiations for global warming to peak at no more than 2° C above pre-industrial levels. We ask that the Assembly set an annual Northern Ireland carbon budget to enable an immediate and sustained decline in Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by an average of at least 3% per annum. The two figures of 2% and 3% are important for us. In particular, we ask that we assist the poorest countries to adapt to the unavoidable effects of climate change and that biodiversity options be considered.

Dr Ian Humphreys (Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland): We would like a Northern Ireland climate Bill to set legally binding carbon dioxide reduction targets and a target of at least an 80% reduction on 1990 carbon dioxide levels by 2050. Scientists say that to remain below the 2°C threshold, global emissions of greenhouse gases will have to be reduced by at least 60% from 1990 levels by 2050. Our historic contributions impose a moral obligation on us to reduce our emissions further than that, because other countries will be unable to reduce their emissions by the same percentage. For those on the threshold of what can sustain life, cutting by even a little would be to fall below the level of survival. It is only appropriate that we take a slightly larger cut — take our fair share.

We also want aviation and shipping emissions to be included in such a Bill, as they comprise a significant and growing component of our emissions and must be taken into account. To achieve the reductions that we have discussed, a reduction of 3% per annum is necessary. The action plan is for a five-year carbon budget so that we can measure progress towards the agreed targets.

Not only do we want the emissions reduction achieved in Northern Ireland to be measured, we also want to ensure that the reductions are made in Northern Ireland. We do not want to reduce our emissions by buying in through trading emissions schemes, such as the clean development mechanism.

The moral argument would be that our emissions reduction should take place in Northern Ireland. There would be a financial incentive in that money invested in Northern Ireland to make reductions and to improve efficiencies and how people live will achieve a sustainable reduction; on the other hand if we buy in reductions by trading carbon budgets, the money leaves Northern Ireland and provides us with no benefits in the long run. The moral argument has also been put forward by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, which said that overseas credits should be purchased only as a last resort.

We want annual progress reports to be made to the Assembly from the Committee on Climate Change. The issue could be made public, which would enable the public and the environmental and development charity sector to express their views. It would also enable you, as elected representatives, to monitor progress in Northern Ireland.

A climate change Act would allow a judicial review if targets were not met. I hope that we would not have to go down that road, but it should be embedded in legislation.

The Executive should be obliged to respond to the reports of the Committee on Climate Change, which would enable the Assembly and a public scrutiny Committee to monitor performance. The public, elected politicians, the Committee on Climate Change and, ultimately, the courts all have roles and responsibilities in ensuring that targets in Northern Ireland are met.

Mr Brian Scott (Oxfam Ireland): My colleagues have laid out our shopping list. I will focus on the behaviour of our Government and in particular the Strategic Investment Board, which recently announced a £16 billion infrastructure-development programme. For the first three years, a mere £8.3 million of that £16 billion is devoted to measures relating to climate change, carbon reduction and energy efficiency. That is simply unacceptable. The Strategic Investment Board's documents and plans ignore the issue, which is a missed opportunity.

We are particularly concerned at the imbalance in the amount of money being spent on encouraging and stimulating private transport. Of course, our roads need to be improved, but minimal attention is being paid to public transport. There is a stark contrast between what Dublin and Belfast spend on public transport. For example, Dublin has the Luas, the Dublin Area Rapid Transport (DART) system, new plans for underground connections and so on; all Belfast seems to have is a few bus lanes and a bus-replacement programme. That is unacceptable.

We are also interested in Government procurement, particularly Fairtrade and ethical procurement, and we

are pleased with the progress in that area. The Central Procurement Directorate issued a guidance note in March 2006; we want a report on the progress of those recommendations. Is Fairtrade procurement increasing throughout Government apparatus? Are statistics available? Is it being measured? If not, can we discuss with the Committee a procedure by which the above could be done? We are pleased with the exhortations and guidance notes, but what we require is action.

Mr Declan Allison (Friends of the Earth): I will talk a bit more about the roles of DFP and this Committee. An area in which the Department could have significant influence on carbon emissions is buildings, particularly building regulations. There is a zero-carbon homes scheme — the eco-homes scheme, which Committee members are probably aware of — the aim of which is to have all new builds rated at zero carbon by 2016, with a phased-in increase in energy efficiency until that time.

The materials and techniques for achieving zero-carbon homes already exist; therefore it could be done now or in the near future. Northern Ireland could leapfrog ahead of the rest of the UK without waiting for the phased timetable. We should be building on our strong construction industry to position Northern Ireland as an exemplar in low-carbon development.

We were disappointed that the Minister of Finance and Personnel overturned Peter Hain's decision on the mandatory use of renewable energy in new builds, as it has left about 160 businesses and several hundred trained installers in limbo. In effect, the Minister has torn up their business plans. It is a regressive step, and we want that requirement to be reintroduced into building regulations.

A 20-year programme to improve the energy efficiency of our housing stock by about 5% would create long-term quality jobs, improve the well-being of the people who live in those houses and make a significant contribution to reducing carbon emissions.

Grants from the environment and renewable energy fund should be reintroduced. Although the Reconnect programme is not directly the Department's responsibility, it would release the funds for it and in that sense it has a financial responsibility.

An innovative scheme could be introduced to examine the energy efficiency of homes and apply a banded rates system, based on eco-homes standards, whereby a much reduced rate would be applied to the most energy-efficient homes. However, there would probably also have to be some upfront grants, because installing insulation and bringing homes up to high levels of energy efficiency is expensive and an incentive to homeowners to carry out the required improvements would be necessary. Furthermore, it would be perverse if, having improved the energy

efficiency and watched the value of their homes increase, homeowners would have to pay higher rates.

The coalition would like the achievement of zero carbon emissions by the 2015 target to be extended to the entire Government estate and not just to the Civil Service estate; that would include hospitals and Government agencies. A development plan should be drawn up with the aim of meeting the 2015 target; otherwise, the target will exist in limbo, and it will probably be filed away as a good intention that never came to fruition.

In summary, we want support for a Northern Ireland climate change Bill and, at this stage, we particularly want MLAs to sign the no-day-named motion calling for the Bill, which has just been tabled by the Business Office. That would deal not only with Northern Ireland's carbon emissions, although that would form a central part of it, but would also improve technology transfer and development aid. Leading by example would place a moral obligation on the rest of the world, particularly on developing countries.

There should be increased investment in renewable energy schemes to enable people to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. We also want to see a move towards sustainable procurement; improved building regulations to include renewable energy; increased support for renewable energy; a banded rates system to incentivise people to improve the energy efficiency of their homes; and an action plan for the Government estate to achieve zero carbon emissions. That is all I have to say for now, and we will answer any questions from members as best we can.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your wide-ranging presentation, although some of the points that it raised may fall outside the direct remit of the Committee; our function is to scrutinise the Department, so our focus will be on its role and its contribution to the broad agenda. Nevertheless, I thank you for drawing attention to the actions that the Department can take and how the Committee can get involved.

Dr Farry: Thank you for your presentation. I support the principle of a climate change Bill. However, in line with the Chairperson's direction, I will try to stick to questions about finance and economic policy. This is a huge subject, and I appreciate that our time is limited. I hope that this discussion will form part of an ongoing dialogue.

My questions merge into one another. You have given your view on the investment strategy, but perhaps you could give us your view on the impact of the Budget on climate change, which would be more in line with the responsibilities of the Committee. I am interested in how we can shift public perceptions. The Budget focused on economic development, which was welcome; however, economic development and

the protection of the environment are often seen as being competing objectives. The question is how to convince the public that both those objectives are complementary and that they should be merged. What is your reaction to the Stern Review? I understand that although it has been welcomed in some quarters, there are people on both sides of the debate who have questioned it.

There is a significant debate in Northern Ireland about how to produce energy in future, which parallels what is happening in Britain. There is a great deal of scepticism about the ability of renewable energy sources to deliver sufficient energy capacity. Much of that debate has focused on future projections using available technology. How can we introduce reliable estimates into that debate about how technology will improve over the coming years if investment is made in it? There have been huge changes in computing technology over the past 20 years.

The Committee has examined congestion charges. What are your views on congestion charges in our inner-city areas and the broader issue of road pricing? I am conscious of the point that you made about the public-private split in transport funding.

Those are very broad questions. It will probably take you two hours to answer them.

Mr Scott: We do not believe that the Budget has caused a clash of ideas. In fact, economic growth can provide the technological solutions that we require as well as helping to reduce carbon emissions and construct sensible buildings that do not emit carbon and which are built and maintained in a way that does not consume so much carbon dioxide.

As one of my colleagues said, we need visionary leadership not just in setting an example to other parts of the UK and the rest of Europe and the world, but also to take economic advantage of the opportunities that are presented. I would like to make a prediction that by 2050, we in Northern Ireland and on the rest of this island — and, presumably, the Scottish islands as well — will be net exporters of electricity to land-locked Europe. We have enormous tidal power resources. Wind power is the flavour of the month — only yesterday, the first commercial tidal turbine pilot was installed in Strangford Lough — but the real opportunity lies in the North Channel between here and south-west Scotland, which has enormous potential.

From my experience of fish farming in that area, I know that there is a constantly running three-knot tide that could produce prodigious quantities of energy. Adequate research and development has not been put into that. Twenty-five years ago, Queen's University developed some of that technology, and it has been lying largely unused ever since. We have the

engineering capacities and the energy resource, and we should use them.

There is no conflict between economic growth and reducing carbon dioxide emissions. The Budget could allow us to make significant strategic economic growth as well take advantage of renewable energy schemes — and that does not simply mean windmills.

I am in favour of congestion charges in the short term; however, we ought to be working towards abolishing congestion. We ought to be planning our public transport systems to replace the systems that existed in our cities and countryside more than 100 years ago. That provides significant opportunities, as local companies are involved in public transportation. The Wright Group is one of the leading producers of buses in the UK. In addition, economic opportunities exist to develop our public transport.

Mr Allison: You mentioned a perceived conflict between economic development and the environment. The solution to that is sustainable development. One of the greatest failings of the Programme for Government and the Budget is that the phrase “sustainable development” only occurs with the word “economic” inserted between those two words. It does not occur in its own right, and there is no understanding of sustainable development and the opportunities that it offers.

We are moving towards a carbon-constrained future with very high fuel prices. Oil has already topped \$100 a barrel; it is predicted to top \$200 a barrel by the end of the year. We simply cannot continue with our oil-dependant lifestyles. We must invest in renewable energy and energy efficiency, which is where we can make the greatest gains. It is regrettable that the Budget does not tackle that issue.

Dr Humphreys: You asked how we could shift public perception. Many people do not see it as a question of the environment versus the economy; that may be a perception of elected representatives rather than the public. People could be incentivised to make small shifts in how they run their houses; they may find that they have an extra £10 per month in their pockets to pay for the increased oil prices, for example. It would incentivise people if they saw the Government doing the same by investing in renewables or technologies that will not come online for a long time. People could trust that that would work in the way that the Government intend.

Ms McNulty: Education and awareness-raising can play a role in shifting public perceptions. There is still a perception that there will be new fossil fuels finds and that the Arctic will provide the solution. However, even if gas and oil were found at the Arctic, worldwide resources would still diminish. Fossil fuels are not the future; a reliance on coal mining is not an option. Renew-

able energy —the wind energy that Brian mentioned — is a message that the public needs access to.

Mr Beggs: Thank you very much for your presentation and useful discussion; it is a theme that the Assembly must develop.

You mentioned the need for mandatory measures and for providing incentives; however, I am unclear about where you think each is appropriate. Have you costed your proposals for improving the housing stock? Judgements must be made: should we build more social houses or fewer but of higher quality? Costings for building improved housing stock and for operating that which already exists would be useful if they are available.

I turn to renewable energy. I am surprised to learn that there has been no discussion between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about the end of the Reconnect scheme and the changes to building regulations. Both will affect the sector at the same time; therefore I am sympathetic to continuing incentives to encourage the use of renewable energy.

You have criticised the Department for removing the mandatory nature of microgeneration. Do you not accept that it would be more environmentally friendly to have higher standards of insulation to avoid the need to generate energy in the first place? You seem to have missed that point. The Department said that there have been significant improvements in the new building regulations and that it plans to upgrade standards in 2011 and again a few years later. Do you not accept that it can be better for the environment to use high-quality insulation and reduce the need for the generation of any form of heat?

Mr Allison: You are absolutely right: the greatest gains can be made from energy efficiency. That produces the biggest bang for your bucks in reducing carbon emissions. However, it does not have to be either/or; we can improve energy efficiency and have high levels of renewable energy as well. It need not be very complex renewable energy; it could be the provision of a water solar panel for every home. That would be simple to achieve and not particularly expensive.

The difficulty with removing mandatory renewable energy targets is that businesses were geared up to expect mandatory targets to be in place and had based their business plans on them. Now it has been scrapped and those businesses are in limbo.

That presents major difficulties. The Finance Minister has left all those businesses with no future.

Dr Humphreys: I have no figures on the percentage of houses that have insulation to the necessary level or which have fitted low-energy light bulbs or which have made other simple changes. However, I agree that

those are the first steps: they are the quickest gains or the lowest-hanging fruit. As Declan says, people will still need to heat water and will still have to burn electricity for other things. For that we still need to look to renewables: insulating and other measures will not help with that.

Mr Beggs: Do you not accept that until you produce costs you cannot make a coherent argument?

Mr Allison: We can send you a report by the Renewables Advisory Board. It is estimated that £6,000 is needed on average to bring a home up to standard; that would produce an annual saving of £725 per home. The £6,000 would be paid off in less than 10 years.

The Chairperson: Does the coalition intend to make a submission on the proposed building regulations, which are out to public consultation as a part of the Committee Stage? The consultation ends on 16 April. The case has to be made by as many of the interested parties as possible.

Dr Humphreys: There will be a submission, delivered by first-class post.

Ms J McCann: Thank you for your interesting presentation. Most people agree that Governments have a social and moral obligation to the poorest and most vulnerable Third World countries.

I have spoken to locally based renewable energy organisations about the Reconnect grant scheme, which would encourage people to take energy-saving measures to make their homes more environmentally friendly. Many people in my constituency of West Belfast could not afford to take those measures unless such grants were available.

An additional benefit of the Reconnect grant scheme is that it would employ local people and local businesses. We are keen to have that scheme reintroduced.

The Reconnect grant and the building regulations are the two best ways of making a difference. They would constitute the action that you want, over and above a mere Government acknowledgment of their responsibility.

What can individual MLAs do for groups such as yours? How can we progress your objectives? Is the best way forward for the Reconnect grant scheme and emissions criteria included in building regulations to be put back on the agenda?

Dr Humphreys: Our main request is for a Northern Ireland climate bill; we want MLAs to support such a Bill if it comes before the Assembly.

If a climate Bill were enshrined in legislation, it would drive the other relevant issues, probably making your job easier. If there were legislation, plans to incentivise people — such as bringing back the

Reconnect scheme or furthering building regulations — would fall into place. We all learn by example. Legislation would drive everything else, and help from MLAs would help that process.

I support the measures that you referred to; both are worthwhile, and investment in them would be recouped very quickly.

Ms McNulty: I thank Jennifer for mentioning the Developing World in relation to climate change.

We have taken particular care to address the Committee on the areas in which it has competence. However, if we think only within that restriction, our progress will be limited.

Northern Ireland is part of a globalised world, and the poor in the Developing World are already affected by climate change.

There are three reasons why the poor suffer most from climate change. First, they have experienced floods and droughts to a much greater extent than we have; secondly, those who are already poor are extremely vulnerable when faced with additional crises, such as climate change; thirdly, they rely heavily on rain-fed agriculture, and rain is either not coming at all, coming too late, coming out of season, or coming in deluge.

I appreciate that the Committee is restricted to approaching the subject within its own competencies; however, morally and ethically, we have a responsibility to think more broadly. A climate change Bill for Northern Ireland is imperative not only for our society but also for the Developing World.

Mr Scott: The reference to Fairtrade promotion may seem tangential to the issue of renewable energy, but it relates directly to what Eithne said. It is also directly within the Committee's remit — how the Northern Ireland Government spend their billions of pounds a year. Will they spend their budget to aid poverty relief and assist people overseas to cope with the effects of climate change?

Climate change is already happening and is affecting the poor and vulnerable.

By going out of our way to buy Fairtrade and to procure goods ethically we can make an important contribution to the global picture. The Climate Change Coalition is made up largely of environmental organisations and bodies such as Oxfam Ireland and Trócaire. The Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA) in Northern Ireland comprises 20 organisations devoted to the eradication of global poverty. We care so much about what we are doing about climate change locally because we know from our work overseas the effect that climate change is already having on vulnerable populations in Bangladesh and in east, central and southern Africa.

Buying Fairtrade products — a simple, easy measure in the remit of the Committee — can benefit people in the Developing World.

The Chairperson: The message could hardly be clearer; we hear it. The slogan about thinking globally and acting locally comes to mind. Declan, regarding the strategic investment strategy and the distinction between sustainable economic development and sustainable development, it might be worthwhile supplying the Committee with a critique of the investment strategy to inform the discussion and help the Committee to examine it and to return to basic principles. The Committee would like to have as much information as possible so that we can make the most effective response within our limitations.

Mr Allison: I am sure that we can produce a detailed critique.

The Chairperson: That can be part of an ongoing relationship. You will find that people are ready to support the broad principles and can benefit from direct advice about how we can apply ourselves.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you for your presentation, most of which I strongly support. I have one question about housing stock. Progress was made recently on the building regulations for new houses and extensions; however, we have a major problem with the existing housing stock. Even in recently built houses the standards are very low. What would be the best way to tackle that problem? You referred to the Reconnect scheme. It is very easy to achieve great improvements in energy efficiency through the insulation and efficiency of heating systems and the paybacks are rapid, so there are many incentives for owners to act. How can we encourage people to do that cost-effectively? If the best way to proceed were pointed out to people, many would do it for themselves. If we were to put money into free surveys of houses with a set of recommendations for owners, as well as education and marketing about climate change, would that be a significant way forward?

Dr Humphreys: I doubt that a survey would affect many people, even if they were told that they could save on their bills. Some organisations — Bryson House, for example — already offer energy audits and tell people how to save on their bills. However, there is a certain inertia. People are reluctant to change, or their bills may be paid by direct debit, and so they do not improve their houses even though doing so could save them money.

Mr O'Loan: Is grant aid the only incentive to bring about change? There is a perfectly sound argument that grant aid is not needed because energy-efficient devices pay for themselves.

Dr Humphreys: A more community-based approach in which community champions could be

trained to take on those issues and provide more on-the-spot support would be beneficial. Those people would be trained to know what measures would be most suitable for the types of houses in their areas, and they would also revisit the houses with energy metres to check what materials were being burned, for instance. They would provide support for householders. The position would be voluntary, and there would be a support infrastructure to train the position holders. Such an approach would have a strong effect, and it could be targeted at the areas in which improvements in housing are most needed.

Mr Allison: Householders who insulate their homes will recoup their money in six months or a year or two, but, as Jennifer McCann said, that is meaningless to people who cannot afford to insulate their homes in the first place. That is where grants are important. Saving people money through a banded rating system is also an important incentive.

Mr F McCann: Have you met representatives of the construction industry? What is its response to the design and build of new homes? Should there be one standard of build? It is argued that private dwellings are built to the minimum required standard and social homes are built to the maximum standard. There is, therefore, a large gap between the two, especially regarding energy efficiency.

Mr Allison: We have not met representatives of the building trade, but a private dwelling should not be more energy efficient than a social home merely because the householder has the money to build his or her own home.

Mr F McCann: Private homes are built to the minimum standard, so the issues that you referred to are irrelevant to their owners.

Mr Allison: I do not think that that is fair. All homes should be built to a high standard, and eco-homes standards are being phased in. However, we could leapfrog ahead now and go for the highest standards because we have the techniques, materials and know-how.

The Chairperson: Would you provide the Committee with further information on the application of the banded rating system and details of how it will be applied — considering the move to a capital-based calculation system? That would help the Committee.

Following this evidence session, the Committee will receive evidence on mandatory microgeneration. We have had discussions on incentivisation, but a comprehensive approach must be taken at policy level. It is a common cause, and we have work to do on informing policy development on it.

How will low- or zero-carbon energy heating systems contribute to achieving EU targets for renewable energy?

Your expertise on that subject will benefit policy makers in their discussions. The Committee will have the opportunity to comment on that in the future, and your support would be helpful.

I thank you for your contributions; it was an interesting discussion. We have just opened the door on this work, so I anticipate that we will be in touch.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

2 April 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Declan O'Loan
Ms Dawn Purvis

Witnesses:

Mr Patrick Flynn	}	Sustainable Energy Association
Mr John Hardy		
Mr Gabriel McArdle		

The Chairperson: Item five on the agenda is a briefing by the Sustainable Energy Association on mandatory micro-generation. Members should note that Hansard is recording the session and, therefore, telephones should be switched off. The Committee will be addressed by Sustainable Energy Association secretary John Hardy, and board members Patrick Flynn and Gabriel McArdle. Gentlemen, you are most welcome; perhaps you would like to make your presentation.

Mr John Hardy (Sustainable Energy Association): Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today. I want to give the Committee some background information on the Sustainable Energy Association. We are a trade association that represents the renewable-energy industry on the island of Ireland. The association encompasses more than 1,000 companies, most of which are small to medium-sized businesses, and up to 4,000 employees. Many bigger companies — particularly manufacturing companies — are based in Northern Ireland, where the manufacturing base is

located. I am accompanied by Mr Gabriel McArdle from Thermomax Ltd, which has recently been acquired by Kingspan Group plc. He is the company's senior executive and is in charge of the commercial-development department. Mr Patrick Flynn is the owner of Green Energy 4 U, which is a small, renewable-energy business based in County Down. It installs heating and energy appliances in homes.

Our submission presents evidence that demolishes the advice that informed Minister Robinson's decision not to implement the mandatory installation of 10% renewables in all new homes, which was due to be introduced in building regulations in April 2008. Civil servants put forward a four-fold argument: that the industry lacks the capacity to deliver; the lack of cost benefit in renewable-energy technologies; the unproven nature of the technologies; and the lack of precedents for that policy direction. We hope to show that those arguments and the evidence that supports them are inaccurate and unfounded and that the Minister was misled.

Precedents for such policies exist in the UK and Ireland; for example, the Lord Mayor of London introduced proposals under the London plan review. Developments must achieve carbon-emission reductions through mandatory on-site renewable energy of between 10% and 20%. Likewise, in the Republic of Ireland, building regulations to be introduced on 1 July 2008 will mandate that 10 kW hours per annum of thermal energy per sq m in each building, or four kW per annum of electrical power, must be introduced in all new builds. Overall energy consumption in new buildings will be reduced by 40% initially and eventually by 60%.

Mr Gabriel McArdle (Sustainable Energy Association): The Lord Mayor of London introduced the new policy on the back of the policy statement in 2004. The Merton rule also mandates the use of 10% renewables. To date, 150 councils — almost a third of the 468 councils throughout Britain — have adopted the policy.

It is also worth pointing out that it is more than likely that the company that I represent — Thermomax Ltd, which is a recent acquisition by Kingspan Group plc — will meet most of the Republic's new building regulations demands for 10 kW hours of solar energy from its manufacturing base in Bangor, which is pretty good.

Mr Hardy: Thank you very much, Gabe. That shows that the claim that there are no precedents is untrue.

The claim that the technologies are unproven is surprising, given that they are mainstream in mainland Europe. In fact, in Germany and Sweden houses cannot be built unless they incorporate some of those technologies. I will ask Gabe to elaborate on that.

Mr McArdle: I represent my own company, Kingspan Group plc, and also, as a member of the Sustainable Energy Association, companies such as Balcas in Enniskillen, which produces biomass products and brites wood pellets; and Glen Dimplex in Portadown, which produces heat-pump products.

The industry employs approximately 8,000 people. My business employs some 500 people in manufacturing in Northern Ireland, with factories in Bangor, Newry, Portadown and Banbridge working on renewables and the environmental sector of the business.

To date, Thermomax has produced and delivered 20 million solar tubes worldwide, although, unfortunately, not many to Northern Ireland. Recently — thanks to the Housing Executive — we have been supplying products to Northern Ireland. To put that into context, those tubes are equivalent to the output of Kilroot power station, which is a coal-firing power station, although it was recently adapted to be a coal- and oil-firing station. Ironically, it is the largest polluting power station in the UK. The solar energy generated by our Bangor product would take that power station off the map.

Balcas has evolved and is producing brites products locally for servicing the industry. Patrick is involved in biomass. Local manufacturing produces a small carbon footprint when the raw material is moved to the source of the product. We have supplied major European manufactures and, as a Northern Ireland-based company, we have also supplied the largest Far Eastern installation in Shanghai Airport, which produces 150,000 litres of hot water a day.

The technology is proven elsewhere in the world. Unfortunately, if the new legislation is not applied, we may not be given the opportunity to prove it locally.

Mr Hardy: Patrick works in installation and has first-hand knowledge of the technologies.

Mr Patrick Flynn (Sustainable Energy Association): The biomass heating in my home uses Viessmann tubes — or Thermomax — which are made in Bangor. From mid-March on, my home, and others with similar technology, will not require oil heating for hot water, which will be quite a saving. Some figures bandied about suggest that biomass does not pay. Oil heating does not have a payoff: oil is used. Biomass is both sustainable and financially beneficial to the client, with savings of up to 50% on their heating bills; that means that the average householder can expect a payoff in approximately three to five years.

We have an increasing demand for solar systems because the sun is available every day and it is free — free for ever more. On the other hand, the price of oil and gas continues to rise. Investing in solar technology

now will benefit us all financially, as we will be less dependent on fossil fuels.

Mr McArdle: I do not want to be selfish and talk about Thermomax in Bangor. Nevertheless, it has been making and exporting tubes for 27 years, which is a long time to prove technology, and it has been accepted worldwide. Viessmann is a huge German company. We brand the product and make it in Bangor, and Viessmann puts its name on it and sells it throughout Germany, which is the biggest solar market in Europe. It has been doing that for 15 years, so it is a proven technology.

Mr Hardy: We dealt briefly with cost benefit and the technologies; Gabe will tell us more

Mr McArdle: Patrick has already referred to costs. The reference to the payback and cost benefit comes from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), but it has not taken into account any figures for oil or gas, although we are unsure of the reason for that. The cost benefit from the renewables point of view is available. We have installed renewables for many years, which proves that there is a payback on solar energy, and that, combined with a biomass system in a domestic situation on a properly sized, designed and controlled system, can show a payback in six to eight years.

Bewley's Hotel in Dublin airport is an example of a large-scale installation; at the moment it has more than 300 sq m of collector on its roof. The payback period for that installation is 10 years, because the capital was quite large due to the scale of the property. The hotel is saving €15,000 a year, as well as 15 tons of carbon; that is a quarter of the carbon emitted per year when the hotel was gas-fired. There are cost benefits and a payback to be gained from investing in renewable energy systems, which will last for 25 years. A gas- or oil-fired system does not offer payback in the long term.

Mr Flynn: I will back up that point, taking biomass systems as an example. Several years ago, an hotel in Newry that we looked at was burning 10,000 to 12,000 litres of oil a week to sustain its heat and demand for hot water. A solar energy system would reduce the hotel's oil consumption considerably, but a biomass system would make a saving of 10% on oil expenditure. Taking today's heating oil prices at about 50p per litre, that 10% would represent a colossal saving, not only on money that can go back into the economy but also on carbon output, as there are about 55 times fewer carbon emissions from wood than from oil. That is significant, considering the Kyoto protocol agreements that must be met. There are substantial fines if those are not met; the money that would be needed to cover those fines would pay for many grant-aid schemes and incentives for businesses, and all of our homes, to change.

Mr Hardy: As outlined in our submission, the Sustainable Energy Association asked an accountant to examine the DEFRA payback calculations that were part of the consultation on the decision not to introduce mandatory microgeneration. The accountant made eight telling criticisms of those calculations, the most important of which — as Patrick mentioned — is the fact that the figures seem to be based on an out-of-date pricing of oil at \$50 a barrel. The calculations also fail to consider the fact that there is no payback whatsoever on fossil fuels energy systems. The criticisms of the DEFRA calculations are detailed in our submission paper, so I will not go into detail at the moment, but I urge members to look at our paper.

Regarding the alleged lack of capacity in the industry to deliver, the progressive and joined-up policy that was advanced by Peter Hain was two-pronged. The Secretary of State decided that in order to bring about the adoption of more renewable energy systems into the mainstream, it was necessary to build capacity. Once that had been developed to a certain degree with grant aid, the building regulations could be introduced to provide a sustainable market for the industry. In order to do that, the Secretary of State introduced the environment and renewable energy fund. It included £9.8 million for the Reconnect scheme, which enabled microgeneration systems to be installed in 4,000 private-sector and 600 social-sector dwellings.

In addition, Action Renewables established the Renewable Energy Installers Academy to ensure that there is a highly skilled indigenous workforce in Northern Ireland capable of maintaining capacity. The figures in our submission speak for themselves: there are 850 qualified installers. Capacity has been built up to the current level as planned, and the Reconnect grant is now being removed, as was planned.

Unfortunately, the mechanism that was supposed to be in place to maintain that capacity — the introduction of building regulations — is not happening. Therefore the industry no longer has grant aid or building regulations and is facing a crisis.

I think that we have demolished the arguments that were presented to the Minister, as we feel that Mr Robinson was misled by inaccurate evidence in making his decision.

Our chairperson, Ruth McGuigan, had discussions with Trevor Martin, who is the chairperson of the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee and the head of building control in Belfast City Council. He explained that he had opposed the mandatory introduction of regulations because he felt that it would be better if the Department supported the introduction of strong and vigorous codes for sustainable homes.

Although one of the Sustainable Energy Association's founding aims is to endorse the code for sustainable homes, unfortunately we have reached the stage at which capacity exists, grants are coming to an end, building regulations have not been put in place and the code for sustainable homes may not be introduced for several years. Therefore in order to facilitate the code for sustainable homes, the capacity that has been built up will disappear and will have to be reintroduced and redeveloped.

Mr McArdle: Furthermore, although it is great that 850 people who are trained to install renewable-energy systems have gone through the training academy — and more are coming through — and graduate schemes specialising in the emerging renewable-energy and building-services sectors are ongoing at Queen's University and the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, if those graduates are to find jobs, they will have to leave Northern Ireland.

I mentioned manufacturing, which is my side of the industry. Under various company brand names throughout the Province, Kingspan employs 500 people. In addition, there is Balcas and Glen Dimplex, and, of course, Harland and Wolff's dry dock is now being used for the manufacture of offshore wind turbines. The capacity exists here, and the situation is ripe for progress.

As with the Sustainable Energy Ireland grants in the Republic — which are coming to an end — the next phase must be support by means of legislative changes to part L of Building Regulations 2000. In Northern Ireland, unfortunately, that is not happening, and, as John said, we are heading into a cul-de-sac and our industry is heading for a tough time.

Mr Flynn: Based on personal experience in my own business, I can reiterate those comments. The building industry is experiencing a slight downturn, and I have been receiving phone calls from people who were previously employed in all sectors of the building trade but who are now seeking jobs. I have been telling them that we have plenty of work until Christmas, but they may have to look for work after that because there is no legislation and incentives to drive the industry forward.

Traditionally, those guys had to travel around the British Isles or further afield in search of work, and that will happen again. I spend much of my time training guys who have skills in all sectors to fit renewable-energy systems that could save people money, reduce our carbon footprint and help everyone. However, I fear that our business will become much smaller and, if we do not make progress, we will have to let many employees go.

Mr McArdle: We are not seeking subsidies, grants or handouts — the Reconnect grant programme is

coming to an end — however, we require support in the form of legislation on building regulations.

Mr Hardy: We hope that we have provided evidence for our case, and we urge the Committee to ask Mr Robinson to reconsider his decision on mandatory microgeneration. Thank you for having us, and we welcome any questions.

The Chairperson: I repeat the question that I asked of the previous delegation: do you intend to make a submission to the Committee concerning the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (Northern Ireland) 2008?

You have set out the effects of the Minister's decision in the here and now, but the key issue for you is strategic development. I believe that a submission from your association, among others, that addresses that issue will also have a strategic effect. I am aware that you want to address that, and I am sure that members will follow that line of questioning. However, we must also consider how the Assembly will address the key priority of sustainable development.

Mr McArdle: We are happy to do that. It is important to say that the industry body does exist. Perhaps we were not consulted because we are not public enough, but if there is still time to make a submission, we will.

The Chairperson: You have until 16 April.

Mr Hardy: We recently made a submission to the Planning Service on PPS 18, which deals with renewables technology, so we are not coming here to argue that you should have done this or that you should have done that. We realise that we have to have our say in the upcoming consultations to try to shape policy to our benefit. We are aware of the consultation period on the building regulations and we are drafting a submission.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for your presentation. I was particularly struck by your corrected calculations on simple payback years and annual cost savings on the different forms of microgeneration. The Committee is interested in that because the Minister wrote to us in November and included those figures, which were DEFRA-referenced. It is important that accurate figures be available that decisions can be based on. Can you provide the Committee with the back-up calculations to show where those figures come from so that we can submit them to the Department? Have you already done so? The payback period and the savings ought to be clarified because there are huge variations — for example, a wood-burning stove goes from a 60-year payback to a payback period of less than one year.

Mr Hardy: Exactly.

Mr Beggs: Another example is that microgeneration goes from having a 6.5-year payback to less than a one-year payback. There ought not to be a debate

about it; there ought to be evidence, and the sooner that is clarified the better.

Mr Flynn: The simplest way is to show it in practical terms. This is not a new industry to Northern Ireland. We have been in the business for four, almost five, years, and we have clients who were saving money on biomass, for example, when oil was \$50 a barrel. We can publish what those clients' savings were. Unfortunately, DEFRA's viewpoint is from the outside looking in, whereas we are on the inside looking out, saying that we have already proved that it works and have no problem restating that.

Mr Beggs: Can you provide the Committee with that information? We suggest that you make it part of your submission.

Mr Hardy: We had an accountant look at the savings, so providing the information to the Committee is no problem. The DEFRA figures were based on 2006 costs when the price of oil was lower. We do not know the size or proportion of the technologies that DEFRA is considering. The payback will be different depending on the size of the technologies that it is dealing with, but that is not a problem. If the Committee would like those figures, we will include them in our submission.

Ms Purvis: Appendix B includes another set of figures relating to payback — where did they come from?

Mr Hardy: I believe that they are internal Department of Finance and Personnel figures. As to where they originated, I assume that they also came from DEFRA. They may have been updated, but they do not include the source.

Mr Beggs: They come from DFP. There are two issues. One is the introduction of mandatory microgeneration; the other is the Reconnect programme. You said that you have work until the end of this year. After that, if the situation remains as it is, the skills will dissipate and people will go elsewhere. How long would it take to build up contracts again? I am trying to find out how small the window is in which to solve the problem.

Mr Flynn: It has happened twice before in two grant schemes. The first was a taster to assess the position of the industry in Northern Ireland; it stopped, and there was talk of something else being introduced. From our conversations, we hear that Joe Public thinks that the Government will do something about climate change; therefore people sit back and allow the cost of the technology to rise. Energy and resources are getting more expensive all the time.

Previously, it took between nine months and a year to get the industry up and running again. That happened twice before. The grant scheme is great in

that it gets many people interested and it promotes the industry. However, that is not what we want: we want a sustainable industry, but grants are not sustainable. We want an industry that moves forward. Incentives that benefit the economy as a whole are required, not handouts. Those might include incentives that benefit the householder through rates or incentives for businesses.

Mr Weir: Thank you for your evidence. I am aware of the good work and the major contribution that Thermomax, which is based in my constituency of North Down, makes to the economy. Many of us were delighted with the successful rescue of Thermomax; its difficulties were not the fault of the firm.

You said that you wanted to reverse the decision to end mandatory renewable energy targets. Have you sought a meeting with the Minister about that?

Mr Hardy: We have attempted to arrange a meeting, but without success — it is difficult enough to secure an invitation to a Committee meeting. We tried to meet several Ministers: Margaret Ritchie, Nigel Dodds and Peter Robinson. We argue for joined-up thinking among the Departments on energy and on sustainable development in particular. If we thought that it was worthwhile asking for another meeting, we would do so.

Mr Weir: Your document mentions developments in London and the Republic. Have there been any developments in the way in which the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales treat renewable energy and microgeneration?

Mr Hardy: Recently, a press release from the Scottish Executive announced that they were tripling grant aid for renewable energy to encourage the industry. They wanted to ensure that more houses would install renewables to reduce the effect on the grid and on carbon emissions. The code for sustainable homes is being introduced in Wales and will be fast-tracked compared to the speed at which it was introduced in England. Even on a larger scale of renewables, Scotland is well above its UK requirements.

Northern Ireland's target for generating electricity or energy from renewables is 12%. For instance, a wood pellet-fired power station supplies most houses in Cardiff.

Scotland and Wales are following the same lines of legislation as England. Gabe mentioned the Merton rule. Members may not be aware that Merton Council in London introduced a mandatory requirement that all new houses must have a percentage of renewables. Of 468 councils, 150 have adopted that requirement, which represents one third of councils in the UK. That has set a precedent, and there is an impetus for the people of Northern Ireland to follow that lead. A fund was recently set up for local councils to adopt

something similar; therefore, I see no reason why we cannot do so.

Mr Weir: As an aside, we could introduce wood-pellet fires in Northern Ireland, as we use them quite successfully in July already. Although some of the items that are burned might be slightly less environmentally friendly.

Mr Hardy: It could be the zero-carbon fortnight.

Mr Weir: Forgive me if this is slightly commercially sensitive, but you spoke about Thermomax's successful exporting side. What share of Thermomax's business might be described as domestic as opposed to international?

Mr McArdle: It is in single digits, and it is primarily associated with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Kingspan has had a good relationship with the Housing Executive over the years in supplying many different products. Last year, there were 1,200 installations. Things are a little unstable at the moment with the Housing Executive and funding has ceased, but we hope that that will free up during the summer, as it typically does.

The domestic figures are small in Northern Ireland, although they could increase up to 5%. In the overall scheme we are lucky that Thermomax has a world export market. However, the incremental increase that we deliver locally is phenomenal, and it is keeping jobs here.

Mr Weir: I understand that the domestic side has been beneficial, but principally your focus will remain on global export market. You seem concerned that the opposition to microgeneration — or at least the opposition to changing building regulations — comes from some civil servants. You also highlighted pressures in the pre-devolution phase and in the present devolution phase. There has been reference to concerns about additional costs being placed on industry. Have people in the industry lobbied against that because they feel that it will increase costs in the building trade or elsewhere?

Although some people in the Civil Service may be unsure about microgeneration, I would be surprised if that was the ultimate source of the opposition. If a head of steam has been built up to try to block that move and there has been pressure from some people in the industry, where do the major problems lie?

Mr Flynn: That is correct. It is not a matter of one body opposing the idea. Some people in the building industry want to build better, more sustainable homes.

Equally, those who are more business-oriented and concerned with making a profit view it as an extra and unnecessary cost. They are probably not sufficiently educated on why there is a need to move in that direction. However, there are many reasons:

the Kyoto protocol; carbon emissions; the cost to the future population; and growing the economy for young people. Rather than seek funding, and so forth, which will be important as we move ahead, one of the association's biggest concerns is to promote the benefits of microgeneration.

Unfortunately, the days of cheap energy will soon end, and the other solution is nuclear energy, which brings its own problems. As Gabriel said, enough solar panels were installed in Germany last year to replace two power stations. It cost a population of 80 million €1 a month, or €12 each a year, to fund that scheme. It is not a massive amount, but it is tailored over a 20-year period, after which there will be no funding; however, by that stage most of Germany should be using sustainable energy.

Ms J McCann: To a degree, your answer to Peter covered the question that I was going to ask. There is much debate about renewable and sustainable energy. However, the previous presentation on climate change and yours on sustainable energy seem to suggest that microgeneration makes sense: environmentally because it cuts carbon emissions, but also socially and economically.

The Reconnect grants have been mentioned. Although they may not have much effect on businesses, they do on those who want to modify their homes. Many people who simply want to save money or who want to be more environmentally friendly cannot do so without the Reconnect grant.

I was interested in what you said about exporting. This is another case of a small local business not getting the same help as larger foreign direct investors. The argument that organisations such as Invest NI always throw up is that companies are not exporting enough. However you export, you employ people — which is of economic benefit to the North of Ireland — and you retain a skills base here.

I met some smaller organisations that deal in renewable energy, and they told me the same thing: they employ people who are skilled to a certain level, but those skilled people will leave. Therefore increased microgeneration makes sense. What is the main stumbling block? It is money. However, when we talk about money, we talk about value for money. Microgeneration makes sense because it offers value for money in the long term.

Mr McArdle: The Reconnect scheme benefits everyone. As the cost of property everywhere increases, fewer people are moving house; they are refurbishing, developing and making available added space for living rooms, and so forth. As you point out, there is now an ideal opportunity to consider different concepts of renewable energy, some of which are simple. From a selfish point of view — although it

applies to all renewable energy — solar energy is extremely simple to retrofit.

We export a great deal. I talked about the availability of academically trained people in Northern Ireland through Queen's University and the University of Ulster, and we are now keen to invest in Thermomax. We employ people with PhDs in technical subjects, and we are looking for more of the same calibre to service not only the local market but all our markets.

In addition to requiring people to perform the hands-on physical manufacturing and installation of our systems, we need more people with academic qualifications. For as long as we remain in Northern Ireland, we will take on people who have been academically trained. I am not suggesting that we will not remain in Northern Ireland, but that depends on where our future markets are. We will keep an eye on what is a fluid situation.

Ms J McCann: It is also important to note that if the scheme is not adopted or replaced by another scheme, sections of the workforce will lose their jobs. Although we want to employ people and build a strong economy, we are not putting effort into developing small local businesses; a mix of the two would be beneficial.

Mr McArdle: Grants will help, but legislation will undoubtedly drive the process. There are 5,300 houses to be built over the next three years, and it would be great to introduce legislation to support the installation of local renewable energy sources and to see those products manufactured, installed and supplied to those houses by local people. It would be ideal for Balcas in Enniskillen to supply a percentage of the houses with its wood-pellet fuel. However, without legislation, it becomes a commercial issue with builders or developers.

The Chairperson: The Committee will consider its options as a result of your interesting presentation — in particular the critique of the economic modelling that informed the Minister's decision. I assure you that the Committee will examine that matter and engage with the Department in a focused way. The Sustainable Energy Association's correspondence with the Department should inform the discussion.

The cost and strategic availability of fossil fuels in the long term brings the need for alternative technologies and renewables into sharp focus and compels us to adopt a business-like and policy-driven approach. We may need to discuss the issue with you again. You should act upon Peter's suggestion and renew your application to meet the Department to discuss the matter. In the meantime, the Committee will consider its next step. Thank you, gentlemen, for your interesting and informative presentation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

3 April 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 Thomas Burns
Mr Fred Cobain
Mr Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Mr Roy McGivern	} Department for Social Development
Mr Seamus Murray	

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): I welcome Mr Seamus Murray and Mr Roy McGivern from the Department for Social Development. This is the formal part of the Committee Stage of the Charities Bill. I will introduce each of the amendments. If elaboration or explanation is required, I will ask the officials to provide that.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Meaning of “charitable purpose”)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought an amendment to clause 2 to reflect the fact that religion includes a belief in one, or more than one, god. The Department’s response was that the clause was to be amended as suggested.

Mr Seamus Murray (Department for Social Development): The Department has taken the Committee’s views on board. The Minister has considered those views, and she is happy for the clause 2(3)(a)(i) to read as follows: “A religion which involves belief in god or more than one god.”

Ms Lo: Does the Bill also cover religion that does not believe in a god? Some religions believe in a prophet rather than a god.

Mr Murray: Clause 2(3)(a)(ii) refers to “any analogous philosophical belief”.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 3 (The “public benefit” test)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought an amendment to clause 3 to ensure that intangible benefits, such as spiritual benefits, would be recognised as providing public benefit. The Department said that spiritual benefit will be covered by the existing legislation and that it will be a matter for the charity commission to issue guidance and consult.

Mr Murray: The clause has been discussed with the Minister, and the Department’s considered view is that the charity commission will issue guidance. The Charity Commission for England and Wales has recently published guidance on public benefit for religious charities. We will follow suit on that.

The Chairperson: The submission from the Evangelical Alliance indicated that it was satisfied with that approach. The Committee asked the Department to consider using the word “harm” or “detriment” in the legislation instead of “disbenefit”.

Mr Murray: The Minister is content that the wording be changed to read “detriment”.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 3, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 4 (Guidance as to operation of public benefit requirement)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought an amendment to clause 4 to require the charity commission to consult on any material changes to its guidance.

Mr Murray: The Department has considered clause 4, and it believes that the Bill as it stands is sufficient to provide that the charity commission should consider where necessary rather than consult on every single change that is required in the future. Public benefit is a significant matter, and it would be consulted on.

The Chairperson: The concern was that the minutiae would have to go out to public consultation.

Mr Murray: That is the danger; if the charity commission were legally required to consult every time it made a change to the Bill, a public consultation process would be required, which would be nugatory.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clauses 5 to 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Practice and procedure)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought a possible amendment to clause 13 to allow the charity commission to make provision for applicants to be represented by special advocates at a charity tribunal.

Mr Murray: The Department has discussed the issue with colleagues in England and Wales. There is currently no provision for special advocates in the legislation there. However, that is being considered in England and Wales, given some of the issues that they face. The best approach that we can take is to watch and observe the changes across the water. Subsequently, change would be considered for Northern Ireland as required.

The Chairperson: If a change were to come about in England and Wales, would the Committee be notified?

Mr Murray: A substantive policy change would come back to the Committee, but that will probably happen somewhere down the line, after the legislation is enacted.

The Chairperson: Will the Committee be notified of a change to the legislation in England and Wales?

Mr Murray: Yes; we would bring that back to the Committee.

Clause 13 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 14 and 15 agreed to.

Clause 16 (Register of charities)

The Chairperson: The Committee had sought a possible amendment to clause 16 to ensure that the charities register would include a separate statement if an organisation had been granted designated religious charity status.

Mr Murray: That is a sensible suggestion, and the Department has agreed that clause 16(4)(b) should be amended, subject to instructions from the Office of the Legislative Counsel.

The Chairperson: The Committee had also sought a possible amendment to clause 16 to ensure that

Assembly approval was required for any further exemptions for designated religious charities.

Mr Murray: The Department feels that that is not required because it will be covered in the legislation. The provision is included in the amendment of clause 165(3).

Mr Roy McGivern (Department for Social Development): That is one of the proposed amendments.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 16, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 17 to 51 agreed to.

Clause 52 (Power to order taxation of solicitor's bill)

The Chairperson: Members will remember that issue being discussed at a previous meeting. The Committee had asked the Department to investigate whether the provisions in clause 52 duplicate the provisions that are contained in the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

Mr Murray: We have checked that out, and the Department agrees that there is duplication in that area. We propose to remove clause 52 from the Bill and rely on the 1976 Order.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated.*

Clause 52 disagreed to.

Clauses 53 to 73 agreed to.

The Chairperson: I thank members and the officials from the Department. That was painless for us as well as for you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

9 April 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (The Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Ms Dawn Purvis
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr John Dumigan	}	Building Control Northern Ireland
Mr Desmond Reid		
Mr Donal Rogan		

The Deputy Chairperson: Item 4 on the agenda is the evidence session on the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (Northern Ireland) with Building Control Northern Ireland. I welcome Mr John Dumigan, Mr Donal Rogan and Mr Desmond Reid to the Committee. As there is considerable information contained in your presentation, I suggest that we go through each paragraph, item by item. That would help you and members who may wish to ask questions on certain articles and proposed amendments. Mr Dumigan, do you want to make an opening comment?

Mr Beggs: It is appropriate that I declare an interest as a member of the North Eastern Group Building Control committee, on which I represent Carrickfergus Borough Council.

Mr John Dumigan (Building Control Northern Ireland): Building Control Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to address the Committee. We hope that our presentation will be of benefit to your deliberations. We have a voluntary networking system, which is a central panel system, of which I am chairman.

I hope that, between the three of us, we will be able to answer members' questions. I will leave it to you, Chairman, to decide how you want to make use of us. If you wish us to go through the presentation, we can do so; if you wish us simply to answer questions on the presentation, we are happy to do that as well.

The Deputy Chairperson: If members are content, I suggest that we start with paragraph 3.1 of the presentation and work our way through the issues. If any questions arise, we can ask Mr Dumigan and his colleagues to comment. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: Paragraph 3.1.1 recommends that the definition of "owner" should be changed to "responsible person". How would the responsible person be determined in cases in which, for example, there is a legal owner, an agent or a tenant? Is that approach taken in other legislation?

Mr Dumigan: It is difficult to determine who the owner is in some legislation. In many instances of enforcement, people refuse to declare their ownership of property. That makes it difficult to make a prosecution. In article 66 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, there is a requirement on people to declare their interest in a property. If they refuse to do so, a prosecution can arise. The Bill does not give us that power, although it would probably help us to determine the ownership of a property and, therefore, enable us to take action against the owner.

The Deputy Chairperson: Therefore you do not believe that it would be difficult to establish the person responsible for a property?

Mr Dumigan: At present, it is difficult. However, if the legislation required the owner to declare him or herself as such, that would certainly help the enforcement process. We would agree with that, Chairman. It is not an issue that we have raised, but it is a difficulty.

Mr Donal Rogan (Building Control Northern Ireland): The Committee may want to take advantage of the opportunity to harmonise definitions in the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 and allied legislation. For four years, we have worked with Land and Property Services to produce information so that properties may be valued for local authority rating. There are overlaps in completion notices and completion of works as to how properties are measured in relation to the Land Registry (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 1976. It is not dealt with specifically in the Bill; however, if possible, there should be an opportunity to attain harmonisation across regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson: Let us discuss each article in turn. If it were helpful, John could give an explanation of each to help members. Shall we move on to paragraph 3.2?

Mr Beggs: I have a question on paragraph 3.1. You said that there may be difficulties in identifying the “responsible person” if work needs to be carried out.

Building Control recommends that “owner” should be changed to “responsible person”. Is that a sufficient definition or does it present any problems? Might “responsible person” refer to the builder or the tenant? How have you come up with that term?

Mr Dumigan: We hoped that the term “responsible person” would be specified in the Bill, as, previously, the term “owner” was defined in article 2 of the 1979 Order; it is a more modern term. Under article 18 of the 1979 Order, Building Control can serve a contravention notice on the “owner”; we would like that term replaced by “responsible person”, which embraces a variety of categories.

Dr Farry: It may be unusual, but occasionally the owner of a building or the person formally responsible will be outside the jurisdiction. How would you proceed in that event?

Mr Dumigan: Making the definition include any person, agent or trustee acting on behalf of that owner, including the occupant — and the current definition includes occupants — would deal with such a situation.

Mr Desmond Reid (Building Control Northern Ireland): It also includes the person carrying out the work, so it is a broad definition.

The Deputy Chairperson: If there are no other questions on that paragraph, we will move on to paragraph 3.2., “Article 3A — Protected Buildings”.

Mr Dumigan: Is the Committee happy with paragraph 3.1.2?

The Deputy Chairperson: Since there are no questions from members, we will move on.

Mr Dumigan: Article 3A:

“requires Building Control to have regard to the desirability of preserving the character of protected buildings”.

When Building Control applies the regulations, it should not do so in a manner that would destroy the character of such buildings.

We consider that requirement to be weak. Building Control officials may look cursorily at a building, “have regard to it” but nevertheless destroy the character of the building. We recommend a statutory requirement on Building Control to consult with Government agencies that have responsibility for such buildings. We also suggest that the list of buildings for which such agencies should be consulted ought to be

extended to include those of townscape character and others of historic or architectural value.

The Deputy Chairperson: Should that be in place of or in addition to the duty in the Bill, requiring Building Control to have regard to the desirability of preserving the character of protected buildings?

Mr Dumigan: It would place more of an onus on Building Control to recognise to a greater degree that we could destroy the character of buildings and that we should have more care in that area. It places a greater duty on us to act in a more responsible manner; we should not deal with the issue in a frivolous way. However, the proposed wording could allow some building control officers to do so if they were so inclined.

Mr Beggs: You mentioned townscape character and historic buildings; are conservation areas already included in technical booklet F?

Mr Dumigan: My understanding is that they are.

The Deputy Chairperson: If I do not get any indication that members have a specific question on each section of Building Control’s submission, we will just move through it. Section 3.3 refers to article 5A, which deals with guidance for the purpose of building regulations.

Mr Dumigan: Building Control fully supports proposed new article 5A, as it is a much more flexible way to deal with building regulations. However, our concern is that the legislation states that only those documents that are published by the Department can be used as guidance. However, it is likely that many other organisations will produce documents that could be used as guidance, for example the Building Research Establishment. We are concerned that as such documents are not published by the Department, they could not be used as guidance.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do you envisage there being a list of accredited guidance publications that have been published by other bodies — such as the one you referred to — and are in the public domain? Is there not a risk that there could be contradictory guidance? Are we running the risk of having various sets of guidance that could be interpreted differently and lead to confusion?

Mr Dumigan: We envisage the Department’s spelling out what the guidance would be. It would not be a free market in which publications could simply be picked off the shelf and classed as guidance. The guidance would perhaps be “issued by the Department”, or “listed by the Department,” rather than published by the Department.

Mr Reid: That already occurs in other aspects of the building regulations. When undertaking mechanical and electrical work, for example, we use guides published by the Chartered Institution of Building

Services Engineers (CIBSE). We refer to other guides, but 5A seems to restrict our ability to do that.

Mr O'Loan: Provided that it can be made watertight, I see the point of your recommendation. I take the point that other guides are used in other fields.

Mr Dumigan: Paragraph 3.4 deals with type approval. We welcome that provision, as Building Control has had type approval for a considerable time; it benefits the industry by speeding up approvals. However, some councils do not wish to sign up to the scheme, and some disagree with parts of a type approval, because somebody feels strongly about some particular matter. After all, building regulations are open to interpretation. However, that undermines the scheme, and in my view undermines Building Control itself. We recommend that all councils be required to sign up to the agreed approval scheme so that a particular council cannot opt out of it. We need a robust system to ensure that whatever is type approved is in compliance with building regulations.

However, we are anxious to ensure that if a builder or developer goes to the trouble of getting a type approval from one council, another council does not tell him that it does not agree with that.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there not an argument for keeping the power to type approve in the hands of DFP centrally rather than devolving it to councils?

Mr Dumigan: Yes, if DFP wants to retain that power.

Mr Rogan: A potential difficulty with that is that our customers value the right of appeal to a third party, which would be DFP. Therefore the councils should have the power to type approve. However, we recommend that action be taken to require all councils to comply with an agreed type approval scheme.

Mr Weir: How many councils resisted the scheme?

Mr Dumigan: Two or three.

Mr Weir: Do they object to certain aspects of the scheme or do they reject the scheme in its entirety?

Mr Dumigan: Two or three councils will not sign up to some parts of the scheme.

Mr Weir: Opposition is therefore relatively limited.

Dr Farry: Mr Dumigan, you stated that building regulations are open to interpretation and are not an exact science. How much variance is there in the approach to type approval taken by different building control professionals who work in similar settings but in different locations? How frequently are there disagreements and what is the range of those disagreements?

Mr Dumigan: We have a close interface with the users of the service, and their message to us is that they want uniformity and consistency above all else.

We tried to deliver that through the central panel system in which panels provide guidance on how to interpret and apply regulations. No matter how hard we work, there will never be 100% compliance or uniformity, but we are moving to get as close as possible to achieving that.

Each council is autonomous, and each council officer can make his or her own decision. We have a voluntary networking arrangement: it is not mandatory for an officer to accept any decision by a panel. That is the weakness in the system. However, we are much stronger than other building regulatory authorities, in that we work so closely together.

We work in a small Province with 26 councils. Our surveys and focus groups show that our customers are reasonably content and that we have not inflicted any major inconsistencies on them. We deliver a reasonably good and consistent service, but it is not 100% consistent — there will always be differences.

Mr Rogan: The point about achieving consistency was well made. The central panel recently devised an audit to determine the effectiveness of the building control system. It is a voluntary audit, and no one else does it. We ask how effective the regulations are and whether they achieve what they are set out to do. Our objective is to achieve added value by achieving overall compliance.

Dr Farry: The review of public administration will reduce the number of councils from 26 to 11. How important will the power of type approval be in the new context? For example, developers who currently work in both the North Down Borough Council and Ards Borough Council areas may experience consistency issues, but when those two councils merge, there will be a central building control approach. However, I do not imagine that too many developers are involved in similar schemes in North Down and, say, Fermanagh. When the number of councils changes from 26 to 11, will type approval become less significant?

Mr Dumigan: I do not believe so. Several multi-nationals requiring type approvals, such as McDonald's, are moving into Northern Ireland. The Department of Education requires type approvals for temporary classrooms and other pre-fabricated buildings. All sorts of buildings are being erected throughout Northern Ireland, and the people using those buildings would benefit.

Mr McQuillan: I have a question on the review of public administration. I thought that the move from 26 councils to 11 would make it easier for type approvals to be granted.

Mr Dumigan: Having read the Bill, I gather that the Department had in mind a type approval system similar to that which pertains in England and Wales,

whereby one council assesses an application and all the other councils accept it. That was not the system that we had in mind for Northern Ireland, nor was it the way things were done in the past. Representatives from different parts of the Province would meet in a working panel to assess a type approval. They decided whether a project complied with building regulations, and their decision was adopted by the councils. That is different from how things are done in England and Wales. Problems have occurred in England and Wales when one council has made an approval that is not accepted by others. Our proposals are for a more robust system in which more people have an input into what the type approval is.

Mr Beggs: Do you agree that if there were no panel to make a decision, the multi-nationals would apply for approval to a council that required slightly lower standards, which in turn would lower the standard elsewhere in Northern Ireland? Therefore a panel system is a better method of protection.

Mr Rogan: We agree with that and see it as a way forward. The central panel, which we are here to represent today, has satellite panels that work to it, one of which is a standards panel, comprising a group of volunteers who come together to represent councils and take decisions on the interpretation of regulations. It is all about trying to achieve consistency. The model that we are presenting today, of a group of members who meet to interpret matters, is a stronger one. We do not want the regulations to be diluted by one council taking its own view. The evidence from England and Wales is that that has happened on occasions.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will now move to paragraph 3·5.

Mr Dumigan: Article 13 of the 1979 Order deals with plans deposited with a district council. Although the Bill does not contain any amendment to article 17, Building Control would like to propose an amendment to it. I said earlier that councils are autonomous bodies, and we are here to put the view of the vast majority of councils. However, in their assessment of this article, several councils, but not all, expressed the view that plans should be approved before work is commenced, which would ensure that serious and costly mistakes are not made during the construction process. At present, developers can submit a plan to Building Control and start the project half an hour later. The result is that, in general, mistakes are made and remedial work has to be carried out, which is a waste of time and resources for developers and for us. It has created problems in some areas. I will ask Dessie to elaborate on that.

Mr Reid: As John said, not all councils hold the view that plans should be pre-approved; members may be aware that in Scotland developers must have

approval before they start. The repercussions can be costly. No later than last week, I was presented with a situation in which a developer submitted plans with very little detail, got them out of his agent's office, and wanted to get started. The plans were for a multi-storey building with an underground car park. An initial look at the plan showed me that it was completely up the left; it may even require another lift.

That would have implications for the structure of the building. The underground car park requires extensive ventilation, which the plan did not cover. We must discuss the matter further, and consider whether to allow building to proceed before approval. At the moment, some developers proceed without approval, but that can be a costly decision for the developer or applicant.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are there any bottlenecks in the approval process?

Mr Reid: Building Control has 56 days to consider plans, after which it is considered a deemed refusal. We suggest that that should be changed, and, after 56 days, should be considered a deemed approval. England and Wales do it that way; it puts the onus on Building Control to respond.

We encourage pre-application consultation whereby applicants discuss the plans with us before submission. However, that only happens occasionally because of the pressure to commence work on the site.

Mr O'Loan: You said that not all councils advocate the proposal; its intentions are clear but there are difficulties. Will bottlenecks or delays in the process hold up development? There are concerns about the planning system, and the Committee wants to ensure that legitimate development is not delayed. My understanding is that buildings are approved in stages and often can not proceed beyond the first stage — foundations and so on — because the proposal gets buried in the planning process. In a way, the system offers protection.

If that formed part of the legislation, how would it be enforced? The proposal is not ripe enough for the Committee to advocate an amendment to the Bill. Your evidence proves that it requires further examination.

Mr Rogan: Most councils approved the plan to introduce targets of 35 days for the commercial sector and 21 days for the domestic sector. However, 90% of Belfast's plans are turned round in 35 days. That does not mean that plans are approved, rather that a meaningful response is issued to the applicant. We approve only 38% of newly submitted plans, as most contain a contravention. Some clients — or sometimes the agent or developer — commence work before approval, but, as Dessie said, they do so at their own risk.

There are ways around it; we and our clients value greatly pre-submission consultation. On occasion, we use the stage approval system; sometimes clients prefer stage approval for a superstructure or a substructure. There are economic considerations in approving plans before commencing building work.

Mr O’Loan: If the proposal formed part of the legislation, how would it be enforced?

Mr Reid: I am not familiar with Scottish legislation, but it is illegal to start building before approval. We would have to introduce the measure slowly and perhaps take enforcement action against those who commence before approval. That would become a contravention, as it is in Scotland, where it is also a contravention to occupy before completion.

Mr O’Loan: I will leave it there.

The Deputy Chairperson: You say that you would like article 17 of the 1979 Order to be amended.

Mr Dumigan: Article 17 concerns appeals to the Department. When applicants are aggrieved by a decision taken by a council, they have a right to appeal to the Department. The Department publishes information on how it arrives at appeal decisions, which is a recent development. Hitherto, we have always had a problem in Building Control in trying to understand how the Department reached a decision. Although the Department now publishes such information, a new incumbent might decide not to publish. We are asking that the power be introduced to require the Department to publish information on the rationale that it uses to reach an appeal decision. We also suggest that, with the introduction of guidance-based documents, there be a system of determinations. The problem for developers and builders when working on-site is that if they have done something that Building Control feels to be wrong and requires them to fix, and they feel that it is not wrong and that they do not want to fix it, one cannot afford to wait a month or six weeks for an appeal to be heard. It would be of great benefit to the industry and to Building Control if there was a fast-track method for resolving such disputes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there a problem with delays at present?

Mr Dumigan: Usually, a developer will decide that he cannot afford the delay and will give up. I suppose that that could be considered a loss of rights. However, if there was a fast-track method to allow a decision to be reached in a matter of days, the issue would be over and done with and the builder could get on with his work.

Mr Beggs: How many appeals have there been?

Mr Dumigan: Most appeals happen as a result of planning applications. To the best of my knowledge,

there are not many appeals about work on site. The Department has a better idea of the number.

Mr Beggs: Are you aware of any appeals in your own areas?

Mr Rogan: There were six appeals in Belfast last year, particularly on part R of the building regulations for disabled access and lifts. There were two in the past year about decisions on site.

The Deputy Chairperson: Article 18.

Mr Dumigan: Article 18 concerns serving contravention notices for work that contravenes building regulations. Under that article, councils have 18 months from completion of the works to serving notice. However, “completion of the works” is difficult to define and is open to legal interpretation and legal battles. Under paragraph 3.7.2, we are working to the enforcement concordat through a democratic process. Councils are not keen to take enforcement action. Such action is a last resort. Councils are anxious for us to try to resolve matters before they reach court. Building Control considers reaching court to be a failure in that we have been unable to prevent that from happening. Therefore, when the time that we are required to devote to that process is added up — either through the democratic process or telling people what they are required to do according to the processes and the concordat — as well as the time in which people have to appeal, and the general slowness of the legal system, we are often outside the 18 months. Therefore, the period within which we must serve a contravention notice has elapsed.

In addition, unauthorised work — that is, work undertaken out of our sight — often results in contraventions that are a danger to health and safety.

If that work has been completed for more than 12 months, we cannot serve a contravention notice. We can apply for an injunction for the removal or alteration of any contravening work.

However, the legal advice that we received states that that process is exceedingly expensive. In addition, courts expect requests for injunctions to be made in a timely manner. If the work was completed five or 10 years ago, an injunction is not timely; we will not win such cases. Our concern, therefore, is that there is an area of the Bill over which we have no control.

Paragraph 3.7.4 of the briefing note states that article 18A (1)(a) allows for a person upon whom a contravention notice has been served to submit a report to the council. That person has the right to appeal within a certain period. They also have the right to submit a report within a certain time; and after that submission, another appeal can be made. Indeed, a total period of 84 days is allowed for the report to be submitted. That period allows site work — if it is

ongoing — to continue for a considerable time before a decision is made on whether to proceed or withdraw the notice.

The facility of submitting a report is seldom used. The whole process would be speeded up if that facility was removed. Article 18 is not effective for us — it can prevent us from taking enforcement action. It gives the applicant certain appeal and legal rights; if we serve a contravention notice, the applicant can appeal against that notice, submit a report, etc.

Article 21 provides the right for councils to go straight to court when provisions are contravened. Therefore although the process is convoluted and difficult for us, we could — if we so wished — circumvent it and go straight to court. That scenario is unfair on the developer and the applicant. If we implement the provisions of article 21, lawyers seem to grant the applicant certain rights and then take those rights away.

We need a more effective procedure for processing contravention notices and taking legal action.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do you have any suggestions about how completion of work could be defined? Admittedly, that is a minefield, but could it not be taken as the date of the completion certificate?

Mr Dumigan: I realise that the Department intends to let the clock run from the day that the completion notice is issued. However, we have had experiences in court when, although a completion notice had not been given under current legislation, the work was deemed to have been finished. We had argued that the work had never been completed and, therefore, that we had the right to serve the notice long after the 18-month period. The magistrate countered that although the appropriate documentation was absent, it was not reasonable to argue that the house had not been completed. I accept that it is difficult to define the time of a work's completion, but it is critical that we do it.

Mr Beggs: You said that councils have 18 months from the completion of the works to serve a contravention notice. We have discussed to whom notices are served and occasions when you have been unable to locate the owner. Is the system being abused, inhibiting your ability to serve the appropriate notice? Could the proposed legislation give rise to such a situation?

Mr Dumigan: I have taken legal action on several occasions against builders who have subsequently claimed in court that they are not the builder.

I told the magistrate that he was on site and that he was directing the work. The man said that he was the foreman, but not the builder. There are difficulties in the legal process, as I am sure you all know. The t's must be crossed and the i's dotted, and one must go on

site and identify the builder, find out his name, where he is from and record those details. However, there have been instances when that has been difficult.

Mr Beggs: In supporting your wider interpretation earlier, I do not want deadlines to be missed because of technical difficulties in getting the appropriate person with the notice, and what you say supports the definition of a responsible person. That may stop people circumventing the law.

Mr Dumigan: It is not infrequent to go to court and have the defendant say that he is the wrong person.

The Deputy Chairperson: Should councils not have access to the contract that was established between the builder — the person who is carrying out the work — and the company that is doing the work on their behalf? Anyone involved in building projects knows that if there is a legal framework an agent is used. That agent must have legal documents that stipulate clearly the builder's name for insurance purposes and for other reasons. It should not be that difficult to find out the name of the builder.

Mr Dumigan: On many occasions there are no written contracts — especially with smaller works.

The Deputy Chairperson: You are referring mostly to smaller works; however, one would expect a contract with larger works.

Mr Dumigan: The situation is easier with larger works. However, the difficulty with larger works is knowing which member of the board of directors to serve notice on.

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes, or whether the work was subcontracted, and that can take you into another area.

Mr McQuillan: Surely that information can be found out through the planning process and the agent. Everything has to be advertised clearly.

Mr Dumigan: Not necessarily. Often applications are transferred from person to person. There have been difficulties in trying to identify the owner and the builder, and we do not have much power to demand that information.

Mr Rogan: Although we make that point, the provisions in the Bill are an improvement on the present situation. The reference to making false statements is also helpful, especially when filling out application forms. Traditionally, that has been misleading and frustrating for the local authority.

Dr Farry: My question is slightly tangential, but it relates to the issue. Does Building Control proceed, regardless of the payment of the fee? What is the legal link between payment of fees and the work? Are you honour-bound to inspect works, even though there is a default on the payment of fees?

Mr Reid: We are legally bound to carry out all our statutory inspections; it does not matter whether the fee is paid or not; we must carry out the full regime of enforcement. Fees relate to a separate piece of legislation, and we must pursue their payment separately. We cannot refuse to do our work or to issue completion notices.

Dr Farry: How big a problem is non payment or default on payment of fees?

Mr Reid: It is quite a big problem, and it is increasing with the drop in the industry and the number of commencements.

Dr Farry: Is that covered by the long title of the Bill or are you suggesting that it is a parallel piece of legislation?

Mr Reid: Prescribed fees is a separate piece of legislation.

Dr Farry: In the longer term, would it be advantageous to change the law to require payment of fees before certificates are issued?

Mr Reid: Yes. I have always advocated that.

Mr Rogan: I agree with Mr Reid. A link could be made between the issuing of the certificate and the fee, and that would strengthen our position. If a fee is not paid but work has commenced, that is an issue concerning different legal opinions. For example, in entertainment licensing legislation the local authority in Belfast has explained that the application is not legitimate if everything is not made up front, including the fee. Local authority building controls tend to be customer-focused. The industry tends to make last-minute decisions due to cash flow and other constraints.

When an application is lodged, it suits us to go through with the inspection process anyway, because undertaking the process that Mr Dumigan explained — the issue of contraventions — is much more difficult and is a burden on the rate payer. We would rather try to achieve compliance through negotiation and discussion as opposed to formal legal action because that could become a rate-borne activity and could go beyond what the prescribed fees are intended for.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: Can you elaborate on article 19?

Mr Dumigan: Article 19 covers the deposit of plans to be of no effect after a certain interval. At present, if plans are submitted for building works and are not commenced within three years of the date of that submission, councils can declare them to be null and void. However, what seems to happen is that developers will start to build a site of 100 houses, for example,

and say that if one house has been started the whole site has been started. That site could then run for years, building to standards that could be long outdated. In fact, there have been recent instances of people building to 1973 standards.

Our concern — and we have spoken to the Department about this — is that building to lower standards should not happen in this day and age. There should be some mechanism whereby houses that have not been started on a site should have to comply with current building regulation standards.

I understand that the Department is of a mind that that can be addressed in secondary legislation, but our concern is that that will not deal with the thousands of sites that are in the pipeline. Thermal standards were raised at the end of 2006, and Building Control across Northern Ireland was swamped with applications for houses. The obvious intention of developers was to get planning permission before the new standards were introduced. We are concerned that all that is still in the pipeline. It could go on for many years, and we are anxious to ensure that there is some mechanism to allow us to declare that those plans will be null and void.

Mr Beggs: I support that measure. Householders could purchase houses and could be unaware that they are inefficient. Why should the new standards not be adopted in order to provide more sustainable buildings and deal with energy requirements in the future?

The Deputy Chairperson: A situation could arise where houses could be built that do not comply with current standards, because somebody received approval several years ago. There are probably houses that have been built recently that only comply with standards that were in place in the 1970s or 1980s.

Mr Beggs: Would that cover issues such as disability access?

The Deputy Chairperson: Such cases would not have to comply with disability regulations.

Mr Beggs: That has strengthened my view on the issue.

Mr Reid: It is important that “commencement” be defined: on occasions, developers have started minor drainage work but claimed that a site has been started. The legislation needs to define “commencement”.

The Deputy Chairperson: The definition of commencement is also relevant to planning applications. A site entrance may be opened, but the site might lie dormant for years, yet such sites are deemed as having commenced material works.

Mr Dumigan: Proposed new article 19A relates to the maintenance of registers by district councils. Councils keep registers, and we are concerned that suppliers and builders have access to those registers. I

extended my house recently, so I know that people who are doing building work are inundated with junk mail from those people. The public should be protected from that sort of abuse, because that is not what the registers are there for. I am not sure how that abuse can be eradicated, because there is perhaps a requirement on us to provide that information under the Data Protection Act 1998.

If the Department specifies that we have to provide information, all of that information will be available. However, access to the registers is a difficulty.

The Deputy Chairperson: The minute that a planning application is advertised in a newspaper, the applicant will receive notification from a local builder because it is in the public domain; I am sure that we all have been subjected to that at some stage.

Ms Purvis: There is an edited version of the electoral register, on which people can request to be included. That may be one way of keeping information from manufacturers, suppliers and builders. Planning applications will be published in the press, but it will be up to the builders, for instance, to work harder to chase that up.

Mr Beggs: I am not sure how councils could restrict access to registers under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Mr Rogan: The Land and Property Service's chief executive and director of operations will be attending the Committee later today. The register that is kept by district councils could perhaps be expanded to facilitate the rating legislation. That ties in with what was said earlier about harmonising definitions. We have to deal with linkage across the various legislations.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will move on to the additional issues.

Mr Dumigan: Building Control has powers to enforce dangerous buildings legislation and so protect the public. However, some of that legislation was drafted in 1847 — the year of the famine; it needs to be brought up to date. We are not even certain whether it can be legally applied outside towns because the legislation was the Towns Improvements Clauses Act 1847, and it related to towns only. We are not sure how much of it has been transferred. We have taken a great deal of legal opinion, but even the lawyers are uncertain of our legal standing.

We asked the Department to include that in the Bill, which it did. However, the definition was so broad that it appeared that we would apply dangerous buildings legislation to anybody who did something that was dangerous when involved in new build. That is not what we intended. It was intended that the legislation would apply to existing property, not to property under

construction. The Department's action, therefore, was too broad.

In its wisdom, the Department realised that the legislation would need more consideration, so it removed the provision dealing with dangerous buildings. However, the Bill should include power to make legislation; if it does not, responsibility for the current legislation will lie in another Department. I am not certain whether another Department would be interested in undertaking that responsibility.

As we are dealing with buildings, the Bill should be more of a one-stop shop that deals with new buildings and dangerous buildings; then the public should know that it is all focused in one area.

We are anxious that the opportunity be taken now to provide for the power rather than for the regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson: Should DFP hold the power for dealing with dangerous buildings or should the councils hold it?

Mr Dumigan: The power should be held by the councils.

The Deputy Chairperson: DFP said that the issue of dangerous buildings must be further researched and evaluated before firm provisions are made. Do you agree?

Mr Dumigan: Yes, and we suggest that the power to make the regulations be taken now. The regulations would be made later.

Ms J McCann: Could the dangerous buildings legislation be broadened to include a provision that, when the site is under construction but work is not taking place, would make the site safer for people who live in the vicinity, particularly young children? When a building is completed, roads and footpaths that had been dug up as a result of the construction must be replaced. Could the legislation be extended to cover that?

Mr Reid: Most of those issues are covered by health and safety legislation and the construction, design and management (CDM) regulations when work is ongoing. The contractor has a responsibility to the general public to ensure that a site is safe. The existing legislation, to which the Roads Service is subject, covers the restoration of footpaths; the Water Service and other agencies are also subject to legislation. It would be difficult to apply the dangerous buildings legislation to the type of situation that was mentioned. I appreciate such problems arise, but they are already covered by legislation.

Ms J McCann: It is not enforced enough.

Mr Reid: I did not say that it was.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will now discuss harmonisation of regulations.

Mr Dumigan: General press releases, trade magazines and television programmes say that new building regulations are being introduced; however, they are being introduced in England, not here. That causes confusion about what regulations are applicable. Moreover, the requirements in England and Wales are similar but slightly different from those here. The requirements in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland are also similar but slightly different from those here. The trade literature to advise architects and builders how to comply must be spelled out in four different jurisdictions.

It causes confusion, so we want the Bill to include an aspirational requirement for the Department to try to harmonise regulations, even if that only includes their introduction; if that were done, these islands would introduce the same measures at the same time. Most of the legislation comes from the European Union anyway. The harmonisation of regulations would benefit the industry and the profession.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there an argument that Northern Ireland requires to do things differently?

Mr Dumigan: We acknowledge that that is your right; that is why there is an Assembly. I heard the same argument in the National Assembly for Wales. Scotland also has autonomy. Our suggestion is for each of the legislative bodies to get together to discuss the issue, as it would be beneficial if the regulations were given the same names. In Northern Ireland, fire safety is covered by part E of the regulations; part B of the Building Regulations 2000, which covers England and Wales, refers to fire safety; and in Scotland it is covered by another part of its regulations. That leads to total confusion.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will move on to the issue of backland development.

Mr Dumigan: I am sure that the Committee is aware that the issue of builders making use of backland development has been prevalent recently. On several occasions, access for the Fire Service and refuse lorries has been impossible. Those services cannot get access under arches to get to a development. We have spoken to colleagues in the Planning Service and to other colleagues, and it appears that there is no control over that difficulty. There are developments to which the Fire Service could not get access if there were a fire. That is a serious issue that must be addressed.

Mr Rogan: In the consultation on part J of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, we spoke to the Department, which emphasised that much of the backland development restricts access for refuse lorries and cleansing services. We ask that that be considered in the review of the regulations, particularly part J or, if required, in the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is serious if a development is under construction but cannot be accessed by the Fire Service.

Mr Rogan: There are examples, one of which is in Moira.

The Deputy Chairperson: In my constituency a couple of years ago, the Housing Executive had to demolish some of its properties because the Fire Service could not access them.

Mr Reid: In a village in Fermanagh, there are three houses in a backland development that cannot be accessed. To get access from behind the development, the developers are negotiating to use Housing Executive development land. However, the residents there do not want that to happen, so it is in a kind of no-man's-land at the moment.

Mr Beggs: Is that because a Department has failed at the planning stage? If so, which one? Alternatively, has there been a failure in the planning legislation?

Mr Reid: There is no onus on the Planning Service to discuss its proposals with us. The Planning Service is given permission for the layout and design of a scheme; we cannot control that in our legislation.

Mr Beggs: I may take query elsewhere. If the Fire Service were consulted even at the planning stage, the situation would be improved.

Mr Rogan: Under the draft houses in multiple occupation (HMO) plan, councils are consulted on waste, fire safety and part R of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) on building issues. However, that is only under the draft HMO plan. Better consultation is required, and there should be a body that can ensure that proper access is a requirement.

Mr Beggs: Can Building Control refuse to approve plans if there is no fire access?

Mr Reid: No.

Mr Beggs: If Building Control had that power, it could assess buildings with drawings to determine whether there was fire access.

Mr Reid: That issue should be dealt with at the planning stage of a development before building permission is granted.

The Deputy Chairperson: That raises my concern about the planning process and the building control regulations — in some cases, it seems that never the twain shall meet and that they live in separate silos. That is a huge issue. Surely it should be incumbent on the Planning Service to take cognisance of the basic important element of safety. There is a pre-consultation with planning in building regulations and planning applications, so there should be consultation between the Planning Service and Building Control. I assume

that Building Control is not a statutory consultee in planning applications.

Mr Dumigan: That is correct.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do you regard being a statutory consultee as a valuable tool?

Mr Rogan: Building Control is a proposed statutory consultee under the draft HMO plan.

The Deputy Chairperson: However, not in normal circumstances.

Mr Rogan: No; the local authority is the statutory consultee, but it does not prescribe building regulations, which is difficult and tends to be on matters of pollution control and contaminated land.

In his review of social housing in England and Wales that the Government commissioned, John Calcutt links planning conditions, local authorities and warranty systems.

Mr Reid: Under RPA, all the planning powers will go back to councils — I say that facetiously.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is a salient point.

Mr Reid: It is easier to organise and take on board.

The Deputy Chairperson: We are running over time, so I invite John to continue. If Members have any specific questions, feel free to raise them.

Mr Dumigan: The building industry is the most dangerous industry in the country, yet it seems to be self-regulated. There appears to be no robust inspection regime in place to ensure that things are done safely; it is mostly reactive as opposed to proactive.

We are particularly concerned about the demolition of buildings. Responsibility for that lies with the Health and Safety Executive, but we are of a mind that control of demolitions should lie with Building Control, because we would be reactive as we already inspect buildings. The Pointer database of addresses for the whole of Northern Ireland has been established; however, it lacks information on demolished properties, so the data are incomplete. No one holds such information, but if we were given that responsibility we could help to fill the gap. Our recommendation is that the Committee consider making regulations to control demolitions. In effect, Building Control could become a one-stop shop.

Mr Rogan: Most demolition is a precursor to reconstruction, which brings Building Control on site. We could ensure proactive measures to ensure that we control the whole demolition process.

The Deputy Chairperson: Who controls demolition at present?

Mr Dumigan: It is largely self-regulated, but it falls to the Health and Safety Executive. If something goes wrong, the executive will investigate.

Mr Rogan: Planning approval is required before the demolition of listed buildings and other proscribed buildings, but it is not necessary for other aspects of demolition.

Mr Dumigan: The Health and Safety Executive does not control a demolition. Representatives from the building industry have strongly suggested that we need a published programme of proposed new regulations so that people know what is in the pipeline. They have also suggested that when amendments to regulations are introduced, there should be a breathing space of three or four years to allow people to catch up with the new requirements. After that, further amendments could be introduced. However, there was a major upheaval when the last amendment was introduced in 2006. We have still not come to terms with that, and it is still disturbing Building Control and the industry. We merely suggest a system that is better planned.

The Deputy Chairperson: The amendments are driven by EU directives; therefore, in many regards, they are beyond our control.

Mr Dumigan: I accept that. However, we suggest that amendments be controlled and phased.

Mr Reid: England and Wales are reviewing the situation; they recommend a periodic review of building regulations every three years to allow the building industry to forward-plan rather than have continual changes, which happens at the moment.

The Deputy Chairperson: What about existing buildings?

Mr Dumigan: It might be appropriate to take on that power, because in future we may wish to apply regulations retrospectively. We might never wish to do that, but we will not get an opportunity like this for some time, so we should build in that power now.

The Deputy Chairperson: Would there be an enforcement issue? How would we police something like that?

Mr Dumigan: If someone wanted to upgrade buildings thermally, they would simply make an application in the normal way, saying that the buildings require that work. There is much talk of climate change and saving the planet, so we could take this opportunity to require buildings to be more energy-efficient. If the regulations could be applied to the existing building stock, it might help the situation. We are not saying that the regulations should be brought in; we are merely suggesting future-proofing and providing a power to carry out the work if necessary.

Energy-performance certificates, which Committee members will be aware of, are one method of doing what John suggests, but, in relation to schedule 1, we understand that there is provision to allow for application of building regulations to existing building stock.

Ms J McCann: Do you consider it important to have renewable-energy equipment installed in new buildings, in view of the debate about renewable energy?

Mr Rogan: I am aware of that debate. We have to try to achieve compliance with the building regulations. The building regulations are functional in the sense that they are not prescriptive; prescriptive regulations go against the ethos of our performance-based standards. Our argument is that the current regulations — particularly the energy conservation regulations — include provision for the regeneration of power. Therefore we are absolutely not against regeneration and micro-regeneration.

Our problem is that the economic payback is difficult. We will encounter resistance when we are interfacing with the applicants and trying to ensure compliance with a technology that is not financially beneficial, because, ultimately, the cost of the technology is always passed on to the end-user. Therefore we will encounter resistance to all the regulations. The current provisions give consideration to the micro-regeneration industry; however, the question of whether renewable-energy equipment should be installed in new buildings must be considered from the wider perspective of achieving the overall objective, which is to reduce carbon emissions.

Mr Dumigan: Building Control is unanimous on that. There are certain circumstances in which renewable energy does not work — for example, if a house is not south-facing, a solar panel will not work as well as it would if the house were south-facing. Therefore it is not appropriate to put solar panels there; photovoltaics will never pay back. Similarly, if 500 houses burn wood pellets, a person will need breathing apparatus to be able to live on that estate. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes, there are practical implications.

Mr Dumigan: It would be very difficult to make the installation of renewable energy equipment mandatory.

Ms J McCann: At last week's Committee meeting, we met people who gave a good presentation about why we should be changing to renewable energy sources in the long term. Using renewable energy sources could also have a social and economic benefit, for example, by insulating the homes of people living in disadvantaged areas. Any initiative should be cost-effective as well as being environmentally friendly, but both objectives could be achieved in the long term.

Mr Dumigan: I do not believe that small schemes will ever achieve what the Committee might want them to — such schemes will not save the planet. The Committee must look at the large scale; for example, wind farms and tidal schemes, such as the one in Strangford Lough, which the Committee should visit. Large-scale projects will provide the answer to the problem of energy consumption rather than small-scale projects.

Mr Rogan: One of our difficulties is that we are always tasked with measuring our performance, and we therefore measure many outputs. One of the things that we must measure to be effective — and it is a challenge for every Department — is the outcome of what we are trying to achieve. What we are trying to achieve is compliance with the regulations, and what we are trying to achieve with that particular regulation is CO2 reduction.

Some lobbyists confuse the debate between energy diversification and CO2 emissions. We can meet the CO2 emission target in areas such as the power generation sector, which John mentioned. However, that outcome is covered by the provisions in part F.

We know that provisions are in place to further reduce CO2 emissions. Perhaps that will attract micro-regeneration or larger-scale regeneration, which would result in the economic benefits starting to kick in. However, making such provisions prescriptive goes against the concept of functional-based regulations.

Mr Dumigan: I want to put on record my acknowledgement of the excellent working relationship that we have with the Department of Finance and Personnel, which is a good example of joined-up government. We communicate regularly with each other, we do not work in silos and there has been contact about the Bill.

We are making the Committee aware that during our debates with the Department, we got some, but not all, of what we wanted. We have listed for the Committee the issues that we feel were not addressed, and we were glad of the opportunity to do so.

Mr O'Loan: This has been a useful session. As we anticipated, the bodies that the witnesses represent have been closely involved with the Department on the issue. They have a high level of expertise, and they have made some important points.

The witnesses' submission makes 15 recommendations, one or two of which would probably require considerable work — even to formulate the recommendations. However, most of the recommendations have merit.

Our task, in conjunction with making recommendations to the Department, is to turn those recommendations into workable amendments. Not to

use the valuable information that we have received during this session would be a huge mistake.

The Deputy Chairperson: I thank the witnesses for their attendance today. This has been a useful session and has given us more detail and information that we can use as we move the process forward.

Do members agree that it would be useful to forward the witnesses' submission and the Hansard report of today's proceedings to DFP?

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

10 April 2008

CHARITIES BILL (NIA 9/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Fred Cobain
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Kieran Doyle	} Department for Social Development
Mr Seamus Murray	

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Hilditch): The Department for Social Development is represented by Seamus Murray and Kieran Doyle; you are very welcome. We will begin the session by going through the amendments that were discussed at last week's meeting. The Committee is to agree the wording of the proposed amendments. Gentlemen, do you have anything to add on those proposed amendments, or are you happy to proceed?

Mr Seamus Murray (Department for Social Development): We are happy to proceed.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 2 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department. Does the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 3 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department. Does the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 16 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department. Does the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will now continue with the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Charities Bill.

Clauses 74 to 86 agreed to.

Clause 87 (Persons disqualified for being trustees of a charity)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee sought a possible amendment to clause 87 to include the disqualification of trustees who had been removed from office in other jurisdictions in which charity legislation exists.

Mr Murray: Under clauses 87(7)(e) and 87(7)(f), trustees who are disqualified in England and Wales, and Scotland, will also be disqualified in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland's legislation has not yet been enacted, so parity with it could not be included in the Bill until that legislation is in place. However, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, met the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív, last month about ensuring consistency in the operation of legislation between North and South. That process will continue; on 2 May, we will meet officials from the South and have further discussions with them. We will seek to ensure that the exchange of information on trustee disqualification will be taken forward in Northern Ireland.

The situation outside the UK and Ireland is perhaps more difficult in that the interpretation of the concept of charity and charity legislation is diverse. Legislation in other countries that defines a charity does not equate with that of European countries so it is difficult to have that arrangement. However, the UK and Ireland forum, and the international charity regulators forum, which shares information on issues to do with trustees, is a possible solution to that.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is the Department content that the legislation can be amended when the legislation in Ireland is enacted?

Mr Murray: A possible amendment would take that on board. The proposed legislation is the best that can currently be done. As we move forward with the Republic of Ireland, we will look for either a change to our legislation or a memorandum of understanding between the two Departments.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 87 agreed to.

Clauses 88 to 95 agreed to.

Clause 96 (Winding up)

Mr Murray: Clauses 96 to 104 deal with charitable companies. As was previously flagged up to the Committee, the introduction of the Companies Act 2006 across the UK has implications for the Charities Bill, not only in Northern Ireland but across the UK. In the majority of cases, that part of the Charities Bill will make technical changes to update references in the Companies Act 2006 from the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. It will bring parity with England, Scotland and Wales on the impact of the 2006 Act on charities legislation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 96 agreed to.

Clauses 97 to 121 agreed to.

Clause 122 (Power to transfer all property of unincorporated charity)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee sought an amendment to clause 122 to provide for an exception for a transfer of designated land that has a very low value.

Mr Murray: We have discussed that proposed amendment with the Minister, and we have taken on board the concerns of the Committee. There is a degree of value in the deregulation of that. The Department proposes an amendment to clause 122(1)(b) to include

“or has designated land of a low value, and the Commission has been notified prior to the transfer”.

That would provide for designation to a small charity that holds land to effect a transfer. That amendment is subject to advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel, for which we are currently waiting.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 122, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 123 to 126 agreed to.

Clause 127 (Power of unincorporated charities to spend capital: general)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee sought a possible amendment to clause 127 to consider a point that was made by the Charity Commission for England and Wales in relation to endowment funds.

Mr Murray: The Department discussed the matter with colleagues on the Charity Commission for

England and Wales and with the Office of the Legislative Counsel. The recommendation is that we wait for amendments to English legislation to see how those are enacted. After that, we should consider making changes to the legislation rather than making a change now.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 127 agreed to.

Clauses 128 and 129 agreed to.

Clause 130 (Regulation of public charitable collections)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee expressed concern that clauses 130 to 148 in Chapter 1 of Part 13 do not apply to Internet funding and asked the Department to provide information on how that is regulated in other jurisdictions.

Mr Murray: Work on Internet fund-raising is evolving. It is extremely difficult to regulate, and any regulation of the Internet is difficult in itself. The Department has discussed the matter with other charity regulators and is compiling advice and guidance. The Institute of Fundraising covers Great Britain, and it issued a code of practice on Internet fund-raising that is available to charities in Northern Ireland.

When the charity commission for Northern Ireland is established, the Department intends to consider Internet fund-raising and issue appropriate guidance based on best practice elsewhere. At this stage, it is not possible to create an amendment that would have any impact.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee is content that regulations on Internet funding are not appropriate at this stage.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 130 agreed to.

Clauses 131 to 133 agreed to.

Clause 134 (Restrictions on conducting door to door collections)

Mr Murray: Fairly late in the day, the Committee received correspondence on permits for public collections from the Association of Charity Shops.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does the correspondence relate to clause 134?

Mr Murray: It also relates to other clauses in Chapter 1. The Association of Charity Shops expressed concern about the permit requirements in Northern Ireland. The Department had further discussions with the association and with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The flexibility in the current

legislation allows the requirements for permits to vary, and such variation can be applied to charity shops that carry out door-to-door collections. Therefore, the Department does not consider that an amendment is required to the legislation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 134 agreed to.

Clauses 135 to 141 agreed to.

Clause 142 (Applications for permits to conduct public charitable collections)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Association of Charity Shops expressed concerns about permit requirements. The association's proposed amendment to clause 142(1) is to add the words "in a public place" after "public charitable collection". The association claims that that would allow the proposed amendment to clause 134 to be made, and it would bring the provisions of Part 13 into line with the provisions of the Charities Act 2006 that apply in England and Wales. The new wording would also mirror the wording in clause 143(1). The Committee has already agreed to clause 134.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 142 agreed to.

Clauses 143 to 149 agreed to.

Clause 150 (Professional fund-raisers, etc. required to indicate institutions benefiting and arrangements for remuneration)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Department has had sight of the submission from the charity shops that was tabled this morning.

Mr Murray: Clause 150 has a twin purpose. It protects the public by ensuring the accountability of charitable collections, including door-to-door collections, such as those that use black bags. It also protects charities from bogus collections.

The potential abuse of door-to-door collections, or black bag collections as they have become more commonly known, has attracted much media attention and some political interest. Therefore, the clause is targeted at that issue.

The Department noted and considered the concerns of the Association of Charity Shops, having received its submission only today. We studied the submission alongside the legislation as drafted. The association recommends that a leaflet be submitted to the individual householder when a black bag collection is being carried out. The leaflet would outline how the householder could find out more information on the details of the collection from another media: perhaps

through a telephone call to the charity or electronically on the organisation's website.

The Department's view is that the twin aspects of accountability for the charity and the public are provided for in the legislation. Any leaflet could detail the nature, timing and purpose of the collection and the name of the charity responsible. Therefore, the legislation as drafted is sufficient to provide dual accountability in Northern Ireland.

The Department is aware of ongoing discussions on the matter between the Association of Charity Shops and the Office of the Third Sector in England and briefly discussed the issue with them this morning. We will keep an eye on how the situation develops. However, at present we do not consider that the legislation needs to be amended to ensure that public accountability is maintained.

Mrs McGill: Seamus, you commented on the submission from the Association of Charity Shops. Why did that arrive when the Committee is considering the clauses? Is it a late submission?

The Committee Clerk: Last night, David Moir contacted me to say that the Association of Charity Shops had only realised the implications of clauses 150 and 151. He asked whether he could submit a document. Given that the Committee was due to discuss the clauses today, and that it is important to consider any serious concerns that the association may have, I agreed to accept the submission and circulate it to the Committee.

Mr Murray: None of the charity shops raised the issue during the public consultation process, and the Association of Charity Shops engaged with the Office of the Third Sector within the past three weeks. Only recently, therefore, was the issue also raised in England and Wales.

Mrs McGill: Is the issue important? Are we really discussing the matter as such? It is extremely late to be doing so.

The Committee Clerk: I received the submission only last night. I could not circulate it to members more quickly than I did. The Department also had sight of the submission and has provided an explanation. Therefore, it is for the Committee to decide whether it is content with the Department's explanation and, for the protection of other charities and the public, with the legislation as drafted.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 150 agreed to.

Clauses 151 to 158 agreed to.

Clause 159 (Power of Department to give financial assistance to charitable, benevolent or philanthropic institutions)

Mr Murray: The Department determined that clause 159 is not required, as it is a duplication of existing powers in Northern Ireland, as provided by the Social Need (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. As members know, approximately 90% of the Bill has been taken from the Charities Act 2006 in England. The Act included that particular power because of concern in the House across the water about insufficient coverage of how grants should be provided by the then Active Communities Directorate, which is now the Office of the Third Sector. The Department's view is that the clause is a duplication and, therefore, surplus to the requirements of the Bill. We sought legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office to confirm that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negated.

Clause 159 disagreed to.

Clauses 160 to 163 agreed to.

Clause 164 (Effect of registering charity merger on gifts to transferor)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee sought a possible amendment to clause 164 to make provision for any gift that takes effect on, or after, the date of transfer to take effect as a gift to the transferee.

Mr Murray: The Department has taken a strong view and has sought legal advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel. We believe that the possibility of losing the benefit of a gift between the date of a merger and the date of registration should act as a strong incentive to ensure that registration is proceeded with at haste. Therefore, an amendment is not required.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 164 agreed to.

Clause 165 (Application of Act in relation to designated religious charities)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee asked the Department to consider how the clause could be amended to reflect that any Order made by the Department to extend exemptions to charities in that area should be approved by resolution of the Assembly.

Mr Murray: The Department agrees that clause 165(3) be amended to reflect provisions in clause 167(7).

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 165, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 166 (Designation, etc. of religious charities)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee asked the Department to consider the criteria applied to applications for designated religious charity status.

Mr Murray: This issue attracted interest in the Committee and among religious, faith-based bodies. We had lengthy discussions with the Minister, and she has agreed to remove clause 166(3)(d), which relates to membership in Northern Ireland, and, secondly, to reduce the requirement in clause 166(3)(c) from 10 years to five years. The charity commission will retain sufficient powers to execute its responsibilities and to ensure that bodies that receive designated religious status exercise proper governance.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome the changes. My colleague Jonathan Craig had to step out and thanks the departmental officials and the Minister for accepting the changes.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 166, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 167 (Institutions which are not charities under the law of Northern Ireland)

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee asked the Department to consider how the clause could be amended to make it clear that there is a link between it and clause 16.

Mr Murray: Only those charities, as defined in clause 1, are registrable under clause 16. It is not appropriate to include clause 167 institutions in the register kept under clause 16 because those institutions are registered elsewhere. Therefore, no amendment is required. Those clause 167 charities will be neither exempt from registering or reporting to the charity commission nor from demonstrating their public accountability regarding operation in Northern Ireland. That reflects regulations that exist in other parts of the UK and that will exist in the Republic of Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will there be a parallel register?

Mr Murray: Yes, there will be.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 167 agreed to.

Clauses 168 to 186 agreed to.

Schedules 1 to 9 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Deputy Chairperson: I thank Mr Murray and Mr Doyle for their co-operation in scrutinising the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mr Murray: On my behalf and that of my colleagues, I thank the Committee for its time; it is probably the last occasion that we will meet on this subject. It has been a positive, if somewhat laborious, engagement, which has been important for the progress of the legislation. I thank all members, as well as the Committee Clerk and her staff, who have been very supportive during the process.

Mr Cobain: You will go far, Seamus. *[Laughter.]*

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

16 April 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Peter Weir

Witness:

Mr Trevor Martin	}	Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee
------------------	---	--

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): Before we begin, I remind everyone that as electronic devices interfere with the recording equipment, they must be switched off completely; it is not sufficient to turn them to silent mode.

Members will find the briefing paper from the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) in their papers. I welcome Trevor Martin from NIBRAC, who I invite to make some introductory remarks.

Mr Trevor Martin (Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee): Good morning. I do not want to go through the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill, because NIBRAC — of which I am chairman — was behind the Bill and was involved in its drafting. Instead, I will spend 10 minutes telling the Committee a little bit about NIBRAC and our involvement in the consultation process. I will pick up on the key issues about which members have asked some of my colleagues and which have been highlighted in the Committee papers.

As I said, I am chairman of NIBRAC. For my sins, I am also head of building control at Belfast City Council. I have been in the industry for about 30 years, working in both the public and private sector, and, at one time, for the Government. I have been chairman of NIBRAC for the past four years and a member for five years. NIBRAC is an advisory committee that was set up by the Government to advise on the introduction of the building regulations.

NIBRAC comprises 16 members who were appointed as individuals, rather than on behalf of their professions or employers. They represent the industry and are appointed under Nolan Commission rules. They are therefore subject to rules on confidentiality, vested interests and so on. NIBRAC meets three or four times each year, but its subcommittees, particularly one that would meet to discuss the Bill, meets much more frequently. I am an ex-officio member of subcommittees.

The members of the subcommittee that considered the Bill have all since left NIBRAC; indeed, some have retired from the industry. However, Orla McCann of Disability Action chaired that subcommittee. She cannot attend today, but she has seen the papers that I have presented, and she is perfectly happy with their content.

The public consultations on the Bill were held in 2004 and 2005, and there was a good response rate to them. We worked with the Department on those responses, and we tried to address all the issues that were raised — we did not shirk any of the matters that were mentioned. We also dealt with suggestions that members of NIBRAC made about the way in which to proceed with the proposals. To get the process to the Assembly, we had to draw a line under our deliberations at some point, because issues kept cropping up all the time. However, we drew that line under a point that included as many elements as possible at that time.

Under direct rule, an Order would be subject to review only every 25 to 30 years. That being the case, it was essential to include as much as possible in the Bill. Life is easier now that the Assembly has been restored. If amendments to regulations are needed, we can bring them to the Assembly, subject to the available parliamentary time. Therefore, we do not have to agonise over the process, but adjustments may be needed in future, and it is easier to do that under the current system.

Some aspects of the Bill caused debate. The move from technical booklets to approved documents is a great improvement of which the industry heartily approved. It means that we can introduce other types of guidance into the regulations, and it frees up certain matters.

District councils carrying out type approvals is to be welcomed — that is an essential element of any regulatory jigsaw. It always seemed bizarre that 26 councils operated one set of regulations, yet people had to apply separately to each council for approval under what was, essentially, the same set of regulations. Therefore, the inclusion of this provision is fundamentally a major improvement and a good move that will save time and money. For architects, it provides conformity of interpretation across the Province, given that one big issue for them is that different councils ask for different things.

The main issue for Building Control is the establishment of a mechanism that will make such conformity happen. Type approvals exist in England and Wales, where the mechanism is voluntary. That works in some ways but not in others. In Northern Ireland, such a mechanism is necessary. One of the big challenges for Building Control — and for me — is to get such a mechanism in place. With the review of public administration (RPA), that will be easier, and Building Control officials are considering it.

The type of information that district councils keep on registers is not an issue. Most councils keep much more information than is required. In planning, all the information is in the public domain, and rightly so. However, Building Control information is always privileged between the applicant and the council. In the past, Building Control officials have been uncertain as to whether to release information. The Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 mean that it is good for the industry that there is clarity about what information in registers the Department may make public.

One other issue is dangerous buildings and places, which the Committee has already discussed. That matter arose because councils sometimes use complex and archaic legislation to deal with that. Were that matter included in the Buildings Regulations (Amendment) Bill, it could make life easier by modernising how dangerous buildings and places are dealt with. The issue arose late in the consultation process. The problem with it was that when the Department tried to draft a form of words to address the problem, it sometimes ended up with a draft that was worse than the current regulations. As head of building control in Belfast City Council, I can say that the Belfast Improvement Act 1878 was better than the regulations that we were drafting for 2008. The decision to remove that provision from the Bill and give it more thought was sound. I take most of my management theories from Winnie the Pooh: Winnie got stuck in honey pots and rabbit holes because he did not think over things carefully. It would therefore not be a bad idea to consider that matter more carefully.

Harmonisation of building regulations across Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom would be a good thing, but any devolved legislature should be able to move further than others in the rest of the United Kingdom on certain issues if it so wishes. Some issues are peculiar to Northern Ireland, and we may want to move on those, but they should not be subject to harmonisation.

When the Bill was being drafted, NIBRAC studied the Scottish building regulations and those in England and Wales. The committee's unanimous view was that the local authority building control system that we have in Northern Ireland was the best, and we were perfectly happy with it. Most committee members felt that local authority services were good, but that they may need to be tweaked and improved. Harmonisation would apply to regulations, not to the system. Sometimes we get things right in Northern Ireland, and it is not necessary to copy the systems that are employed in England and Wales or Scotland.

It is essential that NIBRAC agree a programme of work with the Department, but pre-programmed amendments are submitted all the time. Things must be subject to cyclical change. European directives also influence the programme of work, but vested-interest groups can now lobby the Assembly through the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which can then ask the Department to introduce new items on the programme or to move things up the agenda. Therefore, an opportunity exists to influence the programme.

I congratulate the Department of Finance and Personnel on the introduction of the regulations. The Department introduced part F of the building regulations, which related to thermal energy. That was a massive change in the regulations, and it was a model for other jurisdictions. The industry in England and Wales was given only 16 days before their introduction, whereas the Department here gave three months' notice, which was a lot of time. Therefore, what we did in Northern Ireland was a model for other jurisdictions.

Finally, I want to touch on building regulations and microgeneration, mainly because it has raised its head in the Committee and in the industry. I gave a couple of media interviews, and in one I was painted as being somewhere to the right of Attila the Hun and George W Bush. Microgeneration and building regulations are huge issues. If global warming is the biggest problem facing the world, we must tackle it. However, one can get into an emotional battle about such issues, and sometimes we can lose all reason and logic. Indeed, we started to stray when we reached that point in the debate.

The advisory committee discussed the issue at great length, and it is absolutely committed to the reduction

of carbon emissions. However, we thought that Peter Hain's announcement was not the best route to follow. We welcomed Minister Robinson's announcement, and the committee's recommendation on that matter was unanimous.

The committee does not comprise housebuilders, and the only person who could possibly profess to having any interest in house building is one member from the National House-Building Council (NHBC). Two academics are on our committee — Professor Chris Tweed and Dr Patrick Waterfield. They are experts in their field, and they agreed that there are better ways of cutting CO2 emissions. The committee therefore recommended that we can introduce microgeneration by other methods.

Building regulations are about outcomes. The Department or the Government should state the outcome that we need to achieve; it should be a matter for the industry to find out the best method of achieving it, and the solution should be imposed by Government.

That is all that I wish to say. I wanted to raise those issues, say a little about NIBRAC, and offer the Committee an opportunity to ask me any questions on what I have said or on any other parts of the industry.

Mr F McCann: Trevor has asked most of my questions and answered them at the same time.

Mr Martin: Like any good officer.

Mr F McCann: You should always be careful about mentioning Belfast to Committee members as some of them are liable to jump all over you. With regard to health and safety, how can Building Control staff help to protect people on building sites, especially in light of some of the recent injuries and deaths on building sites across the North?

Mr Martin: Northern Ireland is unique in that building control is the responsibility of the local authorities. That is not the case in England and Wales, because building control there has been privatised. Building control professionals in Northern Ireland can play a role in areas other than those that are related to building regulations. Anybody can consider building regulations: it consists of looking at a drawing; assessing it; stamping it; and checking the works on site.

Building control is a wider issue. There is a series of professionals in the 26 councils who could be used in a wider field, one of which is health and safety. There are approximately 300 building control professionals on site in Northern Ireland at any one time, and they could add greatly to the work of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), because they would provide another set of eyes and ears on building sites. That has to happen, and the Assembly and councils must examine that opportunity and see what value the

building control staff can add. A recent incident in Belfast, in which a floor collapsed, might well have been prevented had we taken a more proactive role. Building control professionals could, therefore, play a larger role.

It is crucial that the building control professionals have the basis for the building regulations, because that is what gives them their financial basis on which to add the extra value, and it provides the intelligence. The work on building regulations that is carried out by building control professionals can add greatly to the work of the industry.

Mr Beggs: You said that academics have determined that microgeneration is not the best method of obtaining renewable energy at this time and that increasing the insulation of a building is more effective. Nevertheless, microgeneration will become a more viable and relevant option in the future. Should a relevant provision be included in the Bill now so that it will be less difficult to introduce regulations on that matter in the future?

Mr Martin: The Bill amends the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 by including microgeneration, and it mentions CO2 and greenhouse gases. The building regulations are not against microgeneration. Let me take off my NIBRAC hat and don another: if global warming is the biggest problem facing the world, we should address it holistically. However, we are not doing that. Rather, it is being addressed in a piecemeal fashion: the planners introduce PPS18; somebody else brings in micro-generation; and somebody else gives out grants. That means that three or four Departments are dealing with it.

Last year, I wrote an article for 'Agenda NI' in which I said that one Minister — namely Minister Foster — should take responsibility for the issue. Everyone who has an involvement in this area — the microgeneration experts, architects, builders, mortgage lenders, Land and Property Services, HM Revenue and Customs — should be brought into one room, and the Minister should tell them that she wants zero-carbon buildings by a particular year. It is up to the professionals to tell the Minister how that can be achieved, and no one should be allowed to leave the room until a solution is found. That way, nobody will be able to shirk a question or pass it on to someone else. In such an environment, the professionals will be able to tell the Minister whether such buildings can be designed and built. If it so happens that regulations or a lack of money are preventing the design and build of zero-carbon buildings, it can be determined whether regulations can be changed and whether green mortgages and tax exemptions can be obtained. By doing that, microgeneration will be brought into the heart of the debate, and a system will be established.

The great thing about Northern Ireland is its parochialism; everybody knows everybody else. Such a holistic approach could be taken only in Northern Ireland, because of its size — it could not be taken in England, Wales or Scotland. Northern Ireland, more so than any other jurisdiction, could be the leader in bringing microgeneration and tackling CO2 emissions to a bigger platform.

Mr Beggs: The Committee has been advised that so long as building has commenced on one house on a site with multiple houses, the other houses can be built to some of the older regulations. We were also told that certain buildings were required to have Building Control approval even though the original parts of those buildings had been built to 1970's regulations and had poor insulation and disability access.

Will enforcement be easy, practical and consistent to ensure that all newbuilds will gain that approval in a shorter time frame? Can that be managed practically so that such systems will not be abused in the future?

Mr Martin: I believe that it can. Although abuse occurs, it is less likely in the current marketplace than previously, especially since the introduction of energy-performance certificates that rate houses. When you buy a house, just as when you buy a fridge, you know whether it is an A-rated house or a B-rated house. Although it is less likely that abuse will occur, a mechanism could be introduced to prevent it. As with any new regulation, someone will always try to find a way round it. Current market forces mean that people are now more aware that they should buy energy-efficient houses. That, in a sense, will reduce the problem. However, if abuse continues, some sort of provision, such as a cut-off period, should be included to prevent it.

Mr Beggs: Do any amendments need to be made to the Bill, or can that matter be dealt with in subsequent regulations?

Mr Martin: I would have to discuss that with the Department. Certainly, the matter could be brought up at the next NIBRAC meeting. However, it may be that amendments can be made to the Bill to try to close that particular loophole or to alleviate its effects.

The Chairperson: The final sentence of paragraph 3.2 of your brief, which deals with type approvals by district councils, mentions that the review of public administration should ensure:

“that the scheme works easily and carries validity.”

Do you know whether the Department of the Environment (DOE) is dealing with that particular concern? What changes do you believe are needed?

Mr Martin: I do not believe that DOE has examined that matter, but it may have to deal with it. A type approval system currently exists in England and

Wales, and in that system, a particular council's approval of a type of building is then acceptable across other councils.

Competition is the driver for that system in England and Wales. The reason that councils do that is to keep out private inspectors. They have banded together to offer a valued product. If a local authority's building control approves a house in, say, Sevenoaks, that type of house will then be permitted in any other council area. Privatisation being the driver of building control does not exist here, because local authorities' building controls have a monopoly. At present, in order for NIBRAC to introduce type approvals voluntarily, all 26 heads of building control would need to buy in to the system. If two or three of them opted out and decided that they want to be kings in their own particular kingdoms, the system would start to fail and lose credibility. In that case, the Government and DOE must consider some sort of mandatory system that forces councils to accept the decisions of others.

Wearing my building-control hat, I want to point out that Northern Ireland Building Control and my colleagues are working hard — before the Bill is enacted — to agree on a system that we can all find workable. We are considering a panel system. At present, if a plan is not approved by building control in Belfast, for example, it will automatically go to Strabane's building control and be accepted. We are examining a more representative system in which a committee of the 26 local authority building controls will look at a plan, discuss it, agree and put a stamp on it. All 26 councils must absolutely agree that plan before it can be stamped. I hope that that system can be implemented and that the DOE will not have to introduce mandatory change. If we cannot get such a system, mandatory change must be introduced. That is the big challenge for Northern Ireland Building Control.

The Chairperson: Have you made a formal submission about that? Can you come back to the Committee with your written opinions about that matter? That would be helpful

Mr Martin: We could, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Your submission refers to proposed new article 19A and whether data that are held by Building Control are considered to be privileged information. Have you sought legal advice about that?

Mr Martin: We sought legal advice about that some time ago, and we were advised that the information was not in the public domain and was therefore privileged. However, that was prior to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 coming into force. Given that planning permission relates to building work that affects people's neighbours, it should be in the public domain. However, someone carrying out work to the

inside of their house is not affecting their neighbour, so why should that neighbour, or anyone else, know about it? Building Control did not give that information to third parties; it was not in the public domain. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 has blown that situation open, because obviously any information can now be requested.

We believe that the registers will clarify the situation by acknowledging that the information that Building Control holds is in the public domain and should therefore be released if requested. That is a difficult area for us. For example, about two weeks ago I received an enquiry from someone who wanted to know what building work was going on in their neighbour's house. If I were to release that information, the person working on their house would query why their neighbour should be informed of it, arguing that what they do in their own house is their own business and is not public information. The registers will add some of clarity to that situation, and Building Control will welcome that.

The Chairperson: Are you confident that the Department is responding to that concern, or will that need to be tested at some stage?

Mr Martin: No, I do not think it that will need to be tested. The Department is aware of the issues that we face. The relationship between Building Control and the Department, through their liaison panels, and NIBRAC's relationship with the Department will ensure that that issue is addressed.

The Chairperson: Another issue that we face is the vexed question of microgeneration. Presentations about that have been made to the Committee previously. NIBRAC made a recommendation about it, and the Minister responded. Clearly, microgeneration has implications for the building industry. Have you considered the direction that is being taken in the South of Ireland, where a mandatory minimum renewable energy requirement in all new homes is being introduced?

Mr Martin: We have considered that. We also considered what is known as the Merton rule, which exists in England, where the councils have attempted something similar. That rule is beneficial for the microgeneration industry; however, it does not result in much reduction of carbon emissions. Therefore, it imposes additional expense on people without any real financial gain for them. There is much debate about the payback times for some forms of renewable technology. However, most people would agree that, if their options are to add insulation to a house or to put up a wind turbine, added insulation is the much better option. Insulation is better value, it results in a greater — in fact, an immediate — reduction of carbon

emission, whereas it may take many years to recover the cost of a wind turbine.

Therefore, we must be sensible about what we are trying to achieve with the Bill. If the aim is to reduce carbon emissions, we should state what reduction we want. We should then continue to raise the standards, but allow the developers and individuals to choose the most effective and efficient way of meeting those standards. With standards being continually raised, a stage will be reached where microgeneration automatically becomes one of the better methods of reducing carbon emissions. However, all the other methods must be exhausted first.

The challenge for the microgeneration industry is to create a situation whereby building regulations do not force people to incorporate microgeneration technology into their building work; we must look at the problem from a holistic viewpoint, which will make those in that industry a bigger player than they are now. That involves offering grants and raising targets for the reduction of carbon emissions. Currently, the issue of microgeneration probably has more to do with fuel diversity than with the reduction of CO₂ emissions.

Mr F McCann: Several weeks ago, I mentioned that some people in the building industry believe that the house building standards that have to be met by private developers fall far short of those to be met by, for example, people building social housing for housing associations. Should one standard not be applied right across the industry?

Mr Martin: One set of building regulations applies across the industry; however, the problem is that they set minimum standards. Therefore, a private developer may choose to build at a minimum standard. However, when a developer is building social housing, the Housing Executive will introduce voluntary standards that are over and above the minimum standards.

The standards will depend on the market that the developer is targeting: if they are targeting an expensive market, their work will obviously be of a higher quality. The regulations do not refer to the quality of the work; rather, they refer to whether a developer meets the minimum standard.

If what you are saying is that better houses are required, the best way to achieve that is to raise standards continually. I have often found that great intentions will not force developers to take certain measures. For example, ramps and toilets for disabled people started to appear in buildings only in the late 1980s. That was despite the fact that there have always been disabled people in Northern Ireland. Developers started installing those facilities only after legislation was introduced.

If the thinking is that the quality of building is poor across the industry, the best way to address that is to raise standards and ensure that everyone has to comply with the same set of regulations.

The code for sustainable homes has been introduced by the Department for Social Development (DSD). If that is deemed to be a good measure, perhaps an increase in the standards in the building regulations should also be encompassed by that code.

Mr O'Loan: I agree that the issue of dangerous buildings and places should be considered carefully. In last week's evidence session, Building Control Northern Ireland recommended that the Bill include powers to make regulations to control dangerous buildings and places. That was one recommendation of 15. However, you said that you would prefer the legislation to be amended at a later date. The same argument could be applied to several of the recommendations — they all require careful consideration and cannot be rushed. I accept that.

The representatives of Building Control Northern Ireland also made the point that stabilisation is required, and they said that there should be a breathing space of three or four years after the Bill is enacted. Is it not possible to consider fully the issue of dangerous buildings and places and amend the Bill so that it deals with that matter?

Mr Martin: NIBRAC would have to discuss that with the Department. Building regulations have never covered the issue of dangerous buildings; that has always been covered by public health Acts, and, in Belfast, by the Belfast Improvement Act 1878.

The difficulty is that legislation can cover too wide an area. For example, a building could be defined as dangerous if it contained anything that could be hazardous, such as asbestos. Covering such a wide area could start to impinge upon other legislation under which other people operate. Alternatively, legislation can cover too narrow an area. Most councils have said — and I know that mine has — that what is proposed is better than the existing legislation. If that is a big issue for building control practitioners, there is a possibility that we, through the Committee, could raise it with the Department and ask for a bit more thought to be put into it.

Given the old legislation under which some councils operate, I know that they find it difficult to take action on dangerous buildings. Having worked in Belfast for many years, I am aware that not dealing with dangerous buildings quickly can lead to loss of life. Therefore, it is an important issue, and I will take it back to NIBRAC for consideration.

Mr O'Loan: That is fair enough. My second question concerns the harmonisation of regulations. I was surprised that you made no reference to the

Republic of Ireland. Obviously, a lot of builders and developers from Northern Ireland work across the border. In some ways, harmonising our regulations with those in the Republic of Ireland is more important than doing so with those that apply across the water, although that is also relevant. Surely there is a good case for seeking all-island harmonisation.

Mr Martin: Absolutely. The regulations in the Republic of Ireland closely mirror those in England and Wales, as do ours. Therefore, harmonising the regulations between England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic is probably the easier option. Scotland tends to be slightly different and has always done its own thing.

Apart from Scotland, the existing regulations are not wildly different. The most pronounced difference is in how they operate. I know fairly well how the regulations operate in the Republic, because I go there every year, and I speak about regulations at a conference there every other year. The Republic's regulations are closely aligned with those in England and Wales. The main issue in the Republic is self-certification or, as some people argue, the lack of certification.

The harmonisation of the regulations on the major issues should not be too problematic. The main issue for jurisdictions is how to enforce, and ensure compliance with, the regulations. It is unlikely that agreement can be reached on that, because people have different views on how it should be done. However, to answer the question, we have close links with our colleagues in the Republic.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Trevor. No doubt debate on the matter will continue.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

17 April 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
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): The Committee must agree the wording of the proposed amendments to the Charities Bill that were discussed at last week's meeting. Officials in the Public Gallery can, if necessary, provide clarification and assistance. There are a number of outstanding clauses.

Clause 13 (Practice and procedure)

The Committee Clerk: On 3 April, the Committee deferred consideration of clause 13 — which makes provision for applicants, in certain circumstances, to be represented by special advocates at a charity tribunal — because there were thought to be developments on the issue in England and Wales. The Department contacted its counterparts and was told that no changes are imminent. Therefore, it was felt that any amendment to clause 13 would not be appropriate at this stage. The Department will consider the matter again should there be developments in England and Wales.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 13 agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: Clause 122 deals with the exemption of the transfer of designated land. The Committee had already agreed the text to an amendment, which was an exemption for the transfer of designated land of very low value. The Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) has informed the Department that the text of the amendment is unacceptably vague. The OLC has suggested a figure

of £90,000 which ties in with the threshold for small charities in the Bill and the Companies Act 2006.

The Chairperson: The amount of money is difficult to define, because one person may have an opinion on what constitutes low value for land, and another person may think otherwise. The Committee accepts that leaving the wording to read “low value land” is vague and difficult to define. In the absence of a more suitable amount on which everybody could agree, I think that the suggested figure is as close as we can get. Relatively speaking, it is quite a low value.

Are members content that the Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 122 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Clause 165 has been amended to ensure that no Order should be made under that clause in relation to designating religious charities unless a draft of the Order had been laid before, and been approved by, a resolution of the Assembly.

The Chairperson: Are members content that the Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 165 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Clause 166 refers to the length of time that a charity had to have been established, which has been reduced from 10 years to five years. The requirement that a charity have at least 1,000 members has been removed.

The Chairperson: Are members content that the Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 166 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agree to the text of the amendment?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We will now move into private session to consider the draft report on the Charities Bill.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

23 April 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mrs Dawn Purvis

Witnesses:

Mr Joseph Birt	}	Association of Building
Mr Billy Gillespie		Engineers
Ms Kerry Greeves	}	Institution of Structural
Mr Joe McGlade		Engineers

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): I welcome Mr Billy Gillespie, who is a council member of the Association of Building Engineers, Mr Joseph Birt, who is a member of the Association of Building Engineers, and Ms Kerry Greeves, who is a member of the Northern Ireland branch of the Institution of Structural Engineers.

Mr Joe McGlade (Institution of Structural Engineers): Mr Chairman, my colleague Ms Greeves is feeling unwell, so I am volunteering to speak on her behalf. I assume that that is acceptable?

The Chairperson: Absolutely. You are very brave, Kerry, to have come along at all.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as Carrickfergus Borough Council's representative on the north-eastern building control committee

The Chairperson: I suggest that each witness make a short opening presentation, because two separate organisations are present.

Mr Billy Gillespie (Association of Building Engineers): The Association of Building Engineers (ABE) does not have a large membership in Northern Ireland, but the majority of its members are in the public sector, mostly in building control departments. The association does not have a formal consultative mechanism, but the views contained in the submission reflect the opinions of all or most of its members on the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill.

I will expand on my role and Mr Birt's. Mr Birt is a member of the Association of Building Engineers and advises on technical issues. He has been in building control for 12 years, and he works with Down District Council and the building control south-eastern group of councils. He is on the Building Control Northern Ireland standards panel, which addresses issues of interpretation and guidance; and he is also the chairman of the Building Control Northern Ireland fire safety panel, which works closely with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Mr Birt is also a member of the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC).

I am a chartered civil engineer and a chartered environmentalist, as well as a fellow, council member and director of the Association of Building Engineers. Mr Birt and I have been in building control since 1996. I am the assistant group chief building control officer in the building control north-eastern group of councils. I am chairperson of the Building Control Northern Ireland training and communication panel and provide training for building control, architects, designers, builders and students. I am also a member of the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee.

We have a very good working relationship with all our professional colleagues and liaise closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the development and intended purpose of building regulations. The regulations are open to interpretation, and the Department maintains the role of arbiter in the event of an appeal against building control decisions.

The Association of Building Engineers is multidisciplinary, and its members have a wide range of building-related expertise. ABE members in building control are ideally positioned to take on additional functions as a consequence of the Bill or changes in local government regulations.

The association hopes its submission to the Committee is constructive and helpful. The ABE wants to encourage a building-control system that benefits the community and adds value to designers, builders and householders; the ABE hopes that the opportunity will be taken to ensure that, after enactment, the Bill will serve Northern Ireland as well in the future as the previous Orders have until now.

The Chairperson: Mr Gillespie and Mr Birt, do either of you want to draw attention to amendments or changes that have been recommended?

Mr Gillespie: Our submission refers to specific amendments. Would you like us to explain those amendments?

Mr Chairperson: Yes; please outline your proposed amendments briefly, and the Committee members may ask questions as each point is raised.

Mr Gillespie: The Bill must address the fact that the definition of “site”, as interpreted in article 2 of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, has become outdated. The current definition of a site relates to the building’s footprint. However, regulations have changed to include drainage, access from parking areas and access for the fire service. New consultation also considers issues such as retaining and garden walls and at how far refuse bins must be moved for collection.

The Association of Building Engineers feels that it is necessary for the term “site” to cover the entire area encompassed by the boundaries of where the building is being constructed rather than simply relating to the building itself. The Department should address that issue.

Mr O’Loan: The ABE’s summary introduction states:

“Initial consultations on the Order suggested that a complete re-write was planned and led to anticipation of far reaching changes. Many of these proposals would have been welcomed and it is hoped may be incorporated in the near future.”

Is the Association of Building Engineers expressing a general sense of disappointment with this Bill?

Mr Gillespie: No, it is not, and I am sorry if it has come across that way. The initial consultation provided a panoply of options that could be included in the amended building regulations Order. Many people hoped that it would widen the horizons for the application of different regulations. Some of those have come to fruition, and others have not. Some people were disappointed that a few of those were not included. The ABE hopes that they will be included in the future or that the Order could be written in such a way that could enact other parts.

The Chairperson: I read that in the same way that Declan did. Do those references or amendments reflect the views of the Association of Building Engineers on the Bill?

Mr Joseph Birt (Association of Building Engineers): The ABE would have preferred to have seen other measures included in the Bill. Those are included in our submission and will be addressed as we work our way through it.

The Chairperson: I thought that we might address any reservations or issues as we discuss your submission.

Mr O’Loan: A similar issue arose when Building Control Northern Ireland submitted approximately 15 recommendations to the Committee. Its representatives said that their working relationship with the Department of Finance and Personnel was very good. I thought that the Bill, as currently presented, would have incorporated most of the measures that the sector viewed as being sensible.

Mr Birt: I am happy to go through our submission. That process should identify any constructive suggestions that the Association of Building Engineers has.

Mr Gillespie: Clause 2 of the Bill concerns protected buildings and the insertion of a new article 3A in the 1979 Order. The Association of Building Engineers felt that the way in which the clause is worded:

“a district council should have regard to the desirability of preserving the character of protected buildings”

was not positive enough. There should be a requirement for councils to take a more proactive view; they should actively preserve protected or listed buildings. The ABE felt that the wording could be strengthened.

Mr Beggs: The current wording is “have regard to”. Do you think that that is weighted too much towards the new insulation efficiency measures, rather than protection?

Mr Gillespie: The current insulation regulations request consultations with the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) about listed buildings. The phrase “have regard to” seems to suggest that one could consider it but would not have to do anything more than that. If the point of the regulations outweighs historic considerations, the regulations have priority. If that is the case, the character of historic buildings will disappear. More emphasis should be put on preserving the historic character of buildings rather than conforming to new regulations.

The Chairperson: In those circumstances, would it be helpful to supply an alternative form of words?

Mr Gillespie: Yes, we would. The ABE could suggest a form of words.

The Chairperson: The Committee will welcome the ABE’s guidance and technical expertise on that issue.

Mr Gillespie: Article 4 of the 1979 Order relates to the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. Mr Birt and I are members of that committee, which liaises with, and advises, the Department and forms useful links with the industry. At present, NIBRAC members do not have the opportunity to highlight issues of

concern for the industry to the Department. We would propose amending the criteria to allow that to happen, but not necessarily in a forceful way.

Mr O'Loan: Do you mean raising concerns about issues other than building regulations? I thought that NIBRAC's function was to advise the Department on that.

Mr Birt: As I understand it, NIBRAC's function is to advise the Department on matters that the Department, for other reasons, may consider introducing through regulations and amendments.

However, there are circumstances in which specialist niches in the industry raise concerns; the ABE would propose that a suitable avenue should be provided for NIBRAC to highlight those concerns. NIBRAC is currently involved in the assessment of proposals that are put to it by Departments and Ministers; the relationship is reactive.

The ABE understands that Ministers give instructions to Departments on a range of different matters about what regulations should be introduced, which is entirely appropriate. However, the ABE is proposing another vehicle through which to make constructive suggestions about what should be included in legislation concerning the built environment.

Mr O'Loan: Should that be mentioned in the relevant article, or should the Committee simply be mindful of that?

Mr Birt: The way in which the article is currently worded suggests that NIBRAC's role is purely consultative. A slight rewording would be required to extend NIBRAC's remit to enable it to raise issues of interest.

The Chairperson: That sounds reasonable. Committee members are not technical experts, and they will need some support from your association in the wording of a proposed amendment to the article. In support of your argument, will you suggest an alternative wording, which the Committee will consider in light of its own feedback?

Mr Birt: Absolutely; the ABE will do that.

The Chairperson: As general rule of thumb, that is the best way to proceed. The ABE has a significant amount of background experience on the issue, which will be helpful to the Committee.

Mr Gillespie: Clause 5 of the Bill seeks to insert a new article 5A in the 1979 Order about guidance for purposes of building regulations. Under the current legislation, technical booklets provide a way of complying with the building regulations. If builders work in accordance with the technical booklets, they are deemed to satisfy the requirements of the regulations.

The Department is now suggesting that it will provide guidance documents, which should be

considered to ally with building regulations. For builders and designers, there remains an option to rely on other documents, which may be produced by other technical groups in the United Kingdom, or if a better system were to be devised in Australia, that could become the standard used for design in that particular case. However, it is essential that the builder or designer ensures that building control is content with the codes or standards being used. We are happy that the change has been made from technical booklets to guidance documents.

Clause 6 of the Bill amends article 8 of the 1979 Order to deal with the power of district councils to approve types of buildings. The Association of Building Engineers welcomes the use of type approvals as more companies such as Lidl, KFC and McDonald's are building outlets in Northern Ireland. Those companies like their buildings in Northern Ireland to be the same as the ones that they build in England, Wales and Germany. Although the standards in Germany are somewhat different to ours, the approach is similar: the companies want to present a pre-designed building in Belfast, Craigavon or Derry that is accepted by councils. That is a good idea that should be recommended.

In the past, Building Control Northern Ireland has done that through its standards panel — a group of volunteers from group areas and districts representing the whole Province — which examines particular designs. If the panel feels that those designs comply with building regulations, it recommends that they are accepted for use in all the councils of the Province. Due to the nature of the regulations, some difficulties have arisen because certain councils want to interpret the regulations slightly differently. Those councils may continue to do that, but their concerns should be on only site-specific issues, such as foundation conditions, ground conditions or contours on the ground, which may mean that different access is required. In principle, we recommend type approval and suggest that the Department writes to the councils asking for their commitment to accept that form of type approval.

Article 17 of the 1979 Order deals with appeals to the Department. In England and Wales, the relevant Department publishes the appeals that it has received and the rulings that it has made. 'Building Engineer' publishes those rulings, which are the most widely read part of that journal because readers can learn from the experiences of others. The Department should publish the outcomes of the appeals that are made to it under article 17.

Mr Birt: The publishing of those rulings has proved to be particularly useful for designers and the wider industry, not only people in building control, because they clarify the intent.

The Chairperson: The benefit of sharing that information can readily be seen.

Mr O’Loan: What do you mean by “publishing”?

Mr Birt: The appeals and rulings can be published on the Department’s website, as in England and Wales, or they can be published in other industry newsletters or journals. Publishing the appeals and their outcomes is a useful tool and would be more useful if they were widely available.

Mr Gillespie: Clause 8 of the Bill seeks to amend article 18 of the 1979 Order, which deals with contravention notices in respect of work contravening the building regulations. I apologise, because our submission suggests that the Bill would bring the time period down to six months — it should say 12 months. When I was writing the submission, I was looking at an earlier consultation document that suggested that the time period be six months.

Clause 8 would mean that there is 12 months from the time that the work is completed for building control to put on a contravention notice. Building control tries to persuade builders to build in compliance with building regulations. We often see that, if we have to take someone to court, it is a failure of ours to encourage people to build properly. In instances where we fail to get a builder to comply, we must issue a contravention notice.

Clause 8 amends the period in which a contravention notice could be served to 12 months of completion of a building will give us less time to do that. However, over 18 months, other construction work can go on, and that would mean that more remedial work would have to be done.

Taking people to court has a dramatic effect for building control. We try to comply with the enforcement concordat, and most council building control departments have signed up to that. The difficulty is that taking someone to court is a time-consuming and expensive operation. Council finance departments will often suggest that going to court is too expensive to contemplate. I have been involved with a number of other bodies that are involved in the regulatory forum, and they also come up against that. I encourage the Department to try to prevail on the Criminal Justice System Northern Ireland to streamline the court system to make it easier to take people to court to ensure their compliance.

Mr Birt: The proposed reduction in the period in which a contravention notice could be served from 18 months to 12 months is critical to our ability to achieve compliance with the regulations. For example, self-builders who are building their own homes might do so over a period of time. From experience, we find that, near the end of a project, funds run short and the house is built more slowly because it takes some time to

build aspects such as external steps, the driveway and more expensive details inside the house. Building control may need to write to the property owner if it discovers an offending piece of work at the property. It may find that, after a number of months, that is not resolved, despite receiving assurances from the property owner. For example, we are often told that the work will be done when the owner gets the VAT back. The change that the Bill proposes would bind building control to a shorter time frame and would necessitate enforcement action on people who genuinely intended to do the work.

Given the current market conditions, that could also occur on some development sites. If developers were left with buildings that were built but were not being sold, they would not finish the buildings for that reason, and work would cease. A longer time lag is needed, and clarity is needed on the issue of completions. Therefore, we suggest that the 18-month period be retained in the interests of fairness and proportionality.

Mr Beggs: Are there any negative aspects to allowing that extended period for remediation work?

Mr Birt: On some occasions, particularly on big projects, it is reasonable to suggest that a developer could carry out some contravening work and that building control would not take any action for 18 months. That can potentially happen under the current legislation, which allows contravention notices to be served only after 18 months. However, in reality, building control would make the developer aware of any contravening work as soon as that were identified. Negotiations would take place between building control and the developer, who would attempt to resolve the situation or would employ some experts to give advice. Therefore, the 18-month period is useful, and, to my knowledge, it has never been abused.

Mr Gillespie: Article 19 of the 1979 Order deals with the deposit of plans to be of no effect after certain intervals. Building Control Northern Ireland and the Association of Building Engineers are concerned that there will be a rush of applications before the new regulations are about to come into force. For example, in the week before regulations came into force — particularly energy regulations — in November 2006, the equivalent of six months of applications for houses were submitted to one particular council. Consequently, in some district councils, part of the regulations are only now being applied, 18 months after they came into force, because so many applications were made prior to that.

The problem is that, when an application is made for a development of 30 or 40 multiple houses, that constitutes a single application. As soon as work starts on that application, the developer can then

take as long as he or she wants to complete the development. The regulations that apply to all the houses are the regulations that were in force at the time of the application. If an application is made to build 30 houses, and building control give building regulation approval, those houses could be built over 30 years, if undertaken by a small builder — and some developments do take a long time. They could be building to regulations that were in force 10 or more years earlier. There have been instances where builders are building to regulations that were in force in 1973. Fortunately, that is rare, but we would like a mechanism to try to remove that anomaly. The Department has suggested that the ability exists to prevent builders building to regulations that are out of date, but we feel that it is not straightforward and would be difficult to pursue.

Mr Birt: I concur with that; it is important to have a mechanism to deal with that issue. An example of the type of thing that can be missed through that loophole — which, effectively, is what it is — is that buildings that are built under current regulations would require escape windows, but which do not have those. There are new buildings on the market that should have heat detectors in kitchens and smoke detectors in living rooms, but they do not have them. The accessibility standards that are invoked today are not necessarily adhered to, and it is an area which is being exploited by developers, obviously to the detriment of prospective purchasers and the wider community.

The Chairperson: The Committee would appreciate some assistance with the wording of a proposed amendment to article 19.

Mr Gillespie: Clause 9 of the Bill seeks to insert a new article 19A into the 1979 Order to deal with registers to be kept by councils. The current councils were established in 1973, and many of them have records that go back to that date. In those days, everything was done on paper, and it became difficult for councils to store that paper, so many of them were looking for ways either to dispose of those records or to reduce the amount of space taken up by them. Some councils have digitally photographed their records and kept them on computers, but often that has resulted in loss of detail of some of the printing as well as some of the content.

Some councils have gone so far as to dispose entirely with records that go back beyond 10 years. That was partly due to initial fears about the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the view that, if one does not have the information, one does not have to give it to people. Those initial fears have not actually been realised, and there have not been such demands.

We have heard about people who have been building, or have made an application, and have had

unsolicited sales and marketing information sent to them. However, the ABE feels that it is important that councils should keep a register of information, and that that should be made available to, for example, future owners. The issue is dealt with more fully in the additional comments to our submission.

The first such comment relates to council databanks. The ABE feels that councils are in a unique position to hold all the information about the details of the construction of houses and other buildings. Increasingly, with the evolution of electronic data, we are able to store material electronically on computers. Council building control departments go out on site when a new building or renovation is under way, and they hold records of that. Most building control departments provide information on property searches to solicitors to assist them in the conveyancing process.

Building regulations have changed over the past few years. They have become more rigorous and have been extended to require testing and commissioning of flues, gas fires, unvented hot-water systems, boilers, heating controls, air-conditioning systems and airtightness. That information could be gathered and held by building control.

Building control provides information to Land and Property Services (LPS), which was formerly known as the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA), on the commencement and completion of houses. Some councils are in negotiations with LPS over the possibility of getting details of house dimensions for valuation purposes. In the fullness of time, all that useful information could be used. Home information packs have been introduced in England and Wales, but not in Northern Ireland. Building control could hold all the information here.

A building logbook may be introduced here to provide information to new homeowners. The logbook would document certification processes, inspection records on houses, requirements for servicing and maintenance and, possibly, sustainability information on disassembly and reuse of appropriate materials.

The Department should consider provisions to require local authorities to gather and store that data safely for future use so that it could be passed to new owners or tenants.

Mr O'Loan: That is a major recommendation, but it is clear.

Mr Gillespie: In Northern Ireland, around 12,000 new dwellings are built each year. There are approximately 720,000 dwellings with which building control does not deal, unless an extension or attic conversion is carried out. Those 700,000-odd houses may not be up to current standards and may be producing carbon dioxide emissions that we are trying

to reduce in the new regulations. Therefore, they are not energy efficient.

The Department may wish to consider control being extended through building regulations to existing dwellings, particularly in light of the fact that energy performance certificates will become law, and they will be policed by local authorities, probably through building control. The energy performance certificates will draw attention to deficiencies in the energy efficiency of houses. It may be appropriate to set a standard whereby the energy efficiency of houses should not fall below a recommended figure. However, there is currently no responsibility on someone buying a new house to upgrade it. It may be worth considering suggesting that that work should be carried out when a house changes hands. Furthermore, there is no responsibility on councils to promote or advise on current standards. We do that by trying to improve submissions coming into building control. Part of the energy performance certificate requirements will be that building control departments should endeavour to promote certificates. There is no requirement for us to promote building standards and regulations, but it is something that we do to assist quality and consistency of standards.

Mr Birt: We are suggesting that the Bill amend the Order to provide for regulations to be made that will resolve the issue of carbon dioxide emissions in existing buildings. We are not suggesting that that happens now but that the Bill will include a provision enabling that to happen, should it be required in the future.

My colleague also suggested that building control could play a role in educating the industry about what the building regulations require. That would be an important role, given the recent changes in the industry, which were fairly significant. There is no obligation on building control or on councils to carry out that role, but the Committee may feel that it is important and should be built into the legislation.

The Chairperson: Of course, you are talking about existing stock. You are not talking about the industry so much as about general households.

Mr Gillespie: The matter of demolition was included in the original consultation. In England and Wales, local authorities control demolition and issue licences for it. Building control officers have the skills to oversee that work and when we have requirements for recycling and reuse of existing materials in future, it may be prudent to give responsibility for overseeing demolition to local authorities and building control. I suggest that legislation regarding party walls should also be included for enactment at a future time, and that building control could be involved in that.

The original consultation document also referred to dangerous structures. Building control currently

enforces dangerous buildings legislation, some of which is over 150 years old. We have discussed that with departmental officials, who indicated that it has been difficult for them to frame legislation that would be beneficial to building control at present. We suggest that the Department should take the opportunity to include a reference to dangerous structures in the Order. By structures, I mean retaining walls and structures that may not be attached to buildings but which would be unsafe for members of the public. The Order should include that provision for enactment at a later date, when regulations appropriate to dangerous structures have been framed.

Mr Birt: We felt that those two previous issues were omitted from the draft Bill, and would prefer if they were included. If building control has information about how a building was constructed, it will be in a position to ensure that the materials being taken out of that building are reused effectively and not necessarily disposed of, something which is covered by other legislation. That would be an appropriate way to deal with, for example, the steel structure, the timber members and even the masonry elements in the concrete.

We are not suggesting that time is available to redraft the Order to include a reference to dangerous buildings, but the enabling legislation must be in place to allow the necessary regulations to be developed in the near future. The Committee has a unique opportunity to implement those changes and introduce the enabling legislation at this stage.

Mr Gillespie: Our penultimate comment is about sustainable communities. Councils are well positioned to co-ordinate community sustainability strategies. For example, communities could be advised on renewable energy systems, such as grey-water recycling, rainwater harvesting, community heating plants to provide combined heat and power, arrays for solar panels and photovoltaic cells. If all those schemes were undertaken on a community-wide basis rather than in individual properties, they would be more efficient and would do more to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Councils might be requested to provide advice, information and training about sustainability and best practice. Similarly, via pre-submission consultations, councils might provide such advice to people intending to make planning applications. The Department should consider framing legislation in such a way that district council building control departments could be utilised for sustainability matters.

Mr Birt: Much information about such matters is available from manufacturers and other sources. The Association of Building Engineers values the independence of local authorities, which offer an existing voluntary pre-submission advice service for people who are contemplating work on their

properties. That could be made mandatory — specifically in relation to sustainability — which would mean that members of the public would have access to independent, impartial advice about building proposals from their district councils.

That suggestion is linked to my earlier comment about training. There should be an obligation to inform the public about new regulations, which would greatly aid their implementation.

Mr Gillespie: The final element of our submission, which is a catch-all point, concerns future-proofing buildings. Material technology and construction methods are changing rapidly, and there is more emphasis on electronic data presentation and storage. It may be appropriate for the Department to include provisions in the Bill that would ensure that future buildings incorporate, and take advantage of, modern technologies and electronic communication systems.

Mr Birt: Before we conclude, on behalf of the Association of Building Engineers' members, I acknowledge the Department's openness and accessibility in giving advice. Although the Department remains impartial and will not discuss specific projects, the ABE and, indeed, Building Control Northern Ireland accept that we have a good relationship with the Department, and that greatly assists the understanding and interpretation of regulations, which must be commended. Furthermore, the Department's regulatory briefing sessions are part of a relatively new initiative that enhances the wider industry's understanding of regulatory requirements.

We also commend the Bill and welcome many of its improvements, including its clarification about low or zero carbon emissions. The provisions for the protection of historic buildings are useful. Type approval is an industry-wide demand to which it looks forward. Clause 1 of the Bill incorporates the use and recycling of materials, and that clause's adoption will contribute to meeting the Government's commitment to reuse materials. The proposed amendments will future-proof protected buildings, and the sustainable use of materials is also included. We welcome those proposals, and, if some of the other measures that we suggested were included, the proposed amended Order would be excellent and — pardon the pun — would provide an exceptionally good foundation for the Northern Ireland built environment.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Some suggestions, particularly those concerning additional responsibilities and duties for the councils, would, for example, involve the Department of the Environment. The Committee will need to consult the Department of Finance and Personnel on that issue.

Joe, you have been very patient. We do not have the benefit of a written submission, so I invite you to

focus specifically on issues in the regulations that you would like to see amended. Please feel free to flag up any concerns that you may have. Thank you for your patience.

Mr McGlade: Thank you for your invitation to give evidence. The reason that a written submission was not entered was that the Institution of Structural Engineers did not recognise any proposed amendments that would have a major impact on a structural engineer's role in the building process. Our position has been well covered by Billy, and I have only one comment regarding the new type approval. It has specifically excluded the structure where it has been implemented elsewhere, for such reasons as Billy has mentioned.

Much of our work is site-specific — for example, a site could be very exposed and have wind problems or it could have foundation problems — so I see type approval as excluding structural matters. Building control has always recognised the role of the structural engineer in the field of demolition and the assessment of dangerous buildings. I do not see that role changing.

Reuse of materials is fairly new to the institution; reuse of structural materials is an area in which we would have to become more involved. I can envisage that developing.

Generally, I have little to add to the excellent submission that has already been delivered by Billy and his colleague, and I thank you for the opportunity to attend.

The Chairperson: If you and your colleagues feel that there is something in particular that you would like to submit — for example, a written amendment focusing on that issue to help the Committee — we would be very open to that.

Thank you for the presentation. Will you be responding to the Committee's requests, Billy?

Mr Gillespie: We will suggest some amendments to the wording.

The Chairperson: I assure you that that would be very helpful to the Committee. Thank you.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.
The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting Hansard process or changed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 4 April 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Northern Ireland Memorial Fund

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much funding it has made available to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund over each of the last five years; (ii) how much is being committed to this fund in the current year; and (iii) how much is planned to be made available for 2008 and 2009. (AQW 3353/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Since the Fund was established formally in May 1999 it has received a total of £9.1m from Government. The OFMDFM contribution over the last 5 years is outlined in the attached table.

Financial Year	Amount allocated (£K)
2002-03	260
2003-04	0
2004-05	0
2005-06	0
2006-07	0
2007-08	800

Officials are in discussions with the Fund regarding financial support in 2008-2009.

Good Relations Indicators

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the consideration being given to the incorporation of the actions and targets contained in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial

Action Plan 2006', into the forthcoming programme of cohesion and integration. (AQW 3406/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to building a shared and better future. As previously stated we will bring forward proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future.

In setting strategic targets, key objectives and actions for the programme of cohesion and integration we will give consideration to progress already achieved including the actions and targets contained in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006'.

The Good Relations Indicators provide a robust monitoring tool to measure change and monitor effectiveness of good relations policies. As previously indicated the Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report published in January 2007, will provide the core measures to reflect the work currently being undertaken at central and local level to improve societal relations. The indicators will inform progress against targets and outcomes. This will be a part of the detailed proposals for the programme of cohesion and integration which will be brought forward by OFMDFM to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly in due course.

Capital Realisation Task Force's Report

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give a timescale within which the Capital Realisation Task Force's Report will be available for consideration. (AQO 1841/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers are currently considering the report of the Capital Realisations Taskforce, and it is expected that the report will be published in due course.

Victims' Groups

Mr Buchanan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail all the victims' groups that it consulted with prior to the appointment of the 4 Victims' Commissioners. (AQW 3486/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: No consultation took place with Victims' Groups prior to the appointment of the four Commissioners designate. The four Commissioners will have the same general roles and responsibilities as envisaged in the Victims and Survivors (NI) Order 2006 for a single Commissioner.

Extensive consultation has already taken place on the role and remit of a Commissioner.

Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the meetings it has had with groups working with, or on behalf of, people experiencing (i) poverty; (ii) social exclusion; and (iii) deprivation, in relation to the publication of the Executive's strategy to 'tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need'. (AQW 3592/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) undertook two extensive periods of public consultation during the development of 'Lifetime Opportunities' Governments Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, which was launched by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain MP, on 13 November 2006.

During the two periods of public consultation, OFMDFM contracted the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN) to facilitate a series of workshops across Northern Ireland at which the strategy proposals were outlined and debated, by those who were experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

In total over 300 people attended the series of workshops and further details on these are available via the NIAPN website at www.niapn.org.

'Lifetime Opportunities' was subsequently considered and discussed by the shadow Programme for Government (PFG) Committee.

The Executive, in line with its statutory obligation under Section 16 of the St. Andrews Agreement, will shortly consider the adoption of an overall strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. In doing so, it will take account of the findings of both the public consultation exercises, the views of the OFMDFM Committee and the response of the shadow PFG Committee to Lifetime Opportunities.

European Union Goods and Services Directive

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2878/08, if in forwarding the (i) public consultation responses; and (ii) the Committee's consultation response, in relation to the European Union Goods and Services Directive, to the Government Equalities office, it recommended that

favourable consideration be given to extending the exceptions to include (a) events organised by churches or religious organisations that take place away from the church precinct; (b) commercial or charitable shops, cafes or other businesses organised by churches or religious organisations; and (c) individuals working in the health professions who have religious or moral conscientious objections to this Directive.

(AQW 3942/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The UK Government made the decision to implement this directive on a UK basis. In forwarding the consultation responses to the Government Equalities Office, no recommendation on any issue was made to that office.

Ministerial Sub Committee on Children and Young People

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the ministerial sub committee on Children and Young People can ensure that the monies awarded are being ring-fenced within the Department of Regional Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

(AQW 4039/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Budget 2008-11 provided an additional £26 million to the Departments of Education, Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Culture, Arts and Leisure. This additional funding was in recognition that the funding previously given to Departments under the Children's Fund was to be mainstreamed within departmental baselines. How Ministers choose to allocate this funding is a matter for the individual Minister.

The Department of Education also received £13 million for children and youth services.

A further £30 million was allocated to DHSSPS for the Bamford Review in direct response to the concerns raised regarding the provision of mental health services.

Neither the Department for Regional Development nor the Department for Employment and Learning received additional funding in the Budget for children and young people.

All Ministers are committed to the Programme for Government and delivering on the associated PSA targets. The ministerial sub committee will provide a forum to co-operate in meeting these targets to ensure maximum impact for children and young people.

All Ministers will be reporting on progress in achieving their PSA targets, including those for which this funding has been allocated.

Planning Appeal Backlogs

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the action it is taking to address the backlog of appeals with the Planning Appeals Commission. (AQW 4450/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Planning Appeals Commission exercises its functions independently of OFMDFM but the Department is responsible for providing the resources needed for the Commission to discharge its responsibilities. OFMDFM is aware of the build-up of appeals in the Planning Appeals Commission and has committed within the Public Service Agreement to deliver increased resources to enable it to address the backlog of appeal cases. As a result, additional funding has been made available both within the current 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 £510,000, £520,000 and £538,000 respectively in each of the next three financial years. 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.

The additional funding allocations 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.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister made five appointments to the Commission in January 2008, and arrangements are currently under way to deliver new competitions to recruit additional full-time and Panel Commissioners.

Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to

AQO 2083/08, to confirm whether the delay in making a decision on the Maze/Long Kesh regeneration will result in a loss of opportunities to host events in the Olympic games and the Fire and Rescue Service games. (AQW 4526/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The prospect of achieving the development of the site in time for the London 2012 Olympic Games is challenging. In respect of the World Police and Fire Games which will be hosted here in 2013 the timeline is less critical.

A full perspective on timescale can only be determined once the engagement with a development partner has started.

Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what plans it has to continue the work which was undertaken by the Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment.

(AQW 4612/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment fulfilled a valuable role during the previous period of direct rule. However, the restoration of devolution has ensured full democratic and accountable control over public services through the Assembly and the Executive. These arrangements enabled us to consult widely and highly successfully on the Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget on a holistic basis with the broadest range of interests. We believe the most appropriate approach to engaging on infrastructure investment issues is through such consultation and we fully intend to continue and develop that approach in the future.

Attorney General for Northern Ireland

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm if it will be able to appoint an Attorney General for Northern Ireland before the end of May 2008, if there is agreement for the devolution of Policing and Justice powers by that date. (AQW 4647/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It would not be appropriate to comment on the process for appointing an Attorney General for Northern Ireland, under s.22(2) of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, until the NI Assembly had indicated that it was likely to request devolution of the relevant matters.

Eames/Bradley Consultative Group

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that (i) it will co-operate fully and in all matters with the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past and (ii) it will encourage all groups and individuals to co-operate also. (AQW 4703/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Both of us have met with the Consultative Group in January 2008. The Consultative Group is to present a report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by summer 2008. We therefore have no direct responsibility for, or role in, this group. We await the outcome of this group.

Annual Costs to the Taxpayer

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the annual cost to the taxpayer of (i) the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; (ii) The Equality Commission; and (iii) The Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People. (AQW 4761/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As responsibility for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is a matter for the Secretary of State, you may wish to seek a reply from the NIO regarding costs to the taxpayer. Out-turn figures for the remaining two bodies for 2006/07, the latest year available, are as follows:

- The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland – £6.999m
- The Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People – £1.847m

Assembly Questions

Mr O'Dowd asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of written and oral Assembly questions that have been tabled to the department in the six months following the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the cost incurred in researching and answering these questions. (AQW 4799/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

- (i) Between 8 May and 8 November 2007, 123 written and 60 oral Assembly Questions were tabled to our Department.
- (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.

Sub Committee on Children and Young People

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any plans or arrangements that have been made by the ministerial sub committee on Children and Young People to engage with leading non-governmental organisations on a regular basis. (AQW 4854/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: At its first meeting on 13 March 2008, the ministerial sub committee on Children and Young People agreed its key cross-cutting priorities and the agenda at future meetings will reflect those issues.

It is intended to have a standing item on the agenda whereby a relevant speaker will be invited to make a short presentation to inform discussion. It is anticipated that those speakers will include representatives from leading non-governmental organisations.

Voluntary and community sector organisations will also be represented on the Strategy Planning and Review Group which will be chaired by the junior Ministers. The outputs from this group will be presented to the ministerial sub committee on Children and Young People.

Quangos

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) the number of people that serve on (a) 1 quango; (b) 2 quangos; (c) 3 quangos; and (d) 4 or more quangos; and (ii) the remuneration given to those people. (AQW 4947/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The most recently published information on the number of people serving on the Boards of public bodies and the remuneration they receive is contained in Volumes 1 and 2 respectively of the Public Appointments Annual Report for 2006/07. In relation to multiple appointments the report shows that at 31 March 2007:

- 1592 people held 1 public appointment
- 159 people held 2 public appointments
- 30 people held 3 public appointments
- 6 people held 4 public appointments

The maximum number of public appointments held by any individual is four. A copy of the latest report is available from the Assembly Library and on the Internet at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/public-appointments.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of people that have been appointed under public appointments by the Department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 4960/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The number of people appointed to public appointments by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister since the restoration of devolution and the number that are female or elected Councillors is as follows:

Number of People Appointed	Number that are Female	Number that are elected Councillors
11	5	0

Community Relations

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the role played by the department in promoting better community relations. (AQO 2559/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Programme for Government confirms our commitment to continue to challenge racism, sectarianism and intolerance which mar our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society.

We remain fully committed to addressing the divisions within our society and to achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and intolerance. That is why we are making additional resources available over the incoming Comprehensive Spending Review period to target these very issues.

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 three years.

Total investment between 2008-09 and 2010-11 will therefore be approximately £29m, (taking account of efficiencies over the period) to meet the PSA target of building a shared and better future for all. This will be additional to the Government's contribution of EU PEACE III funding.

In addition, the cross-departmental Good Relations Panel headed up by Sir Nigel Hamilton has overall responsibility for driving forward the good relations and good race-relation policies across government. It is viewed both internally and externally as an important instrumental link in translating policy into actions.

Funding is also committed to all 26 District Councils to operate community relations based programmes such as small grants schemes for locally-based community groups engaged in cross-community activities. Other projects currently running include bonfires initiatives, integration of minority ethnic people into host communities, youth-based activities targeting issues around sectarianism and racism.

Funding is also provided by our Department to the Department of Education for the provision of a range of Summer Intervention Programmes. These programmes are targeted at supporting work at interface areas and challenging those behaviours associated with interface violence. We also contribute to the Arts Council's programme which is helping re-image communities through community-based arts projects.

Our Department's sponsorship and funding of the Community Relations Council enables it to deliver on a range of local and regional activities and programmes including research to tackle good relations issues.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the criteria used to determine the locations of the Equality Impact Assessment consultation venues. (AQO 2602/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Equality Impact Assessment process should determine which groups and individuals should be consulted, and where such consultation should take place. In organising consultation meetings, a key criterion will be that appropriate measures are taken to ensure full participation. Given the varying needs of different groups, an array of practical issues should be considered in deciding venues including: accessibility; geographical spread; facilities for people with disabilities; crèche facilities; public transport arrangements; whether people will feel comfortable attending at a particular location; and whether there is a welcoming and harmonious environment.

Strategic Investment Board

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give its assessment of the operations of the Strategic Investment Board. (AQO 2540/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Since we took office in May 2007 the Strategic Investment Board has worked closely with us on the Investment Strategy 2008-2018, which was developed

in conjunction with the Programme for Government and the Budget. These documents were approved by the Executive and endorsed by the Assembly in January.

The Strategic Investment Board has also been working closely with Departments on their individual capital investment programmes and projects. We have noted the significant progress that has been made through the key milestones achieved in recent months in areas such as roads, water services, education and health.

SIB has recently provided support for more than 50 projects with value of some £4.5 billion. These include Belfast Metropolitan College; Strategic Road development under Roads Package 2; hospitals, community health facilities and medical equipment; Belfast Schools, and developing innovative approaches to delivering new social housing and new schools to name some of the key areas.

Our assessment of the operations of the Strategic Investment Board is therefore that it is successfully achieving its objectives and is making a significant and positive impact on the planning and delivery of the Executive's infrastructure investment programmes.

Combating Violence

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what plans it has to establish a plan of action for combating violence against women; and to provide a time frame for these plans. (AQO 2617/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Violence of any kind against women is completely unacceptable. The Programme for Government specifically commits us to ensure there are effective programmes and strategies aimed at achieving the eradication of all forms of violence against women. We will work collaboratively across Departments to this end.

Violence against women is a national and international area of concern, and tackling violence will be a theme of the cross-departmental gender equality action plans which we will publish later this year.

Domestic violence alone accounts for approximately one-fifth of all recorded violent crime. Our junior Ministers are members of the newly-formed cross departmental Ministerial Group, which our colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has brought together to provide leadership and oversight across government's work in tackling both domestic and sexual violence. The junior Ministers will give a high priority to this work.

Gender Pay Gap

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the action taken to eliminate the gender pay gap. (AQO 2568/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government commits to implement the Gender Equality Strategy, which includes a key action on the gender pay gap. This will involve a co-ordinated range of actions, across Departments, which will contribute to eliminating the gender pay gap, including education, training and employment programmes, and initiatives to improve work life balance. Discrimination on grounds of gender in the area of pay is illegal, and we are examining the case for improving existing legislation affecting pay. We will work closely with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in taking this work forward.

Racial Equality Strategy

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on the progress of the current action plan for the Racial Equality Strategy. (AQO 2615/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals for a 'Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration for a Shared and Better Future,' which we signalled in the Programme for Government. This programme will tackle issues affecting both the established minority ethnic communities as well as new arrivals. It 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.

While work to fulfil the commitments in the first action plan to implement the Racial Equality Strategy continues with government departments, our resources are now focused on developing and implementing the proposals of the new administration.

These proposals will include arrangements for the development of an action plan covering both central and local government and will pick up outstanding actions in the original implementation action plan. We intend to bring the proposals forward shortly.

We have already made a call for applications under the funding scheme for Minority Ethnic Communities Fund which, in the longer term, this funding will form a key strand of our proposals for a Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

The successful applications which we have received from organisations that have been awarded funding will build on examples of best practice previously funded by OFMDFM.

Devolved Legislatures

Mr Campbell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any progress it has made in further improving relationships with other devolved legislatures in the United Kingdom.

(AQO 2527/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The restoration of devolution and the elections of new governments in Scotland and Wales have provided a unique opportunity to strengthen the long-standing relationships and co-operation at all levels between the respective administrations. In June 2007, during the visit of the First Minister of Scotland to Belfast, we signed a joint agreement with him to strengthen co-operation, particularly in the areas of higher education, tourism and renewable energy.

On 14 February 2008, we held a trilateral meeting with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales at which we discussed the need to reinvigorate the mechanisms for co-operation between the devolved administrations and Westminster established by the Memorandum of Understanding.

The junior Ministers already participate in the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) and we anticipate a plenary meeting later this year. We also agreed to further discussions between the relevant Ministers on the experience of the Scottish “Fresh Talent” initiative and on broadcasting. It was also agreed that such trilaterals would take place regularly in the context of the summit meetings of the British-Irish Council.

On 19 and 20 February, we and our junior Ministers paid a reciprocal visit to the Scottish Government, during which we held a bilateral meeting with the First Minister of Scotland. A range of issues of mutual interest were discussed and we agreed a declaration committing our respective administrations to early consideration of the feasibility study into the re-establishment of the Campbeltown/Ballycastle Ferry and to further joint exploratory work on renewable energy. The junior Ministers also had a separate bilateral with Minister Linda Fabiani.

Other Ministers of the Executive have also had meetings with their Scottish counterparts on matters relevant to their Departments and we have encouraged all Ministers to maintain such contacts and to identify new areas for co-operation.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to comment on remarks made by the Deputy First Minister, during his official visit to Dublin, in relation to the portrayal of alcohol consumption on television.

(AQO 2560/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

At the press conference following the British-Irish Council meeting in Dublin on 14 February 2008, the deputy First Minister expressed concern at an apparent concentration of scenes of drunkenness and those set in public houses in a number of soap operas broadcast before the 9pm watershed. During his 26 February statement to the Assembly on the Council meeting, the First Minister took the view that we should set our faces against encouraging young people to indulge in the consumption of alcohol.

Racial Equality Strategy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a progress report on the racial equality strategy, including analysis of targets met or unmet and plans for improvements.

(AQO 2622/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is fully committed to building a shared and better future for all people here. Work on developing the Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration for a shared and better future is at an advanced stage. At the core of these proposals will be action to tackle racism, sectarianism and intolerance. We intend to bring forward these proposals for discussion with the Committee and the Assembly shortly.

It is right and proper that we should focus on these new proposals, rather than use our resources in monitoring the implementation of strategies which were devised for different circumstances. The new proposals, however, will be fully informed by the experience gained on the original implementation action plan.

The new Programme is backed by significant new resources in the Budget and will focus on local people dealing with local issues through their own local solutions. Key objectives, actions and targets to tackle both racism and sectarianism will be developed in the context of these proposals at both central and local government levels to ensure that measurable reductions can be achieved.

As part of our ongoing work to combat racism, we have just completed the application process for a new one-year funding scheme for Minority Ethnic Communities. This scheme will align with the aims of the new Programme and build on the excellent work

already carried out under the previous 3-year fund which is due to expire today.

Violence Against Women

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give its assessment of 'Making the Grade? 2007 - An independent analysis of Northern Ireland Government initiatives on violence against women'. (AQO 2564/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Violence against women is completely unacceptable and government has an important role to play in its elimination. Our officials are considering the findings of the 'Making the Grade? 2007' report in the context of the Gender Equality Strategy and the associated cross departmental action plans, particularly those actions relating to violence against women. Tackling violence against women requires co-ordinated action by many government departments including OFMDFM, the Departments of Employment and Learning and Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Northern Ireland Office. We all recognise that it is vitally important to co-ordinate our work. For example, Michael McGimpsey, Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has convened an Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence, to provide Ministerial leadership and oversight and to increase the co-operation between Departments.

Bill of Rights

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment has been made of the costs associated with a bill of rights. (AQO 2545/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for costs associated with a bill of rights is a matter for 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 will not be in a position to comment on any aspect of a bill of rights until the Secretary of State has made formal proposals.

Gender Pay Gap

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it is taking to (i) ensure that equal levels of pay apply to both men and women; and (ii) make this type of gender inequality illegal. (AQO 2584/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Existing legislation makes it unlawful for employers to discriminate between men and women in terms of their pay and conditions where they are doing the same or similar work, work rated as equivalent, or work of equal value; and provides for complaint and remedy by way of Industrial Tribunal. In line with Programme for Government commitments, we are examining the case for improving the effectiveness of the legislation.

European Union Gender Directive

Mr D Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the failure to agree on the transposition of the European Union Gender Directive on Goods and Services resulted in this decision being handed back to Westminster, to confirm if this methodology will be used to resolve other decisions; and to outline the implications it will have for the Irish language Act. (AQO 2620/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Member States of the European Union have an obligation to transpose all EU directives within a specified time period. UK Ministers decided to legislate on a UK-wide basis to implement the Goods and Services Directive to ensure that the UK, as the Member State, complied 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. UK Ministers exercised the powers conferred on them by Section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 to legislate in this way. As the legislation concerned was subordinate legislation the agreement of the Northern Ireland Assembly was not required. However, in the case of primary legislation, the United Kingdom Government, under the Memorandum of Understanding, has agreed that it will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Assembly.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has signalled his intention to bring before the Executive a paper setting out a strategy for Indigenous Languages to meet the obligations set out in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Gaelic Language Links

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the work being carried out by Imeall Trá Teo to forge cultural and Gaelic language links between North Antrim and the Scottish

islands of Uisk and Islay; and to detail his plans to seek further support for this work at the British-Irish Council. (AQW 4885/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): My Department is not involved with the funding for Imeall Trá Teoranta. I understand that Imeall Trá Teoranta is an initiative which has been funded through the EU INTERREG IIIA programme. This EU programme has been administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake a 'Rural Resource' project linking communities in Antrim and Donegal through Marine Leisure & Cultural activities. Through the Cultural aspect of the project, ITT will develop a language & cultural activity centre in Cushendall. It is proposed that this will raise awareness and use of Gaelic and Ulster-Scots as a tourism resource to underpin economic regeneration in these areas. The facility will be based upon a similarly successful centre in Islay. ITT's facility should be completed during Summer 2008.

My Department has not been approached to seek support for this work.

Sporting Clubs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the development proposals brought to his Department by sporting clubs in 2005-06; 2006-07; and 2007-08; and (ii) the financial support his Department granted to each sporting club. (AQW 4886/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding lies with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI). The tables below show the development proposals received by SNI from sporting clubs in 2005/06; 2006/07 and 2007/08 together with the exchequer funding provided to each club:-

STADIA SAFETY PROGRAMME (EXCHEQUER FUNDING)

Date	Club	Amount	Project
2005/06	Cliftonville FC	£800,000	Construction of new stand
2006/07	Ballymena FC	£161,636	Provision of control room, new signage, automatic doors and barrier between home and away fans
2006/07	Portadown FC	£800,000	Construction of new stand

PROPOSALS RECEIVED UNDER THE BUILDING SPORT PROGRAMME (LOTTERY FUNDING)

Date	Club	Project
2005/06	Derrygonnelly Harps GFC	Changing rooms and meeting rooms
2005/06	Kilcoo GAC	3G pitch and extension to existing pitch
2005/06	Sean Dolans GAC	New pitch
2005/06	Coleraine Yacht Club	New equipment
2005/06	Dromara GFC	Second pitch and changing/showers
2005/06	St Canice's GFC	Pitch, fencing and floodlights
2005/06	Glebe United FC	Upgrade grounds
2005/06	Bready Cricket Club	Cricket Centre of Excellence
2005/06	Moyola Park AFC	New pitch and changing
2005/06	McQuillan GAC	Floodlighting and fitness suite
2005/06	Errigal Ciaran GAC	New changing and meeting rooms
2005/06	Lisnaskea Emmetts GAC	Construction of second pitch
2005/06	Dromore St Dymphna GFC	New pitches
2005/06	Ulster Gliding Club	New glider
2005/06	St Teresa's GFC	Changing pavilion
2005/06	Kildress GAC	Pitch and floodlighting
2005/06	St Colmcille's GAC	Purchase of land and development of pitch
2005/06	Kevin Lynch Hurling Club	Club house
2005/06	St Mary's GAC	Floodlit pitches, changing rooms and car park
2005/06	Kickhams Creggan GAC	New pitch
2005/06	Latharna Og GAC Brustin Braes	Changing rooms
2005/06	The Cliff	3G pitch
2005/06	Poleglass ABC	Community Health facility
2005/06	Teemore Shamrocks	Floodlights
2005/06	Aghadrumsee St Macartans GFC	Floodlit pitch and changing rooms
2005/06	St Martins GAC	New changing facilities
2005/06	John Mitchels GAC	3G pitch
2005/06	Carnview Farms Clay Pidgeon Shooting Club	Double Olympic trap facility
2005/06	Ballyvea Gun Club	Additional traps

Date	Club	Project
2006/07	Lisburn Racquets Club	Sports Hall lighting and netball post holes.
2006/07	Tempo Maguires GFC	New changing rooms
2006/07	Stewartstown Harps GAC	New pitch
2006/07	Mossley Hockey Club	New clubhouse and changing room upgrade
2006/07	Warrenpoint Town FC	All-weather pitch, floodlights and fencing
2006/07	Colaiste Feirste	2 handball courts
2006/07	Belvoir Park Golf Club	New clubhouse.
2006/07	Wolfe Tones GAC	New changing pavilion
2006/07	Ballykinlar GAC	Floodlit MUGA with community hall
2006/07	Russell Gaelic Union	Floodlighting
2006/07	St Mary's GAC	2 nd pitch and floodlighting
2006/07	St Mary's GAC Slaughtmanus	New pitch and floodlighting
2006/07	Pearse Og GFC	Changing pavilion
2006/07	Kildress GAC	New pitch and floodlighting
2006/07	NICS Sports Association	2 Hockey pitches
2006/07	All Saints GAC	3G pitch and floodlighting
2006/07	Dromore St Dymphna GFC	New floodlit pitches
2006/07	Comber Bowling Club	New extension to facilities
2006/07	Limavady Cricket & RFC	Facility improvements
2006/07	County Antrim Yacht Club	Clubhouse extension
2006/07	Ballynahinch RFC	Multi-sport pitch
2006/07	St Eugenes GAC	New changing pavilion
2006/07	Lavey GAC	Synthetic pitch and changing rooms
2006/07	Poleglass ABC	New indoor boxing ring
2006/07	Tir No nOg GAC	Construction of new facilities
2006/07	O'Brien's GAC	New changing facilities
2006/07	Bracken Projectile Club	Purchase of site and development of range
2006/07	Eastside ABC	New premises and changing rooms
2006/07	Ballygalget GAC	Sports hall and changing rooms
2006/07	Owen Roe GAC	Pavilion and changing rooms
2006/07	St Josephs GAC	New changing pavilion
2006/07	Belleeks GFC	Second playing field
2006/07	Ballerin GAC	New pitch and floodlights

Date	Club	Project
2006/07	Belnaleck Art McMurroughs GFC	Additional playing surface and changing
2006/07	Ballymacash Rangers FC	New changing facilities
2006/07	Liatroim Fontenoy's Camogie Club	Develop playing field/training area
2006/07	Portadown Boat Club	New boat house and sporting complex
2006/07	Gleann ABC	New changing facility
2006/07	Owen Roe O'Neill's GAC	New training and changing areas
2006/07	Loughside FC	New pitches and changing pavilion
2006/07	Killen Rangers FC	Upgrade to current pitch
2006/07	Aghyaran St Davogs	3G pitch and conditioning suite
2006/07	Brookeborough Heber McMahon GAC	New changing facilities
2006/07	St Columbas Camogie Club	Astro turf pitch
2006/07	Royal Ulster Yacht Club	Training facility
2006/07	St Colms GAC	Floodlighting for new pitch
2006/07	Dergview FC	Clubhouse, changing, upgrade pitch and carpark

It should be noted that the Building Sport Programme closed in January 2007 therefore there were no proposals received in 2007/08.

Twelfth of July

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his Department's plans to promote the Twelfth of July celebrations as a day of cultural and historical significance. (AQW 4892/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: From 1 April 2008 the Community Festivals Fund is being devolved to Local Government and it will be a matter for them to assess the merits of applications from event organisers.

My Department is currently working with a number of organisations that have an interest in promoting Protestant/Unionist culture and heritage.

Library Spending

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much of the £2 million his department received in the final allocation will be spent on libraries and what per capita funding Belfast currently receives. (AQW 5060/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Libraries budget received £500k of the additional £2m allocated to the Department in the final allocation for the 2008/09 financial year.

In 2007/08 the Belfast Education and Library Board received a total of £5.734m recurrent expenditure which is £21.38 per capita.

EDUCATION

C2K Infrastructure

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which the C2K infrastructure will be available at Gaelscoil An Chaistil.

(AQW 3349/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Bunscoil an Chaistil has been provided with standalone (non-networked) ICT equipment reflecting the temporary status of its current accommodation. In addition the Department of Education has asked the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) and Classroom 2000 (C2k) to investigate how the school can be equipped and connected to the C2k network at its current location. The Department will provide additional funding to allow this work to be taken forward. The NEELB will now liaise with C2k to establish the most appropriate technical solution for this school. The Department will monitor progress and make every effort to ensure that this process is completed as soon as possible.

Pending Policy Reviews

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of development plans for (i) new schools; and (ii) school amalgamations, submitted to her, that are being held pending policy reviews, broken down by educational sector.

(AQW 3371/08)

The Minister of Education: Níltear ag glacadh le haon mholtaí faoi scoileanna úra nó cónascacháin i láthair na huaire ar an ábhar go bhfuiltear ag fanacht le hathbhreithnithe beartas.

No proposals for new schools or amalgamations are currently being held pending policy reviews.

Integrated Schools

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to promote integrated education; and what consideration has she given to setting targets for

increasing the number of places in integrated schools.
(AQW 3779/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. I take that duty very seriously.

I also acknowledge that parental choice is a central tenet to the selection of schools for children. As such I would not consider it appropriate to prescribe targets for the development of integrated education, or any other sector.

Aithníim, ar ndóigh, chomh rithábachtach agus chomh luachmhar leis an mhéid a chuireann an earnáil imeasctha, in éineacht le gach earnáil oideachais, le todhchaí ár bpáistí agus le cruthú na ndálaí atá riachtanach do shíocháin agus sheasmhacht fhadtéarmach anseo.

I recognise, of course the vital and valuable contribution that the integrated sector, together with all sectors of education, makes to the future of our children and in creating the conditions necessary for long-term peace and stability here.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of both pre-school age and school age children, who were '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, in each of the three years 2004/2005, 2005/2006 and 2006/2007.

(AQW 4001/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne in iúl domh nach mbeidh an t-eolas seo ar fáil taobh istigh den amscála. Scríofaídh mé arís a luaite a bheas an t-eolas ar fáil.

I am advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that this information is not available within the timescale. I will write again as soon as the information is available.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline what functions and staff have been identified for transfer from the department to the proposed Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 4019/08)

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.

Post-Primary Provision

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the basis on which previous educational experience and performance will be assessed in relation to post-primary transfer. (AQW 4020/08)

The Minister of Education: The detail of future post-primary transfer arrangements at age 11 is currently under discussion with stakeholders and the outcome of these discussions will be available in due course. In order to facilitate the informed election of educational pathways at age 14, which I have stated should start in 2013, advice to young people will be informed by comprehensive information from three years of post primary schooling demonstrating their educational strengths and weaknesses.

Ní dhéanfar measúnú ar an eolas seo ach ins an mhéid agus is riachtanach d'úsáid i leith comhairle.

This information will be assessed only insofar as is required in order to inform advice.

Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of individual sites purchased by her Department to site Bunscoil an Traonaigh on its existing site at Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea. (AQW 4130/08)

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.

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.

Schools' Infrastructure Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of new schools that have failed to meet their completion date, as a result of delays in the delivery of the schools' infrastructure programme. (AQW 4147/08)

The Minister of Education: There are six public-private partnership projects involving 17 schools at procurement stage, and seven conventionally funded projects which are experiencing delays.

Ta 69 tionscadal eile atá maoinithe go gnásúil ag céimeanna éagsúla dul chun cinn tríd na céimeanna pleanála. Beidh a ndul chun cinn siúd ag an údarás ábhartha oideachais ag brath ar sholáthar agus cheadú aighneachtaí dearaidh agus costais ag céimeanna ábhartha.

There are a further 69 conventionally funded projects at various stages of progress through the planning stages and whose progress by the relevant education authority and the Department will depend on the provision and approval of design and cost submissions at relevant stages.

Cullycapple Primary School

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the external redecoration work to Cullycapple Primary School will be carried out in the 2008-09 financial year. (AQW 4173/08)

The Minister of Education: Chomhairligh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt gur liostáladh Bunscoil Chúil an Chapail mar thosaíocht d'athmhaisiúchán lasmuigh sa bhliain airgeadais 2008/09, ach go dtí go gcuirfear an buiséad cothabhála don bhliain 2008/09 ar fáil ní féidir a chinntiú cé acu a chuirfear sin san áireamh sa chlár cothabhála atá beartaithe ag an Bhord nó nach gcuirfear.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that Cullycapple Primary School has been listed as a priority for external redecoration in the 2008/09 financial year but until the maintenance budget for 2008/09 has been allocated it is not possible to confirm whether or not it will be included in the Board's planned maintenance programme. This

scheme, along with all other competing priorities, will be considered in the light of available finance.

Youth Service Budget

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the youth service budget for 2009/10; and to confirm whether or not there will be a reduction in the budget.

(AQW 4178/08)

The Minister of Education: The funding for the Youth Service in 2009/10 comprises of a resource budget of £26.9 million¹ and a capital budget of £5 million. These amounts reflect the outcome for education of the 2007 Budget process for the period 2008-11.

Tá na buiséid socraithe don tréimhse thrí bliana. Is féidir liom a dhearbhuí nach ndéanfar laghdú ar bith ar an leithdháileadh do gach bliain.

The budgets have been set for the three-year period. I can confirm that there will be no reduction in the allocation for each year.

¹ Excludes funding for Community Relations

Schools' Estate

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans and timetables in relation to the preparation of the next phase of capital investment for the schools' estate, in order to ensure that the Department will be in a position to effectively utilise future spending allocations from the 2011-2012 financial years onwards.

(AQW 4223/08)

The Minister of Education: The Executive's Investment Strategy published in January indicated a capital allocation over the next ten years for schools and youth services of £3.5bn. The allocations for the next three years were confirmed in the Budget document. The Investment Strategy noted that the Executive expects education communities to work together so that decisions on future phases of the schools estate are grounded firmly on cross-sectoral, area-based plans. It will be important that area-based planning is introduced in the coming months and my statement to the Assembly of 4 March set out proposals for taking this work forward this year in relation to the post-primary sector.

Déanfar tionscadail caipitiúil a mheas feasta i gcomhthéacs pleananna bunaithe ar limistéir chun go mbainfimid an leas is fearr ó na hacmhainní a chuirfear ar fáil faoin Straitéis Infheistithe chun freastal éifeachtach a dhéanamh ar riachtanais oideachasúla. Níl aon dáta socraithe fós le haghaidh an chéad fhógra eile faoi chlár caipitil.

Future capital projects will be considered in the context of area-based plans so that we utilise the allocations available from the Investment Strategy to meet educational needs effectively. No date has been set yet for the next capital programme announcement.

Temporary Classroom Accommodation

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) Irish language Naiscoil; and (ii) Irish language Bunscoil, that are in temporary classroom accommodation.

(AQW 4260/08)

The Minister of Education: There are 27 naiscoileanna in temporary accommodation. A total of 13 bunscoileanna are in wholly temporary accommodation although a further 5 are in a mixture of temporary and permanent accommodation. There are 11 Irish-medium units attached to maintained schools and 4 of these are in temporary accommodation.

The state of accommodation of many of the Irish-medium schools is unacceptable and my officials have been liaising with Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta on the accommodation issues whilst we await the outcome of the Irish-medium Policy Review.

Bhí cruinniú agam freisin ar an 5ú lá de Márta le hionadaithe ó Chomhairle na Gaelscolaíochta agus pléadh an cheist seo.

I also had a meeting on 5 March with representatives of Comhairle na Gaelscolíochta where this issue was discussed.

Bamford Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the measures put in place to address issues relevant to her department contained in the Bamford Report.

(AQW 4336/08)

The Minister of Education: Tháinig Athbhreithniú Bamford ar Shláinte Mheabhrach agus Mhíchumas Foghlama réimse moltaí a bhaineann le hoideachas i sraith naoi dtuarascáil. Bhí feidhmeannaigh ón Roinn Oideachais (RO)/ón Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna (COO) mar chomhaltaí de Ghrúpa Stiúrtha an Athbhreithnithe, den Ghrúpa Saolta Cothroma agus den Ghrúpa le Cuimsiú Sóisialta a Chur chun Cinn.

The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability produced a range of education-related recommendations across a series of nine reports. Department of Education (DE)/Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) officials were members of the Review's Steering Group, the Equal Lives Group and the Promoting Social Inclusion Group.

Over the course of the Review, DE has been aware of emerging themes around child-centred services and improved collaborative working and has already been working to address some of these issues. The following is an overview of some of the measures and initiatives being taken forward by DE to address many of the issues that are relevant to the education-related Bamford recommendations around children with mental health or learning difficulties. Full details of all the measures will be included in the Government's response to the Bamford Review which is being co-ordinated by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

1. **Increased Funding and Resource Planning for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

In 2005/06 around £170m was expended in the North of Ireland for provision for SEN children and an additional £53m was allocated to meet the needs of pupils with SEN over the years 2005/06 to 2007/08.

From 2006 the School Census has included a new category of SEN to record Mental Health Issues (MHI). It is hoped that this new category will improve resource planning for pupils with MHI and other learning difficulties.

2. **Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SENDO)**

DE introduced SENDO in 2005 in order to strengthen the rights of SEN pupils to be educated in mainstream schools and to make it unlawful for schools to treat disabled pupils less favourably than other pupils. SENDO also introduced the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service (DARS) and an Advice and Information Service.

3. **DE Guidance**

In order to help schools and ELBs to support SEN pupils, to increase the awareness of specific areas of need and to provide information for parents, DE has made available a range of guidance materials to all schools, ELBs and relevant voluntary sector groups. This includes guidance on Promoting Collaborative Working between health and education professionals and materials on autism, dyslexia, sensory impairment and acquired brain injury.

4. **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)**

To ensure that the children and young people under the care of CAMHS receive the most appropriate support from both health and education services, DE and SEELB are planning, in partnership with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, a new purpose-built Regional Child

and Adolescent Psychiatric Centre, including a Learning Resource Centre which will deliver a new flexible education model, on the Forster Green site to bring together the Adolescent Psychiatric Unit and the Child and Family Centre.

5. **SEN Review**

The DE SEN and Inclusion review has highlighted the vital importance of an effective working partnership with the health sector. To this end, DE is working closely with health colleagues to strengthen and develop links, from a strategic level through to delivery, to gain a shared commitment and ensure that planning, assessment and delivery of therapies is timely and realistic.

6. **Anti-bullying**

DE funds a regional anti-bullying helpline operated by ChildLine and is working with the local Anti-bullying Forum to promote good practice in tackling bullying in schools. The Forum published new guidance on cyber bullying in November 2007 and a website providing advice and good practice information was launched in March 2008.

7. **Promoting Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing**

From September 2007 independent counselling support is available in all post-primary schools, which wish it, for a half-day per week.

In addition, work has begun on a pupils emotional health and well being programme in post primary schools. It will focus on positive prevention by building coping skills in children and young people and complements the personal development strand of the curriculum. With funding acquired in Budget 2007 appropriate interventions will be extended to primary and special schools

8. **Revised Curriculum**

The revised curriculum, which is being phased in from September 2007, includes the new areas of Personal Development & Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level. These address issues such as promoting good mental and emotional health and the risks posed by drugs and alcohol. Schools are receiving training and guidance materials to support their teaching in these areas.

9. **Health and Well-being**

DE is working towards a Healthy Schools Policy and has appointed a Healthy Schools Co-ordinator to take this work forward.

Mobile Classrooms

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's policy in relation to the replacement of mobile classrooms in schools. (AQW 4564/08)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir le seomraí ranga soghluaiste bheith cost-éifeachtúil chun freastal ar riachtanais ghearrthréimhseacha scoile mar gheall ar líon rolla bheith ag athrú, mar shampla. Deisítear nó athraítear seomraí ranga soghluaisteacha ag brath ar eolas ó shuirbhéanna cóirithe.

Mobile classrooms can prove to be a cost effective way of meeting the short-term accommodation needs at a school for example because of changing enrolments. Mobile classrooms are either repaired or replaced based on information from condition surveys.

Braidside Integrated Primary School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the provision of a new school building for Braidside Integrated Primary and Nursery school, Ballymena. (AQW 4565/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá staidéar féidearthachta ag comhairleoirí gairmiúla mo Roinne i láthair na huaire le faomhadh. Is é an chéad chéim eile a bheidh ann ná breithmheas eacnamaíochta a scrúdaíonn go mion na roghanna a aontaíodh. Tá breithmheas eacnamaíochta le haontú sula ndéantar tionscnaimh a mheas do chistiú caipitil.

A Feasibility Study is currently with my Department's professional advisers for approval. The next stage will be an economic appraisal which examines the agreed options in the feasibility study in depth. An agreed economic appraisal is a prior stage for projects to be considered for capital funding.

Language Needs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of current schoolchildren who do not have English as their first language; and (ii) the steps she is taking to address the educational needs of these children. (AQW 4594/08)

The Minister of Education: In October 2007, a total of 7,994 children were recorded as having a first language other than English. Of those children, a total of 5,665 were identified as having English as an Additional Language (EAL), in other words, significant difficulty with the English language and requiring additional assistance.

In April 2007 the Inclusion and Diversity Service was set up as a regional service to strengthen and

improve support to children and young people with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and their parents.

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. It is adopting a regional approach to determine which schools need support and the type of support and to direct work more appropriately.

A number of new services such as interpreting, translating and a multi-lingual website to provide support to teachers and newcomer parents have been set up through the service and are available across the north of Ireland.

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

In 2008/09 the Inclusion and Diversity service will be funded with just over £1million by the Department.

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.

Additional funds are provided directly to schools through the Common Funding Formula. In 2007/08 an additional £943 was provided for each child with EAL in the school's annual budget and this is rising to £983 per child for 2008/09, giving a total of £5.5million going directly into schools.

Is faoi na scoileanna atá sé cinneadh a dhéanamh maidir leis an dóigh is fearr le húsáid a bhaint as an airgead seo ar bhealaí éagsúla ar leas na bpáistí BTB (EAL) agus ar leas na ndaoine óga ina gcuid scoileanna.

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.

Blackwater Integrated College

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which a decision will be

made in relation to the establishment of Blackwater Integrated College as a new grant maintained integrated college. (AQW 4648/08)

The Minister of Education: Bhreithnigh mé go cúramach an moladh le Coláiste Imeachtha Blackwater a bhunú mar scoil nua a chuimseoidh daltaí ó Ardscoil Rialaithe Imeachtha Acadamh an Dúin, agus shocraigh mé an moladh a cheadú.

I considered carefully the proposal to establish Blackwater Integrated College as a new school which will incorporate pupils from Down Academy Controlled Integrated High School, and I have decided to approve the proposal.

Tor Bank Special Needs School

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to extend the SPEAC Project, based at Tor Bank Special Needs School, as the project is nearing the end of its three year funding programme. (AQW 4651/08)

The Minister of Education: Maoiníonn Tionscnamh an BOLID (SEELB) Tionscnamh SPEAC, i gcomhpháirtíocht le SPEAC.

The SPEAC Project is funded by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), in partnership with SPEAC.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the SEELB that the Board is currently awaiting the final Inspection Report, from the Education and Training Inspectorate, which will provide an evaluation of the SPEAC Project. Following receipt of this evaluation, and other available information, the SEELB will then be in a position to decide on the future of the SPEAC Project.

Movilla High School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) maintenance; (ii) repainting; and (iii) repair work, that is being undertaken at Movilla High School, Newtownards, in 2007-08 and 2008-09. (AQW 4664/08)

The Minister of Education: The information available does not distinguish between maintenance, repainting and repairs. The total cost of maintenance, including repainting and repairs, in 2007/08 was £26,395 (£22,297 from the South Eastern Education and Library Board's budget and £4,098 from Movilla High School's delegated budget).

Measann BOLOD go gcaithfear tuairim is £20,000 sa bhliain 2008/09 ar ghléasra úr coire; cuirfear sa halla spóirt é in ionad na píobaire damáistithe. Ní féidir ag

an pointe seo a rá cá mhéad caiteachas breise a bheidh de dhíth faoi choinne cothabháil bhreise de réir mar a bheidh gá léi le linn na bliana seo chugainn.

The SEELB estimate that approximately £20,000 will be spent in 2008/09 on the provision of new boiler plant in the sports hall to replace existing damaged pipework. It is not possible at this stage to say how much additional expenditure will be required for further maintenance as it arises next year.

Assembly Questions

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of (i) the benefits to MLAs in receiving answers to written Assembly questions in Irish; and (ii) the impact on public expenditure in providing this service. (AQW 4674/08)

The Minister of Education: I answer my questions in English and in Irish and I believe people should celebrate the diversity of language. Irish is the native language of Ireland and is protected and promoted in accordance with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. I take my statutory duties very seriously as I do my right to use the Irish language.

Go dtí seo tá £956.73 caite ag an Roinn ar aistriúchán Gaeilge ar fhreagraí ar Cheisteanna scríofa Tionóil.

To date the Department has spent £956.73 on translation into Irish for inclusion in answers to written Assembly Questions.

Language Needs

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail, for 2007, the amount of money spent by her department in promoting and teaching, (i) Irish; (ii) Ulster-Scots; (iii) French; (iv) Spanish; and (v) German, in (a) primary and (b) post-primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 4675/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department allocates budgets to schools on the basis of the Local Management of Schools Common Funding Formula. Within the requirements of the curriculum arrangements, it is a matter for schools to determine which languages they provide. School budgets are not allocated by specific subject area.

I believe it is important that we give our young people an early start to language learning in light of the benefits this can have and in our increasingly diverse society. I am therefore putting a programme in place to support those primary schools which wish

to introduce Spanish or Irish, and in the 2007/08 financial year my Department has allocated £125,000 to the South Eastern Education and Library Board, on behalf of all the Boards, to support the programme. Tutors are currently being recruited and will begin working in schools from the next term.

Tá dualgas reachtúil ar an Roinn Oideachais chun forbairt na Gaelscolaíochta ‘a chur chun cinn agus a éascú’.

The Department of Education has a statutory duty to ‘encourage and facilitate’ the development of Irish medium education. Under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 the Department of Education funds the Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta to promote Irish-medium education, and is making a grant of £590,000 available to it in 2007/08.

Preschool Provision

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans to increase the pre-school provision in the Armagh City area, given that the facilities at Grove Street and Railway Street are full. (AQW 4685/08)

The Minister of Education: In the current school year (2007/08) the level of pre-school provision within a 2 mile radius of Grove Nursery School and Armagh Nursery School (also known as Railway Street Nursery School) is 116% with a total of 263 places to cater for a P1 cohort of 227 children.

Is cinnte gur leor é seo le freastal ar an éileamh sa réimse seo agus léiríonn sé seo nach bhfuil aon ghá ann an soláthar a mhéadú go fóill beag.

This is more than sufficient to meet the demand in the area which indicates that there is no need to increase provision at this time.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria that will be applied for access to therapy at the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism. (AQW 4710/08)

The Minister of Education: The criteria for referral and admissions to the Centre are currently being developed by the Centre’s Senior Management Team. As the Centre is a north/south educational initiative these criteria will be agreed jointly with education providers in the North and the South.

Mar thoradh ar iarratas an Ionaid ar an chritéar riachtanach déanfar cinneadh ar na socrúithe atá de dhíth do gach páiste agus beidh soláthar teiripe san áireamh anseo.

The Centre’s application of the agreed criteria will then lead to a determination of the arrangements that are required for each child, including access to therapy provision.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the staff/client ratio at the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism. (AQW 4711/08)

The Minister of Education: The Centre when fully operational will employ between 60 and 70 members of staff. The diversity of staff will include teachers, educational psychologists, therapists, trainers, researchers, residential care and admin staff.

The Learning Support Service will have four group bases catering for a total of 20 children at any one time. Within each group base there will be one experienced teacher and at least one support assistant as well as the necessary support being provided by a range of therapists.

Déanfaidh an tSeirbhís measúnú air, ar a laghad, ceathrar páiste lena gcuid tuismitheoirí gach seachtain agus beidh thart ar 3 nó 4 duine gairmiúil i gceist sa phroiseas seo a ndéanfaidh síceolaí oideachais a stiúradh.

The Educational Assessment Service will assess approximately 4 children with their parents every week and this process will involve approximately 3 to 4 professionals led by an educational psychologist.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the regime of therapies that will be available at the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism. (AQW 4712/08)

The Minister of Education: As a child centred organisation the Middletown Centre for Autism will endeavour to meet the individual needs of the children and young people referred to the Centre. This will involve looking closely at the various therapies used with the child in the past and assessing how they have been used and with what results.

Beidh sé mar aidhm ag an Ionad freastal ar riachtanais aonarach bunaithe ar an cur chuige a shocraítear bheith cuí agus fóirsteanach don duine aonair. Déanfar réimse teiripe in ionad réim faoi leith a mheas.

It will be the Centre’s aim to meet individual needs based on the approach that is deemed appropriate and suitable for the individual. A range of therapies rather than a regime will therefore be considered.

East/West Co-Operation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the work she has undertaken to promote greater East/West co-operation within education. (AQW 4735/08)

The Minister of Education: I recognise that there is real value in sharing and learning from others. That is why, for example, I met with my Scottish counterpart on 12 December to discuss and share our thinking on matters such as teacher education, tackling educational underachievement and Irish/Gaelic-medium education. Other areas where we are already co-operating very productively with our Scottish counterparts include the area of qualifications where GCSEs, A levels and other significant qualifications offered in schools are developed and regulated in the context of a joint framework.

I attended British Irish Council meetings on 16 July 2007 and 14 February 2008 along with counterparts from England, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. The most recent meeting in Dublin focussed on issues of drug misuse, with a focus on children and families; early years policy; child protection; and child poverty – all issues for which our education system has a role to play.

With funding from my Department, the British Council supports and encourages schools to participate in the East-West Schools Programme. This Programme aims to build educational links on a tripartite basis, involving schools from across Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. I have arranged to meet with the Director of the British Council in May to discuss how we can further develop and promote their work.

Earlier this month, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department of Education hosted

an Autism Stocktake Event in Belfast, which included officials and inspectors from Wales, Scotland, the south of Ireland, as well as specialist Education and Library Board personnel and the Middletown Centre for Autism. The event provided a forum to consider autism provision across the education sector and exchange examples of good practice in a strategic context.

Ar deireadh, tá feidhmeannaigh ó mo Roinnse ag obair faoi láthair lena macasamhail féin eile sa Roinn Leanaí, Scoileanna agus Teaghlach agus le Gníomhaireacht Phinsin Phoiblí na hAlban le hullmhú beartais do na scéimeanna pinsin múinteoirí faoi seach anseo agus i Sasain, sa Bhreatain Bheag agus in Albain a chomhordú.

Finally, officials from my Department are currently working with counterparts in the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Scottish Public Pensions Agency to co-ordinate the development of policy for the respective teachers' pension schemes here and in England, Wales and Scotland.

Vice-Head Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of male vice-head teachers in post-primary schools; and (ii) the percentage of all vice-head teachers that this represents, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) sector. (AQW 4736/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached tables:

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL PAYSACLE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2007

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	3	11%	10	83%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	61%
	Maintained	12	40%	6	40%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	1	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	50%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
	Total	16	25%	33	60%
Western	Controlled	4	14%	7	50%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	68%
	Maintained	22	32%	13	59%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	67%
	Total	26	26%	39	61%
North Eastern	Controlled	21	31%	20	74%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	9	24%	7	64%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	33%
	Total	30	28%	43	65%
South Eastern	Controlled	21	38%	14	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	12	75%
	Maintained	7	26%	5	45%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	2	67%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	50%	2	40%
	Total	33	37%	35	58%
Southern	Controlled	12	24%	20	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	68%
	Maintained	20	26%	12	52%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	32	24%	46	61%
Total	Controlled	61	27%	71	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	69	66%
	Maintained	70	29%	43	52%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	1	100%
	Controlled Integrated	3	75%	4	80%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	3	18%	8	42%
	Total	137	28%	196	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL PAYSCALE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2006

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice- principals	% of all vice- principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	6	17%	10	77%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	54%
	Maintained	12	40%	7	41%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	67%
	Total	19	27%	36	57%
Western	Controlled	6	19%	8	57%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	68%
	Maintained	24	32%	13	52%
	Other Maintained	1	100%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	1	33%
	Total	31	28%	35	57%
North Eastern	Controlled	20	30%	20	71%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	7	21%	8	62%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	40%
	Total	27	26%	43	64%
South Eastern	Controlled	23	39%	15	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	76%
	Maintained	8	24%	6	50%
	Other Maintained	1	50%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	50%	2	50%
	Total	37	37%	39	61%
Southern	Controlled	10	20%	20	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	65%
	Maintained	21	27%	15	65%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	25%	0	0%
	Total	32	24%	48	65%
Total	Controlled	65	27%	73	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	67	64%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice- principals	% of all vice- principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice- principals
	Maintained	72	29%	49	54%
	Other Maintained	2	29%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	4	24%	7	47%
	Total	146	28%	201	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL PAYSCALE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2005

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice- principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice- principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	22%	11	69%
	Voluntary	0	0%	18	58%
	Maintained	14	41%	8	44%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	22	29%	41	58%
Western	Controlled	7	21%	8	50%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	24	33%	17	59%
	Other Maintained	1	100%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	32	30%	38	55%
North Eastern	Controlled	22	34%	23	70%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	67%
	Maintained	12	31%	13	81%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	100%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	36	33%	52	70%
South Eastern	Controlled	26	39%	15	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	82%
	Maintained	9	24%	7	64%
	Other Maintained	1	50%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	1	33%
	Total	40	87%	40	65%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Southern	Controlled	11	21%	18	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	67%
	Maintained	19	23%	15	56%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	25%	1	100%
	Total	31	22%	48	62%
Total	Controlled	74	29%	75	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	73	66%
	Maintained	78	29%	60	59%
	Other Maintained	2	29%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	5	83%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	14%	6	40%
	Total	161	33%	219	62%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL Payscale IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2004

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	21%	11	69%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	52%
	Maintained	14	42%	10	53%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	22	29%	42	57%
Western	Controlled	7	19%	10	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	56%
	Maintained	26	34%	18	60%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	33	28%	42	58%
North Eastern	Controlled	25	36%	24	67%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	65%
	Maintained	12	32%	13	81%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	67%	0	0%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	39	35%	52	67%
South Eastern	Controlled	30	40%	16	59%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	79%
	Maintained	11	30%	8	62%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	1	50%
	Total	45	38%	43	66%
Southern	Controlled	13	23%	17	53%
	Voluntary	0	0%	12	67%
	Maintained	18	22%	14	50%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	1	100%
	Total	32	23%	45	56%
Total	Controlled	83	30%	78	61%
	Voluntary	0	0%	73	62%
	Maintained	81	30%	63	59%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	5	83%	4	80%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	17%	4	33%
	Total	171	30%	224	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL PAYSCALE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2003

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice- principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	20%	10	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	50%
	Maintained	14	42%	10	50%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	67%
	Total	23	29%	41	55%
Western	Controlled	8	22%	14	67%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	61%
	Maintained	28	35%	18	60%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	36	30%	46	60%
North Eastern	Controlled	25	37%	23	74%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	65%
	Maintained	15	36%	13	76%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	50%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	1	33%
	Total	43	37%	52	70%
South Eastern	Controlled	31	43%	15	58%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	88%
	Maintained	11	28%	8	73%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	100%	3	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	3	75%
	Total	45	38%	44	72%
Southern	Controlled	15	27%	17	52%
	Voluntary	0	0%	11	69%
	Maintained	17	20%	16	57%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	3	50%	1	100%
	Total	35	24%	46	58%
Total	Controlled	87	32%	79	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	72	64%
	Maintained	85	31%	65	61%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	4	57%	4	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	6	38%	7	50%
	Total	182	32%	229	63%

Irish Translation

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money her department has spent on translating answers to written Assembly questions into Irish, in the first 2 months of 2008. (AQW 4744/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa chéad dá mhí den bhliain 2008 chaith mo Roinn £346.33 ar aistriúcháin go Gaeilge le cur isteach i bhfreagraí ar cheisteanna scríofa Tionóil.

In the first two months of 2008 my Department has spent £346.33 on translations into Irish for inclusion in answers to written Assembly Questions.

Budget Overspend

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the total debt, in terms of overspend, that was owed by (i) the Belfast Education and Library Board; and (ii) the South Eastern Education and Library Board, to her department; and to further detail (a) the amount of this money that has been paid back in each case; and (b)

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Year	Target Repayment £m		Actual Amount Repaid £m		Value of Deficit £m		
	Schools	Centre	Schools	Centre	Schools	Centre	Total
2005					24.2	11.9	12.3
2005-06	0.0	4.5		Repayment to centre not achieved but £4.1m of schools deficit repaid	20.1	7.8	12.3
2006-07	0.0	4.5		Yes	15.6	7.8	7.8
2007-08	1.1	2.1		On target	12.4	7.8	4.6
2008-09	1.0	2.0		Projected	8.4	6.8	1.6

Vice-Head Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last 5 years, (i) the number of male vice-head teachers in primary schools; and (ii) the percentage of all vice-head teachers that this

the plans her department has to secure payments from these bodies. (AQW 4762/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá freagraí ar na ceisteanna thuas leagtha amach sna táblaí seo a leanas:

The answers to the above questions are set out in the following tables:

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Year	Target Repayment* £m	Actual Amount Repaid £m	Value of Deficit £m
2005			8.5
2005-06	3.0	3.0	6.2**
2006-07	3.0	3.0	3.2
2007-08	3.2		0

* The £8.5m deficit at year end 2005 was made up of a centre deficit of £5.7m and a schools deficit of £2.8m both of which, were required to be repaid to the Department.

** This figure has been adjusted to reflect an error in respect of end-year flexibility relating to deferred income in the 2005-06 accounts.

represents, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) sector. (AQW 4768/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the following tables:

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL Payscale IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2007

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	3	11%	10	83%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	61%
	Maintained	12	40%	6	40%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	1	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	50%
	Total	16	25%	33	60%
Western	Controlled	4	14%	7	50%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	68%
	Maintained	22	32%	13	59%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	67%
	Total	26	26%	39	61%
North Eastern	Controlled	21	31%	20	74%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	9	24%	7	64%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	33%
	Total	30	28%	43	65%
South Eastern	Controlled	21	38%	14	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	12	75%
	Maintained	7	26%	5	45%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	2	67%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	50%	2	40%
	Total	33	37%	35	58%
Southern	Controlled	12	24%	20	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	68%
	Maintained	20	26%	12	52%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	32	24%	46	61%
Total	Controlled	61	27%	71	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	69	66%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Total	Maintained	70	29%	43	52%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	1	100%
	Controlled Integrated	3	75%	4	80%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	3	18%	8	42%
	Total	137	28%	196	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL Payscale IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2006

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice- principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	6	17%	10	77%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	54%
	Maintained	12	40%	7	41%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	67%
	Total	19	27%	36	57%
Western	Controlled	6	19%	8	57%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	68%
	Maintained	24	32%	13	52%
	Other Maintained	1	100%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	1	33%
	Total	31	28%	35	57%
North Eastern	Controlled	20	30%	20	71%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	7	21%	8	62%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	40%
	Total	27	26%	43	64%
South Eastern	Controlled	23	39%	15	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	76%
	Maintained	8	24%	6	50%
	Other Maintained	1	50%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	50%	2	50%
	Total	37	37%	39	61%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice- principals	% of all vice- principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Southern	Controlled	10	20%	20	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	65%
	Maintained	21	27%	15	65%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	25%	0	0%
	Total	32	24%	48	65%
Total	Controlled	65	27%	73	65%
	Voluntary	0	0%	67	64%
	Maintained	72	29%	49	54%
	Other Maintained	2	29%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	4	24%	7	47%
	Total	146	28%	201	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL PAYSACLE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2005

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice- principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	22%	11	69%
	Voluntary	0	0%	18	58%
	Maintained	14	41%	8	44%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	22	29%	41	58%
Western	Controlled	7	21%	8	50%
	Voluntary	0	0%	13	62%
	Maintained	24	33%	17	59%
	Other Maintained	1	100%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	32	30%	38	55%
North Eastern	Controlled	22	34%	23	70%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	67%
	Maintained	12	31%	13	81%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	100%	0	0%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
North Eastern	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	36	33%	52	70%
South Eastern	Controlled	26	39%	15	56%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	82%
	Maintained	9	24%	7	64%
	Other Maintained	1	50%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	1	33%
	Total	40	87%	40	65%
Southern	Controlled	11	21%	18	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	67%
	Maintained	19	23%	15	56%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	25%	1	100%
	Total	31	22%	48	62%
Total	Controlled	74	29%	75	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	73	66%
	Maintained	78	29%	60	59%
	Other Maintained	2	29%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	5	83%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	14%	6	40%
	Total	161	33%	219	62%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL Payscale IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2004

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	21%	11	69%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	52%
	Maintained	14	42%	10	53%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	2	50%
	Total	22	29%	42	57%
Western	Controlled	7	19%	10	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	56%
	Maintained	26	34%	18	60%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Western	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	33	28%	42	58%
North Eastern	Controlled	25	36%	24	67%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	65%
	Maintained	12	32%	13	81%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	67%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	39	35%	52	67%
South Eastern	Controlled	30	40%	16	59%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	79%
	Maintained	11	30%	8	62%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	3	100%	3	75%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	1	50%
	Total	45	38%	43	66%
Southern	Controlled	13	23%	17	53%
	Voluntary	0	0%	12	67%
	Maintained	18	22%	14	50%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	1	100%
	Total	32	23%	45	56%
Total	Controlled	83	30%	78	61%
	Voluntary	0	0%	73	62%
	Maintained	81	30%	63	59%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	5	83%	4	80%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	2	17%	4	33%
	Total	171	30%	224	61%

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE VICE-PRINCIPAL Payscale IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2003

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Belfast	Controlled	8	20%	10	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	17	50%
	Maintained	14	42%	10	50%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	2	67%
	Total	23	29%	41	55%
Western	Controlled	8	22%	14	67%
	Voluntary	0	0%	14	61%
	Maintained	28	35%	18	60%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	36	30%	46	60%
North Eastern	Controlled	25	37%	23	74%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	65%
	Maintained	15	36%	13	76%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	50%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	50%	1	33%
	Total	43	37%	52	70%
South Eastern	Controlled	31	43%	15	58%
	Voluntary	0	0%	15	88%
	Maintained	11	28%	8	73%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	100%	3	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	33%	3	75%
	Total	45	38%	44	72%
Southern	Controlled	15	27%	17	52%
	Voluntary	0	0%	11	69%
	Maintained	17	20%	16	57%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	1	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	3	50%	1	100%
	Total	35	24%	46	58%
Total	Controlled	87	32%	79	62%
	Voluntary	0	0%	72	64%

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals	Number of male vice-principals	% of all vice-principals
Total	Maintained	85	31%	65	61%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	2	100%
	Controlled Integrated	4	57%	4	100%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	6	38%	7	50%
	Total	182	32%	229	63%

Consultancy Firms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of occasions on which 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 the financial year 2007-08. (AQW 4785/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an Roinn tar éis leas a bhaint as seirbhísí gnólachtaí Comhairliúcháin ar 121 ócáid sa bhliain airgeadais 2007/08 ar chostas iomlán de £5,042,020.49.

Tugtar sonraí ar mhiondealú na hoibre a cuireadh chun críche ar gach aon ócáid sa tábla thíos.

The Department have employed the services of Consultancy firms on 121 occasions in the financial year 2007/08 at a total cost of £5,042,020.49.

A breakdown of the work completed on each occasion is detailed in the table below.

Consultancy Services employed by the Department of Education in Financial Year 2007/08

Consultancy work carried out
Network Health Check
Interpreting and translation services for English as an additional language policy development
Healthy Schools policy
Preparation and production of a revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy
Evaluation of Full Service School Project funded under Renewing Communities Programme
Early Years Research
Citizenship
Pupil Profile/Incas
Pupil Profile/Incas
Internal Audit
EFQM
Personal Capabilities

Early Years Research
Citizenship
Examinations Modernisation
Examinations Modernisation
Pupil Profile/Incas
Employability
Internal Audit
EFQM
NI Youth Work Awards
Intergenerational Project
Human Resources advice
Public Relations
Preparation of new Funding Policy
Equality screening of Youth Council policies
Preparation of new Management Information System for the youth service sector
Marketing
“Investing in Youth Work” event
To assess the range of previous evaluations of ICT in schools
Teachers’ Pay/Pensions Replacement
PWC Independent Evaluation of the Inspection Process
Development of IMG, MMG communication skills
Chartermark Reassessment
Independent Evaluation of the Inspection Process
Development of ETI communication styles
Governor handbook - to provide a common handbook for school governors
Website Updates
Provision of Internal Audit services
Preparation of Annual Accounts
Website updates
Balmoral High School - appointment of legal and financial consultants to examine future use

PFI Pathfinder Projects - post project evaluations on operation of PPP contract
Evaluation of Parent Support Project (16 schools)
BELB strategic Partnership Project
BELB strategic Partnership Project
BELB strategic Partnership Project
External evaluation of IDF project outcomes
Specialist Schools Pilot Yr 2 Assessments - Fee - £200per reading and panel meeting days - Civil service travel rates
Development of Specialist Schools Pilot year 3 application process - Fee - £200per reading and panel meeting days - civil service travel rates
Framework and Partnering
Legal assistance for framework and legislation
Framework and Partnering
Legal assistance for framework and legislation
Assistance for legal challenge
Research Project on nature and extent of bullying in schools in the north of Ireland
Literacy and Numeracy - identification of difficulties
Additional analysis of PISA 2003 data for the north of Ireland
Literacy and Numeracy - identification of difficulties
Literacy and Numeracy - cities comparison
Synoptic report on e-learning pilot projects
Teacher Vacancies Survey
Call-off contract for strategic, financial and technical consultancy services
Call-off contract for legal consultancy services
South West Divisional Library, Enniskillen
Call-off contract for strategic, financial and technical consultancy services
Call-off contract for legal consultancy services
Independent Strategic Review of Education
Facilitation exercise for Mid/South Down post primary provision
Bangor Academy/Nendrum College PFI
Lagan College & Torbank PFI
PPP Support Team
Lagan College & Torbank PFI
PPP Support Team
Provision of support to assist with the implementation of RPA - Element of extension to contract which fell into the 2007/08 FY
Development of an Outline Business Case for the RPA programme
Provision of Legal advice on the ownership of Controlled schools
Development of options for the establishment of a sectoral support organisation for the controlled schools sector

Consultation with young people to ensure their views are taken on board in the establishment of the Education Advisory Forum
Assist DE Board in identifying the current culture and capability of DE
Development of DE Policy Code
Professional Advice re Investor in People Issues
Professional Advice re Investor in People Issues
ICT Audit
Communications Support
HR Support (Deloitte)
Additional HR Support
HR - Consultancy on specific projects
Communications - appointment of external public affairs consultancy
Financial Planning
ICT - quality assessment
Harmonisation Issues
Arthur Cox - legal consultancy
PWC - recruitment consultancy
White Young Green - building works
Arthur Cox - legal consultancy
PWC - recruitment consultancy
White Young Green - building project management
Robinson McIlwaine - Architects
RPS Ltd - Structural/Civil Engineers
Turner and Townsend - Quantity Surveyors
A H Design - Mechanical and Engineering
Landscape Design
Creation of a technical spec for IT hardware
2nd Recruitment campaign for 2 heads of Division
Legal Fees
Management Consultancy on Risk Management Framework
Legal advice
IT Hardware and Software advice
Accountancy and Audit Fees
Design of Logo and Website
Arthur Cox - legal services
Update of Departmental Circular 99/10 on Pastoral Care
To carry out a study of the outcomes of Government's Financial Investment in Irish-medium education over the last 5 years
Survey of the Youth Estate - to complete a survey of the condition of youth facilities in the voluntary sector
A review to identify the teachers and youth worker training needs for the delivery of community relations in schools
PGS Project Management Services to support Trustees

PGS Project Management Services to support Trustees
PGS Project Management Services to support Trustees
Architectural Services to support Trustees
Building & Maintenance work for CCMS Down & Connor Office

Post-Primary Provision

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3714/08, to provide a detailed account of the ‘facilitation exercise for Mid/South Down post primary provision’, completed during the financial year 2006-07. (AQW 4787/08)

The Minister of Education: When the then Minister of Education, Maria Eagle, turned down a Development Proposal for Rowallane Integrated College in January 2007 she invited the South Eastern Education and Library Board, which had been reviewing provision in the mid/south Down area, to work with the integrated sector and the Rowallane parents’ group, to see how they might develop jointly a proposal for integrated provision which would meet the needs of the area. She asked that discussions should begin immediately.

Cheap an Roinn éascaitheoir ina dhiaidh sin le cuidiú sa teagmháil tosaigh idir BOLOD, grúpa na dtuismitheoirí agus an earnáil imeasctha le fiosrú arbh fhéidir moladh cuí a ullmhú de réir chinneadh Maria Eagle. Bhí deireadh le tacaíocht na Roinne leis an obair éascaithe i Mí Aibreáin 2007.

The department subsequently appointed a facilitator to assist the initial engagements between the SEELB, the parents’ group and the integrated sector in exploring whether an appropriate proposal could be developed in line with Maria Eagle’s decision. The department’s support for the facilitation work ended in April 2007.

Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the provision for teaching thinking skills in primary schools, in each of the Education and Library Boards. (AQW 4789/08)

The Minister of Education: Thinking skills form part of the revised curriculum from Year 1 onwards, to be developed through the curricular areas of learning. This makes more explicit what has always been good teaching practice. A regional programme of training and support, including guidance materials, is being provided through the Partnership Management Board and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

Tá teacht ag gach bunscoil ar an tsoláthar chéanna ar neamhchead don Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a bhfuil siad faoina chúram.

All primary schools have access to the same provision regardless of the Education & Library Board in which they are based.

Mid-Term Breaks

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm who decides the dates for mid-term breaks for (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools. (AQW 4865/08)

The Minister of Education: The law requires a grant-aided school to be in operation for 3 terms and 200 days in each school year less 10 optional days and any exceptional closures approved by the Department.

The education and library boards can approve the dates of school holidays for controlled and maintained primary and secondary schools, other than optional days, in accordance with statutory requirements. In the case of voluntary grammar schools, this power rests with the school’s Board of Governors.

I have no discretion to alter the dates for school holidays other than in the case of a disagreement between a school’s Board of Governors and the education and library board for the area in which the school is located.

The school holiday dates are agreed with a Transport Working Group representative of all school sectors taking account of the availability of school transport and school meals services. Schools are informed of the dates when transport and meals services are not operational but are allowed flexibility to operate on these days at their own volition.

Ar an ábhar go mbíonn rogha ag scoileanna i dtaca lena laethanta feidhme agus a laethanta roghnacha de, is féidir go mbeidh éagsúlachtaí i dtréimhsí saoire, mar shosanna lár téarma, idir scoileanna.

As schools can exercise some discretion in relation to their operational and optional days, there can be variations in holiday periods like mid-term breaks between schools.

School Holidays

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the discretion she has to alter the dates for school holidays; and to confirm who decides the dates that children are on holiday from school. (AQW 4866/08)

The Minister of Education: The law requires a grant-aided school to be in operation for 3 terms and

200 days in each school year less 10 optional days and any exceptional closures approved by the Department.

The education and library boards can approve the dates of school holidays for controlled and maintained primary and secondary schools, other than optional days, in accordance with statutory requirements. In the case of voluntary grammar schools, this power rests with the school's Board of Governors.

I have no discretion to alter the dates for school holidays other than in the case of a disagreement between a school's Board of Governors and the education and library board for the area in which the school is located.

The school holiday dates are agreed with a Transport Working Group representative of all school sectors taking account of the availability of school transport and school meals services. Schools are informed of the dates when transport and meals services are not operational but are allowed flexibility to operate on these days at their own volition.

Ar an ábhar go mbíonn rogha ag scoileanna i dtaca lena laethanta feidhme agus a laethanta roghnacha de, is féidir go mbeidh éagsúlachtaí i dtréimhsí saoire, mar shosanna lár téarma, idir scoileanna.

As schools can exercise some discretion in relation to their operational and optional days, there can be variations in holiday periods like mid-term breaks between schools.

Schools Modernisation Programme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the eight construction companies that have been appointed to form the framework under the Schools Modernisation Programme. (AQW 4869/08)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-ocht ar príomhchonraitheoirí (nó comheagras) rathúla agus a gcuid foirne deartha a ceapadh chun an creat a dhéanamh faoi Clár Nuachóiriúcháin na Scoileanna:

The eight successful lead contractors (or consortia) and their design teams that have been appointed to form the framework under the Schools' Modernisation Programme are as follows:

Lead Contractor:	Lead Designer:
Graham Construction	Building Design Partnership
McLaughlin & Harvey Ltd	SMC PARR Architects Ltd
P Elliot & Company Ltd / McCombe Bros (Antrim) Ltd	Scott Wilson Ltd
Laing O'Rourke / J H Turkington & Sons Ltd	JNP Architects

Lead Contractor:	Lead Designer:
Gilbert Ash NI Ltd / Glasgiven Contracts Ltd	Robinson McIlwaine / Knox Clayton
Bowen Construction Ltd / Mascott Construction Ltd	HLM Architects Ltd / Hamilton Architects
FHT (Farrans (Construction) Ltd / Heron Bros Ltd / Tracey Bros Ltd	McAdam Design Ltd / Isherwood & Ellis
Trinity (David Patton & Sons NI Ltd / H&J Martin Ltd / Felix O'Hare & Company	Todd Architects

Drugs Education Programme

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the drugs education programme currently in place for young people in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area; and (ii) how this programme is implemented. (AQW 4884/08)

The Minister of Education: Drugs education in the Northern Eastern Education and Library Board, as in all the education and library boards (ELBs) is delivered through the revised curriculum, in particular through the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding strand in the primary schools and Personal Development strand in the post-primary schools.

The drugs education programme is delivered mostly through resources created by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in conjunction with the ELBs. The primary school resource is 'Living Learning Together' and the post-primary resource is 'Insync'. Year 8 and Year 9 of 'Insync' have been delivered to schools, with Year 10 due out in the next year. Schools have flexibility within the revised curriculum to deliver the programme in innovative ways to engage the students.

The NEELB Personal Development team, in conjunction with a number of other bodies, ran a series of three pilot programmes for parents over the last month looking at how to reduce the damage of binge drinking to young people. The aim was to strengthen the schools' message by helping parents realise the extent of the problem, the damage caused by excess alcohol and what parents can do to address the issues, based on local and national research.

Mar aon leis sin, tá beirt oifigeach machaire fostaithe ag BOLOT le hoiliúint agus tacaíocht a sholáthar do scoileanna i dtaca le cúrsaí drugaí.

In addition, NEELB employ two field officers to deliver training and support from drugs education to schools.

Staff Sick Leave

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail for each of the five Education and Library Boards, the number of teachers currently on sick leave; and to further detail (i) the average amount of sick leave taken by teachers; and (iii) the total cost of these lost days, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4897/08)

The Minister of Education: Thug Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus

TABLE 1

	2004-05			2005-06			2006-07		
Board/ Sector	Sick Days	Permanent Teachers in Post	Sick days per teacher in post	Sick Days	Permanent Teachers in Post	Sick days per teacher in post	Sick Days	Permanent Teachers in Post	Sick days per teacher in post
Belfast	6,035	1,079	5.59	7,377	987	7.47	7,280	956	7.62
North Eastern	14,790	2,379	6.22	19,740	2,312	8.54	18,769	2,269	8.27
South Eastern	14,146	1,986	7.12	17,293	2,123	8.15	15,091	2,069	7.29
Southern	11,616	1,655	7.02	13,408	1,587	8.45	12,262	1,574	7.79
Western	5,640	964	5.85	8,069	903	8.94	6,946	880	7.89
Controlled Total	52,227	8,063	6.48	65,887	7,912	8.33	60,348	7,748	7.79
Catholic Maintained	62,417	6,990	8.93	76,095	6,871	11.07	71,215	6,719	10.60
Other Maintained	659	409	1.61	984	152	6.47	1078	158	6.82
Maintained Total	63,076	7,399	8.52	77,079	7,023	10.98	72,293	6,877	10.51
Special	8,522	866	9.84	9,663	878	11.01	10,636	857	12.41
Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI)	5,343	841	6.35	6,268	876	7.16	8,218	903	9.10
Total	129,168	17,169	7.52	158,897	16,689	9.52	151,495	16,385	9.25

TABLE 2

OVERALL SUBSTITUTE COVER COSTS

Board/Sector	2004-05 £	2005-06 £	2006-07 £
Belfast	6,376,348	6,669,593	7,203,867.12
Western	7,413,210	8,069,669	11,019,449.60
North Eastern	8,754,272	10,005,241	8,289,562.40
South Eastern	7,588,690	8,470,610	10,259,766.59
Southern	9,446,171	10,773,341	8,515,691.96
Special	3,523,706	3,847,924	3,955,189.33
GMI	1,632,509	1,827,058	2,224,154.34
Total	44,734,906	49,663,436	51,467,681.34

Leabharlainne le fios go raibh 2,173 múinteoir ar shaoire bhreioiteachta i Feabhra 2008; clúdaíonn an figiúr sin neamhláithreachtaí a mhair idir lá amháin agus mí iomlán. Tá mionchuntas bunaithe ar limistéir na mbord san áireamh sna táblaí atá faoi iamh.

The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have advised that the number of teachers on sick leave in February 2008 was 2,173 which covers absences lasting from 1 day to a full month. A detailed break-down by board area is included in the attached tables.

Foreign Languages

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4371/08, to detail the expenditure to private companies for delivery of foreign languages, broken down by Education and Library Board in each of the last three years. (AQW 4903/08)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon chaiteachas mar sin déanta ag mo Roinn nó ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

There has been no such expenditure by my Department or the Education and Library Boards.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of staff that have been appointed at Middletown Autism Centre; (ii) the designations and salaries for each job; and (iii) the date each appointment was made. (AQW 4957/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair tá naonúir fostaithe san Ionad. Ní féidir liom eolas a thabhairt ar na tuarastail mar gur eolas pearsanta é seo atá faoi chumhdach An Achta um Chosaint Sonraí.

There are nine staff currently 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
- 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.

The dates of staff appointments are

- Chief Executive Officer – 16th April 2007
- Head of Research and Development – 1st September 2007
- Head of Learning Support and Assessment – 1st October 2007
- Head of Corporate Services – 1st January 2008
- Caretaker/Maintenance Officer – 1st April 2007
- Grounds Operative 1st April 2007
- 2 temporary Administration Staff 16th and 23rd July 2007
- Cleaner – 1st April 2007.

*SCP – Spinal Column Point

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education 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 4961/08)

The Minister of Education: Is é líon iomlán na ndaoine atá ceaptha faoi cheapacháin phoiblí ag mo Roinn ó athchur na déabhlóide ná 71, ar mná 71 díobh, agus comhairleoirí tofa, 8.

The total number of people that have been appointed under public appointments by my Department since the restoration of devolution is 71, of which 37 were female and 8 were elected councillors.

Representative Central Group

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that the interests of the transferors are represented (i) on the Representative Central Group; and (ii) in the area groups, announced in her statement on 4 March 2008. (AQW 4975/08)

The Minister of Education: Beidh ionadaí ó Chomhairle na n-Ionadaithe Aistreora (CIA) ar an lárghrúpa a bheas ag tabhairt pleanála iar-bhunscoile bunaithe sa cheantar chun tosaigh agus ar gach ceann de na grúpaí ceantair araon. Beidh mé ag scríobh chuig an CIA, mar a bheas mé ag scríobh chuig gach grúpa leasmhar a mbeidh ionadaíocht acu ar na grúpaí seo, le hainmniúcháin a iarraidh orthu.

A representative of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) will be on both the Central Group taking forward post-primary area-based planning and on each of the area groups. I shall be writing to the TRC, as I shall be writing to all those interests who will be represented on these groups, to ask them for their nominations.

Transferors Representative Council

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the assurances she has provided to the Transferors Representative Council that its interests will be represented on (i) the Representative Central Group; and (ii) the area groups, announced in her statement on 4 March 2008. (AQW 4976/08)

The Minister of Education: Dúirt mé sa Tionól go mbeidh ionadaí ó Chomhairle na n-Ionadaithe Aistreora (CIA) ar an lárghrúpa a bheas ag tabhairt pleanála iar-bhunscoile bunaithe sa cheantar chun tosaigh agus ar gach ceann de na grúpaí ceantair araon. Beidh mé ag scríobh chuig an CIA, mar a bheas mé ag scríobh chuig gach grúpa leasmhar a mbeidh ionadaíocht acu ar na grúpaí seo, le hainmniúcháin a iarraidh orthu.

I have stated in the Assembly that a representative of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) will be on both the central group taking forward post-primary area-based planning and on each of the area groups. I shall be writing to the TRC, as I shall be writing to all those interests who will be represented on these groups, to ask them for their nominations.

Constituency Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the protocols she follows in informing MLAs that she will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 4992/08)

The Minister of Education: Agus cuairt á thabhairt ar thoghlaigh, seolann mo fhoireann pearsanta oifige eolas, nuair is féidir, chuig seoladh ríomhphoist na CTRanna le heolas faoi na himeachtaí, an cúis atá leo, agus na dátaí, bunaithe ar chuntais ríomhphoist an Tionóil, ar a laghad 24 huairé roimh ré.

When visiting constituencies, my private office staff, inform MLA's of the reason, location and timing of events via Assembly email accounts, where possible, not less than 24hrs in advance of my visit.

Teacher Vacancies

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress made in relation to the development of an annual survey of teacher vacancies. (AQW 4999/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department initiated an annual return on teacher vacancies in 2006. The return, which issues to all schools, provides information on the number of teachers appointed to fill:

- full-time permanent posts, full-time temporary posts of one year or more in duration, and full-time temporary posts of two terms or more; and
- part-time permanent posts, part-time temporary posts of one year or more in duration, and part-time temporary posts of two terms or more.

The return also provides for a subject breakdown of this information at post-primary level; details of posts still to be filled in the year to which the return relates, and information on the posts filled by (or available to) newly qualified teachers.

Tá an tuairisceán seo mar fhoinsé breise eolais don Roinn faoi dhinimic na foirne múinteoireachta agus cuidíonn sé le cinntí i dtaca le soláthar agus éileamh. Is léir ón anailís a rinneadh ar na sonraí a fuarthas don bhliain acadúil 2007/08 go bhfuil ag éirí le scoileanna a riachtanais mhúinteoireachta a chomhlíonadh le múinteoirí oile atá ag cuardach fostaíochta.

The return provides a further information source to the Department about the dynamics of the teaching workforce and informs supply/demand decisions. An analysis of the data received for the 2007/08 academic year shows that schools are managing to meet their teaching needs from the existing supply of qualified teachers seeking employment.

Sex Education

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the provision that is being made in relation to sex education for teenagers who prefer abstinence as an alternative to contraception. (AQW 5000/08)

The Minister of Education: Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) forms part of the revised curriculum and has an important role to play in raising awareness and understanding of complex issues that will help young people to make informed decisions about sexual behaviour, including abstinence. My Department has issued advice to schools on RSE, including developing their own age-appropriate policy in consultation with parents and Boards of Governors.

Go hiondúil, laistigh den churaclam athbhreithnithe tacóidh an réimse úr d'Fhorbairt Phearsanta le forbairt an duine iomláin agus a gcaidrimh dhearfacha le daoine eile.

More generally, within the revised curriculum the new area of Personal Development will support the development of the whole person and their positive relationships with others.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the consultations she has had with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, in relation to the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, including the dates on which the consultations took place. (AQW 5008/08)

The Minister of Education: The Middletown Centre for Autism was discussed on special educational needs at a meeting with the Commissioner for Children and Young People held on 10th October 2007.

I have been informed by officials that the Commissioner was invited to the stakeholder consultations regarding the building and refurbishment project held in August and September 2007.

Tugadh cuireadh don Choimisinéir fosta chuig na comhairliúcháin a bhí ag Ionad Uathachais an Bhaile Láir i Mí na Nollag 2007 agus i Mí Eanáir 2008.

The Commissioner was also invited to the consultations held by the Middletown Centre for Autism in December 2007 and January 2008.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of letters of (i) support; and (ii) opposition, that she has received from parents in relation to the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism. (AQW 5009/08)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon chomhfhreagras faighte agam ó thuismitheoirí ag tacú le ná ag cur i gcoinne Ionad Barr Feabhais d'Uathachas an Bhaile Láir. Scríobh roinnt thuismitheoirí ag iarraidh tuilleadh eolais ar na seirbhísí a bheas á dtairiscint ag an Ionad agus an dóigh ar féidir le páistí teacht ar na seirbhísí sin.

I have not received any correspondence from parents expressing support or opposition to the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism. Some parents have written to request more information about the services that the Centre will offer and how children can access these services.

Post-Primary Provision

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of enquiries she has received from (a) teachers; and (b) parents, seeking information on the proposed changes to post-primary transfer; and (ii) the average length of time for a response to be issued by her department. (AQW 5010/08)

The Minister of Education: To date I have received 8 letters from teachers with an average response time of 16 days and 8 letters from parents with an average response time of 28.5 days.

Tá roinnt litreacha faighte agam fosta ó bhaill den phobal mar gheall ar na socruithe nua iar-bhunscoile atá molta, ach ní léir cé acu is tuismitheoirí iad nó nach ea.

I have also received a number of letters from members of the public regarding the proposed new post primary arrangements but it is unclear whether they are parents or not.

Ancillary Staff

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of ancillary staff employed by schools, broken down by (i) gender; and (ii) religion, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5024/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh leagtha amach sa tábla iniata agus cuireadh ar fáil é ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne mar gheall ar fhoireann choimhdeach a bhí fostaithe ag an Boird ar 1 Eanáir 2008 i bpoist ghlanadóireachta, lónadóireachta, phatról scoile, mhaoirseoir foirgnimh (airíoch) agus tiománaí bus.

The information requested is set out in the enclosed table and has been provided by the Education and Library Boards in respect of ancillary staff employed by the Boards, at 1 January 2008, in cleaning, catering, school crossing patrol, building supervisor (caretaking) and bus driver positions.

GENDER AND PERCEIVED RELIGION OF ANCILLARY STAFF EMPLOYED BY THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS AT 1 JANUARY 2008

Board	Protestant		Catholic		Neither		Not determined		Totals
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Belfast	157	551	125	570	0	0	22	46	1471
Western	220	677	375	1253	4	25	19	74	2647
North Eastern	280	1229	107	570	20	88	8	52	2354
South Eastern	245	841	113	434	0	0	43	162	1838
Southern	229	969	215	1315	12	57	0	0	2797
Totals	1131	4267	935	4142	36	170	92	334	11107

Conlig Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to confirm if she has made a decision on the closure of Conlig Primary School, including a possible date for closure. (AQW 5042/08)

The Minister of Education: D'fhoilsigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt Togra Forbartha do dhúnadh Bhunscoil na Coinleice ar 29 Eanáir 2008 agus beidh an comhairliúchán reachtúil 2-mhí ar leanúint go dtí deireadh Mhárta 2008.

Déanfaidh mé cinneadh i leith an togra chomh luath agus is féidir i ndiaidh an dáta sin.

A Development Proposal for the closure of Conlig Primary School was published by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board on 29 January 2008 and the 2-month statutory consultation continues until the end of March 2008.

I will make a decision on the proposal as soon as possible after that date.

Groomsport Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail current use of the site of the former Groomsport Primary School. (AQW 5062/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá suíomh sheanBhunscoil Phort an Ghiolla Ghruama á úsáid do chríocha oideachasúla. Tuigim, ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oir-Dheiscirt, nach bhfuil pleananna ar bith ann athrú a dhéanamh ar a úsáid go ceann i bhfad.

The site of the former Groomsport Primary School is being used for educational purposes. I understand, from the South-Eastern Education and Library Board, that there are no plans to change its use in the foreseeable future.

Groomsport Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the site of the former Groomsport Primary School. (AQW 5065/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá suíomh sheanBhunscoil Phort an Ghiolla Ghruama á úsáid do chríocha oideachasúla. Tuigim, ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oir-Dheiscirt, nach bhfuil pleananna ar bith ann athrú a dhéanamh ar a úsáid go ceann i bhfad.

The site of the former Groomsport Primary School is being used for educational purposes. I understand, from the South-Eastern Education and Library Board, that there are no plans to change its use in the foreseeable future.

Economic Appraisal

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3936/08, to give a timescale within which she expects the revised economic appraisal to be approved. (AQW 5070/08)

The Minister of Education: The revised Economic Appraisal for Portadown College provided by the Southern Education and Library Board is currently being examined by the department, and the SELB is being kept informed. The work is expected to be completed within three months.

Beidh feidhm ar an Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra an mheastóireacht a bhreithniú ansin.

The appraisal will then need to be considered by Department of Finance and Personnel.

Education Decisions

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4084/08, to detail (i) who will make the final decision as to which receiving school a child is to attend; (ii) the role previous education performance will play in the decision; and (iii) the priority the receiving school will give to previous education performance, in the event of no agreement between parents and a prospective receiving school; and to confirm if previous education performance will include (a) class work and home work; (b) yearly examinations; (c) a combination of both; or (d) academic criteria set by the receiving school. (AQW 5086/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá na sonraí ar ullmhú na socruithe nua aistrithe faoi réir plé leanúnaigh le páirtithe leasmhara san oideachas. Ní mheasaim gur cuidiú é tuairimíocht a dhéanamh ar thoradh an phlé sin.

The detailed development of new transfer arrangements is the subject of ongoing discussion with education stakeholders. I do not consider it helpful to speculate on the outcome of those discussions.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount she has spent on consultants relating to the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 5121/08)

The Minister of Education: To date £377,920 has been spent by the Department of Education on consultants in relation to the Review of Public Administration. £266,920 of this expenditure was incurred in the 2006/07 financial year with the remaining £110,764 being incurred to date in the 2007/08 financial year.

Tá miondealú sna táblaí thíos ar chostas iomlán sainchomhairliúcháin go dtí seo.

The tables below provide a breakdown of the total consultancy costs incurred to date.

2006/07

Name/Description of Contract	Firm contract awarded to	£
Provision of support to assist DE with the Implementation of RPA	PA Consulting	235,610
RPA Newsletter Design	Leslie Stannager Design	1,540
Preparation of RPA Workshop Materials	Mentoring Connection	2,674
Recruitment of ESA CE Designate	Capita Resourcing	24,385
RPA Element of DE Communications Audit	Weber Shandwick	*2000
Equality Impact Assessment Training	Key Consulting	711
Total		266,920

* This £2,000 represents the RPA Element (20%) of a Communications Audit for DE.

2007/08

Name/Description of Contract	Firm contract awarded to	£
Provision of support to assist DE with the Implementation of RPA	PA Consulting	10,090
Development of RPA Outline Business Case	Deloitte	31,720
ICT Audit (ESAIT)#	PWC	32,250
Communications Support (ESAIT)	PA Consulting	9,350
Human Resource Support (ESAIT)	APSE	1,354
Human Resource Support (ESAIT)	Deloitte	26,000
Total		110,764

Overall Total £377,684

- ESAIT - Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team

Figures quoted above are exclusive of VAT.

Education Task Force

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail how her department intends to implement the recommendations of the Education Task Force. (AQW 5122/08)

The Minister of Education: I have recently received a copy of the Education Task Force (ETF) report and note the recommendations in relation to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in our schools and also those that relate to the wider socio-economic agenda. My Department and the Department for Employment and Learning are jointly carrying out a review of STEM to produce a strategy for the development of STEM through schools and Further Education colleges. This will identify progression routes to higher education and employment and emphasise the links to the skills and innovation needs of the wider economy and consider how to enhance pupil uptake in the STEM subjects.

D'iarr mé go gcuirfí cóip de thuarascáil ETF chuig foireann athbhreithnithe ETIM le breithniú. Tá rún ag an fhoireann bualadh le grúpa beag den ETF leis an tuarascáil a phlé agus le dóigheanna a fhiosrú inar féidir lena moltaí a bheith ina gcuidiú in obair athbhreithnithe ETIM.

I have asked for a copy of the ETF report to be passed to the STEM review team for its consideration. The team intends to meet with a small group of the ETF to discuss the report and to explore how its recommendations can inform the work of the STEM review.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm if the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) operated within its budgets over the last five years, and to detail the operating cost of running the CCEA for the last five years. (AQW 5123/08)

The Minister of Education: There are separate budget allocations to CCEA for recurrent and capital expenditure. Recurrent budgets are net of forecast income, principally from examination fees.

Over the last five financial years the Council operated within its recurrent and capital budgets for 2003-04 to 2005-06, and is expected to do so in 2007-08, for which final expenditure figures are awaited. In 2006-07 there was a £2k exceeding on the capital budget, which has resulted in a corresponding reduction to the 2007-08 capital budget, and an exceeding on the recurrent budget, mainly due to a technical change in the way pension liabilities are recorded and slightly lower than expected income.

Is mar seo a leanas a bhí ollchaitheachas aisfhillteach ag CCSM ar chostais oibriúcháin, agus tionscadail san áireamh, i ngach bliain de na cúig bliana airgeadais seo caite:

Gross recurrent expenditure by CCEA on operational, including project, costs in each of the last five financial years is as follows:

	£m
4-04	22.0
5-05	24.3
6-06	27.7
7-07	30.7 (including one-off technical adjustment for pension liabilities)
2007-08	29.9 (estimated)

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the new arrangements under the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will lead to a more economical and operationally efficient structure for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) when it is amalgamated into the ESA and to detail how she will measure this. (AQW 5124/08)

The Minister of Education: In creating the Education and Skills Authority, it is vital that services are delivered in a more efficient, responsive and cost effective way. The structure of the new organisation will reflect these principles and will be benchmarked against best practice.

Tá mé cinnte go mbeidh coigilteas suntasach ann mar gheall ar bhunú an ÚOS a úsáidfeá ar sheirbhísí túsline agus go mbeidh torthaí feabhsaithe oideachais ann dár bpáistí uilig dá bharr.

I am satisfied that the creation of ESA will yield significant savings for use in front-line services and lead to improved educational outcomes for all our children.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Night Classes

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3940/08, to detail (i) the analysis he has carried out to ascertain the reason for the drop of over 2,000 people enrolled in night classed in the Upper Bann constituency since 2001-02; and (ii) the conclusions reached as a result of the analysis. (AQW 5063/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Southern Regional College has informed me that the decrease in night class enrolments in Upper Bann is attributable to:

- (i) a decline in the demand for introductory computing and software applications training courses; and
- (ii) a reduction in hobby and leisure provision. This provision has been replaced with nationally accredited professional and technical courses to meet the industrial and business needs of the Upper Bann area.

The decline in night class enrolments in these areas has been offset by an increase of over 8% in enrolments on Higher Education evening programmes, and a 6% increase in enrolments on part-time day classes.

South Eastern Regional College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to request the Principal of the South Eastern Regional College to make a public statement in relation to the future of the college's outreach centres at Kircubbin and Ballyboley. (AQW 5158/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have no plans to request the Acting Principal of the South Eastern Regional College to make a public statement on the future of the college's outreach centres at Kircubbin and Ballyboley as decisions relating to the use of these centres are a matter for the Governing Body of the college.

I understand, however, that it is the intention of the college to make a public statement on this matter within the next two weeks.

South Eastern Regional College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) when; and (ii) how, he was notified by the South Eastern Regional College of their intention to close its outreach centres at Kircubbin and Ballyboley. (AQW 5159/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I was not informed by the South Eastern Regional College of its intention to close its outreach centres at Kircubbin and Ballyboley. I would not expect to be informed of the closure of outreach centres, as decisions relating to the use of these centres are a matter for the Governing Body of the college.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Electricity Generation

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of proposals for thermal treatment to generate electricity from waste; and to detail his plans to use the British and European thermal treatment models as a way of generating electricity and hot water. (AQW 4987/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Generation of electricity from waste will help achieve the programme for government target that by 2012 at least 12% of all electricity consumed in Northern Ireland is obtained from indigenous renewable energy sources - at least 15% of which must be generated by non-wind technologies.

The Environment and Renewable Energy Fund had a budget allocation of £18m to support a number of flagship energy from waste projects. Applications are at an advanced stage of consideration. These projects will utilise a range of technologies including the latest proven UK/EU thermal treatment methodologies for producing electricity and heat.

Regional Tourism Partnerships

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding that is planned for the Regional Tourism Partnerships over the Budget period. (AQW 5002/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is currently seeking to negotiate a core service level agreement with each Regional Tourism Partnership covering services required and funding for 2008 – 2009. Arrangements for future years will be the subject of further discussion.

In addition, £2 million per annum is being set aside to support the product portfolios proposed in NITB's draft corporate plan. RTPs will be able to bid for funds from this source.

RTPs will also be able to submit project applications under the Tourism Development Scheme, for which £1.5 million per annum has been allocated across the Budget period.

Overseas Business Meetings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of overseas business meetings, conferences and seminars that have received funding from (i) Invest NI; and (ii) the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, since May 2007. (AQW 5022/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: From 1st May 2007 to date, Invest NI has funded 262 overseas business meetings, conferences and seminars. The majority of these were international trade missions to develop sales opportunities in key target markets or events to promote the Northern Ireland investment proposition to international investors. Invest NI also supported international R&D events to encourage an increased focus on innovation within the Invest NI client base and sector events both to promote the use of best practice and to help its clients develop international strategic networks and partnerships.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have funded 2 seminars outside Northern Ireland since 1st May 2007. These seminars were funded by DETI Energy Division and focussed on their work on the Grid Study and Renewable Energy. Both were held in Dublin.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the planning applications in the Larne West suburbs of Larne, as defined in the area study published in 1992, (i) that have been approved, including the date approval was given; and (ii) that are still under consideration. (AQW 4746/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I attach a table listing the approved planning applications in Larne West other than those applications in respect of individual households. I regret the electronic system does not hold data prior to 2000.

Application Number	Date Valid	Department Decision	Decision Date	Proposal	Location
F/2000/0226/F	28/06/2000	APPROVAL	02/10/2000	Erection Of Warehouse, Service Yard And Access Road	Ivex Pharmaceuticals, Old Belfast Road, Millbrook, Larne
F/2000/0442/F	08/12/2000	APPROVAL	05/08/2001	10 No Dwellings And Garages	Plots 82- 85 and 88 - 93 The Beeches, Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2001/0198/F	16/05/2001	APPROVAL	15/10/2002	Housing development - 24 no.new dwellings with garages	Plots 1 - 42 Phase 6, The Beeches, Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2001/0368/F	02/10/2001	APPROVAL	06/11/2002	Mixed Housing Development comprising semi-detached, detached, townhouse and apartment units.	Phase 2, Walnut Hollow (Lands to west of Walnut Avenue/Drive), Killyglen Road, Larne
F/2002/0382/O	17/10/2002	APPROVAL	11/09/2003	Site of Housing Development	Old Belfast Road, Larne
F/2002/0401/F	05/11/2002	APPROVAL	07/11/2003	Reinstatement of Dwelling Nos 1, 9-23, 41 & 42, Amendments to Road Layout and Dwelling Positions, change of house types to plots 27 - 32 plus 3no. additional dwellings	Plots 1-42 Phase 6, The Beeches, Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2002/0429/F	26/11/2002	APPROVAL	13/05/2004	26 No. Dwellings and Garages	The Beeches, Phase 7, Adjacent to 10 Chestnut Way, Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2003/0013/F	04/03/2003	APPROVAL	04/02/2004	Change From An Apartment Block & Surrounding Land To 2 No. A8 Blocks - Previously Approved On Site.	Sites 377 - 384 Phase 2 Walnut Hollow, { Lands To The West Of Walnut Avenue / Drive } Killyglen Road, Larne.
F/2003/0107/F	14/03/2003	APPROVAL	15/11/2005	6 No. Apartments.	21 Ballyhampton Road, Larne.
F/2003/0228/F	20/06/2003	APPROVAL	01/07/2005	Proposed residential development of 175 no. Dwellings.	Lands to the west of Killyglen link road and adjacent to Walnut Hollow housing development, Larne.
F/2003/0376/F	03/10/2003	APPROVAL	05/01/2006	Housing Development.	Lands off Ballyhampton Road, adjacent to Ballyloran House, Larne
F/2003/0476/F	21/01/2004	APPROVAL	25/01/2005	Residential development of 128 dwelling units	Lands to East and West of Killyglen Link Road and adjacent to Walnut Hollow housing development, Larne.
F/2004/0493/RM	16/12/2004	APPROVAL	17/02/2005	Housing developments (4 Dwellings)	Old Belfast Road, Larne
F/2004/0034/F	27/02/2004	APPROVAL	01/07/2004	4 Dwellings & garages	To rear of 122 & 124 Killyglen Road, Larne, BT40 2HY
F/2004/0115/F	08/04/2004	APPROVAL	22/11/2004	5 No. Dwellings.	Lands Adjacent To site 172 The Hamptons, Larne.
F/2004/0172/F	07/04/2004	APPROVAL	27/04/2005	16 dwellings (amendment to previously approved application).	Linn Road, Larne.
F/2004/0287/F	18/06/2004	APPROVAL	11/05/2005	110 Dwellings and associated site road	Housing Development at Linn Road, Larne

Application Number	Date Valid	Department Decision	Decision Date	Proposal	Location
F/2005/0264/O	18/07/2005	APPROVAL	06/07/2006	Removal of all existing buildings currently on site to facilitate proposed residential development, to include a mix of dwellings, associated car parking, public open space provision together with associated infrastructure to include public road network, community and commercial facilities.	Zoned HO1 housing lands at Larne West situated to the North and South of the Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2005/0357/F	04/11/2005	APPROVAL	05/07/2007	Residential Development of 103 Units (Detached, Semi-Detached and Terraced)	North of Old Forge Manor and South West of 89 Ballyhampton Road, Larne.
F/2006/0275/F	04/09/2006	APPROVAL	09/10/2007	Proposed development for 8 dwellings consisting of semi detached, terrace dwellings and other associated site works	Proposed development at lands 150m north west of Ballyloran House, 100m south west of the Oaks and Driving test and PSV centre Ballyhampton Larne
F/2006/0336/F	20/10/2006			Proposed development for 108 Dwellings consisting of detached, semi-detached, terrace dwellings and other associated site works	Lands 150m North West of Ballyloran House, 100m South West of the Oaks and driving test and PSC centre Ballyhampton, Larne
F/2006/0409/RM	19/12/2006	APPROVAL	14/03/2008	Construction of new access carriageway and housing development consisting of 31 No. townhouses, 6 No. maisonettes and 10 No. apartments with associated car parking and landscaping.	Lands adjacent to No. 8 Willow Crescent, Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2007/0329/F	31/08/2007			Proposed residential development to provide 2 No detached dwellings and 40 No semi-detached dwellings, 107 No terraced dwellings, 128 No apartments and 28 no maisonettes (305 units in total) with associated car parking and landscaping with connecting roads infrastructure. To include demolition of no 91 Ballyboley Road Larne and existing farm buildings.	Zoned housing land (H1) at no.91 Ballyboley Road, Larne and to the northwest of no.93 Ballyboley Road, Larne
F/2007/0360/F	05/09/2007			Proposed residential development to provide 46 dwellings, 66 apartments, retail units, fast food/ restaurant, public house, doctors surgery with associated car parking and landscaping with associated infrastructure	Zoned HO1 Housing Lands at Larne West situated to the North and South of the Ballyboley Road, Larne.
F/2007/0382/F	24/09/2007			Proposed amendment of previously approved residential units (F/2005/0357) to substitute 17 town houses (units 36 - 52) with 9 townhouses & 20 apartments (Amended Proposal)	North of Old Forge Manor and South West of 89 Ballyhampton Road

Application Number	Date Valid	Department Decision	Decision Date	Proposal	Location
F/2007/0436/O	05/11/2007			Erection of district centre comprising food store, 3No. service retail units, 2No. hot food outlets, bank/society, ATM, 'wellness centre', cafe/restaurant, taxi booking office, petrol station, car and jet wash, associated access arrangements, car-parking, recycling point, servicing and landscaping works (amended description)	Development land to the north of No.7 Old Belfast Road, Larne between Old Forge Manor and Porter Crescent
F/2007/0510/F	21/12/2007			Proposed housing development for 121 units in total, (82 apartments, 37 townhouses and 2 semi detached dwellings)	Development of land to the north of No.7 Old Belfast Road, Larne between Old Forge Manor and Porter Crescent (amended address)

Planning Permission

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an estimate of the number of developments that do not have planning permission; and to detail (i) the number of instances of breaches in planning controls, in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) the action she is taking to prevent unauthorised development activity.

(AQW 4895/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department receives a significant number of complaints in relation to unauthorised development each year. I regret the figures requested in each of the last five years are not readily available, but between 2005 and 2007, Planning Service received on average 4,448 complaints each year. However, few of these relate to actual breaches of planning control.

The majority of these complaints come from members of the public and Planning Service has a duty to fully investigate each and decide on the appropriate course of action. However, I must stress that a relatively small number require the Department to take formal enforcement action. There are a number of potential outcomes in investigating these cases:

- No breach of planning control is identified i.e. the works do not constitute development requiring planning permission, the development is permitted or the development has the benefit of planning permission;
- The four or ten year rule applies and the development is immune from enforcement action and therefore lawful;
- Only a minor breach has occurred and it is not expedient to pursue formal action;
- The breach is remedied through negotiation between the landowner / developer and Planning Service;

- A retrospective planning application is submitted to regularise the situation and approved;
- The Department proceeds with formal enforcement action.

Between 2005 and 2007 Planning Service closed an average of 3517 enforcement cases per year.

Where significant development takes place which is unacceptable my Department is committed to taking the appropriate enforcement action and pursuing the individuals through the courts.

In 2008, to date, Planning Service has made 13 successful prosecution cases against unauthorised developments. Details of all successful prosecution cases are posted on the Planning Service and the Northern Ireland Assembly internet sites.

Each Divisional Planning Office and Planning Service Headquarters (in dealing with minerals extraction and waste disposal) have dedicated enforcement teams.

In 2003 and 2006 changes to legislation powers, including increases in the levels of fines for offences and imprisonment, have strengthened the Departments enforcement powers however individuals have also a responsibility to ensure they fully comply with the requirements of the planning legislation.

Information Leaflet 10 'A Guide to Planning Enforcement in Northern Ireland' which is available for members of the public provides guidance on how Planning Service carries out the enforcement of planning control. It sets out the procedures Planning Service may adopt when taking enforcement action, as well as its priorities for taking action.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to give a date when she will inform the Assembly of

her decision in relation to the future model for local councils under the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 4906/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As I indicated following the Executive's agreement to the reform package for local government on 13 March 2008 it is my intention to make a statement on the detail of the package to the Assembly when it returns from the Easter recess.

CO2 Emissions

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps she intends to take in order to reduce CO2 emissions.
(AQW 4931/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has an important role to play in the reduction of carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions, as do all other Government Departments. The agreed responsibility of Executive Ministers is outlined in the Programme for Government. All Ministers are therefore committed to achieve a collective reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 25% by 2025 from 1990 levels.

I take the issue of CO2 emissions reduction very seriously. In December, I secured the legislative consent of the Assembly to extend the provisions of the UK Climate Change Bill to Northern Ireland. The Bill provides a strong signal that the UK government and Devolved Administrations are committed to dealing with the reduction of CO2 emissions. The Bill also provides for statutory UK targets to reduce emissions; the appointment of an independent Committee on Climate Change to advise the UK government and the Devolved Administrations on progress to meet emissions reductions; enabling powers to bring in new emissions trading schemes; and new reporting arrangements including reports to the Assembly.

The Chair for the Committee on Climate Change, Lord Jonathan Adair Turner, has subsequently been appointed. I have no doubt that the Committee will deploy its expertise in a way that will better inform both Northern Ireland's emission reductions pathway and that of the rest of the United Kingdom.

My officials are also working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Devolved Administrations on a new carbon cap and trade scheme to be known as the Carbon Reduction Commitment. It is intended that the scheme will be implemented in 2010. The scheme will affect large non-energy intensive organisations that typically have large electricity bills (£500k per annum). The principle is that if an organisation is more energy efficient than expected, it can sell surplus allowances

to those that are less efficient. The objective is to cap the overall level of emissions.

My officials are also assisting DEFRA and other Devolved Administrations to persuade the European Union to set clear direction in relation to the EU Emissions Trading Scheme beyond 2012.

My planning officials are also active in the support of renewable energy. Before Christmas Draft Planning Policy Statement 18 (PPS 18) was issued for consultation. A few weeks ago my planning officials also issued draft Supplementary Planning Guidance entitled 'Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland's Landscapes' for public consultation. The updated planning policy proposals and the planning guidance should assist the further development of renewable sources of electricity generation and heat production. Indeed the draft PPS embodies the Government's commitment to sustainable development, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and the move from being an overly fossil fuel reliant economy to one which promotes Northern Ireland's substantial renewable energy potential.

I am confident that actions already identified, planned new initiatives such as the Carbon Reduction Commitment, and other measures that we as yet cannot identify will ensure a reduction in CO2 emissions.

Waste Management

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action she is taking to promote best practice in local councils in relation to recycling and waste management.
(AQW 4935/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am taking a number of steps to assist and encourage local councils in this matter. Firstly, I have secured £197m of capital funding in the 2008 Budget to assist the district councils with the costs of delivering the strategic waste infrastructure required to meet our European and national obligations to divert waste from landfill. The administration of this fund and the associated projects will be subject to an OGC (Office of Government Commerce) Gateway process which will ensure that best practice is followed in respect of the delivery of this challenging programme.

A governance structure for the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme has been agreed with the three Waste Management Groups set up by district councils and, as part of this structure, a Waste Infrastructure Programme Board which will oversee the delivery of the Programme, provides a forum for regular contact between my officials and the Waste Management Groups. The Board will play a key role in the administration and distribution of the capital

fund to ensure best value for money in respect of the new waste infrastructure.

Guidance is also provided to local councils on their responsibilities through the NILAS Implementation Steering Group, chaired by my Department. The Group was established in 2005 with the aim of ensuring Northern Ireland maximised its potential in achieving the Landfill Directive targets.

My Department funds the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), a not for profit company created in 2000 as part of Government's waste strategies across the UK. WRAP's ROTATE programme provides hands-on advice to district councils on projects such as the development of individual communications strategies, evaluation of kerbside recycling and household waste recycling centre services as well as a range of research projects. Councils have commented that the breadth of knowledge and the practical support offered by the WRAP Rotate team has been of significant value.

Illegal Dumping

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to seek compensation from the Government of the Republic of Ireland for the environmental damage, and costs associated with, the illegal dumping of waste in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4938/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Questions of liability in respect of illegal transboundary movements of waste are governed by the EU Waste Shipment Regulation 1993 as revised by the Waste Shipment Regulation 2006. A Road Map for dealing with illegal waste movements on this legislative basis has been agreed between my Department and the Department for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in Ireland. My Department is currently in negotiations with DOEHLG and the relevant Irish Competent Authorities to deal with the costs associated with the repatriation of waste from two sites in Northern Ireland and the remediation of the sites within this legislative context.

Motorcycle Drivers

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the procedures that are in place when drivers of motorcycles do not renew their tax discs after a reminder has been issued; and (ii) the timescale for action to be taken against these drivers.

(AQW 5028/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In December 2003, Continuous Registration of vehicles was introduced in the UK. This requires the keeper of a vehicle to keep a vehicle licensed unless a Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN) has been made. Every month, DVA checks the vehicle register to identify keepers of all vehicles, including motorcycles, who are two months late in re-licensing their vehicle, or in making a Statutory Off Road Notification. The keepers of these vehicles receive a Late Licensing Penalty letter which requires the completion of 3 actions within 28 days: payment of a Late Licensing Penalty; payment of the outstanding arrears of duty and the purchase of a tax disc or the making of an "off-road" declaration (SORN).

Nuisance High Hedges

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a proposed timetable for commencement of a consultation on nuisance high hedges legislation.

(AQW 5032/08)

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.

River Pollution

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all pollution incidents which have occurred in the Sixmiletown River and its feeder streams over the past five years and indicate the cause (if known) and penalties levied.

(AQW 5084/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department, is responsible for investigating water pollution affecting either the freshwater or marine aquatic environment throughout Northern Ireland.

Pollution incident investigations are initiated following a report of pollution, which may come from a number of sources. In most cases reports are made either by members of the public, or are discovered by field staff working on behalf of EHS. Incidents are classified by Severity (High, Medium and Low) i.e. the extent of the environmental impact of the pollution.

Table A below details the number of pollution incidents in the Sixmilewater River and its feeder streams and their severity.

TABLE A

Incident Severity				
Year	Low	Medium	High	Total
2003	45	11	0	56
2004	45	7	0	52
2005	45	5	0	50
2006	49	11	3	63
2007	49	9	0	58
2008	10	3	0	13
Total	243	46	3	292

The data presented in Table B below indicate the identified sources of the pollution incidents which have occurred on the Sixmilewater River and its feeder streams.

TABLE B

Identified Source							
Year	Domestic	Farm	Industry	Other	Transport	Water Service	Total
2003	10	6	19	9	3	9	56
2004	1	2	26	12	3	8	52
2005	3	4	15	12	7	9	50
2006	2	11	25	8	7	10	63
2007	10	6	19	11	2	*10	58
2008	0	4	3	4	0	*2	13
Total	26	33	107	56	22	48	292

* Water Service became Northern Ireland Water on 1 April 2007 resulting in the loss of Crown Immunity.

The formal enforcement options available to EHS in water pollution cases are:

- an enforcement warning letter, and/or;
- a Water (NI) Order 1999 Notice, or
- the instigation of prosecution proceedings.

The data presented in Table C below indicates the enforcement action taken by EHS in relation to water pollution offences on the Sixmilewater River and its feeder streams.

TABLE C

	Warning Letter	Prosecutions	Water Order Notices
2003	3	4	0
2004	2	2	0
2005	6	0	0

	Warning Letter	Prosecutions	Water Order Notices
2006	8	3	0
2007	5	1	6
2008	0	4*	7

The data presented in Table D below indicate the penalties levied in relation to prosecutions for water pollution offences on the Sixmilewater River and its feeder streams.

TABLE D

	Warning Letter	Prosecutions	Outcomes	Total
2003	3	4	£600 £800 £800 £800	£3000
2004	2	2	1 - Dismissal 1 - Absolute Discharge	
2005	6	0	N/A	
2006	8	3	£600 £750 (1with PPS)	£1350
2007	5	1	Still to be heard	
2008	0	4*		

* Cases pending and in preparation for progression to Public Prosecution Service (PPS).

Coast Protection

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to provide greater protection to the coast through planning policy statements. (AQW 5101/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As you are aware my Department now has responsibility for all planning policy statements. Whilst a specific PPS on the Coast was transferred from the Department for Regional Development, on 15 January 2008, no substantial work on this document had been undertaken. My Department is currently considering the programme of work and priorities for PPSs in 2008/2009, taking into account the additional responsibilities following the transfer of the DRD PPSs.

Review of Environmental Governance

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which she will (i)

make recommendations to the Executive; and (ii) make an announcement to the Assembly, in relation to the Review of Environmental Governance Northern Ireland recommendations, particularly the creation of an Environmental Protection Agency. (AQW 5103/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I intend to make a statement to the Assembly on the recommendations of the Review of Environmental Governance before the end of the summer. My recommendation to the Executive will be appropriately timed to meet this deadline.

Clean Neighbourhoods and Environmental Act

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which she will introduce legislation, equivalent to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, for Northern Ireland. (AQW 5112/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Waste (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 was made on 6 March 2007. The Order updates existing NI legislation on the management and disposal of waste, and many of its provisions replicate those contained in Part 5 of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

The Programme for Government sets out an ambitious programme for my Department and major environmental challenges lie ahead. I recognise that local environmental problems, such as those it is proposed to address via a Northern Ireland equivalent of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, are very real and topical. I am currently considering when and how best to progress the Northern Ireland Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda in light of the range of key goals set for my Department and resource constraints but am unable, at this time, to give you a timescale within which this proposed legislation may be brought forward.

Post Offices

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm in light of the decision of some local councils in England to take over running post offices due for closure, whether local councils in Northern Ireland have such powers and if not, would she consider giving them such powers. (AQW 5127/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The issue of local councils taking over the running of post offices due for closure has not arisen during our discussions but I intend to raise this possibility with local government through the Local Government Taskforce Strategic Leadership Board.

Constituency Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the protocols she follows in informing MLAs that she will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 5140/08)

The Minister of the Environment: 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.

St. Donard's Cairn

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the financial assistance available from the Historic Monuments Branch to preserve St. Donard's Cairn on the summit of Slieve Donard. (AQO 2573/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Although this monument is not presently protected by statute, my Department, through the Historic Monuments Unit of Environment and Heritage Service (EHS): Built Heritage, may be able to provide financial assistance for the conservation of St Donard's Cairn. This approach to safeguarding the built heritage is one of partnership with owners and interested parties, and we would be happy to consider any positive conservation proposals for this monument. It is not possible to state how much financial assistance can be offered, as this depends on the nature of conservation work required. EHS may also be able to assist by way of providing professional advice about the monument, or by making a contribution to signage or information panels. I suggest that an approach should be made directly to my Department, through EHS, to allow further consideration of any conservation proposals.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if she has had any consultation with, or her department has been approached by, either the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or his officials, in relation to a public planning application for the Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre. (AQO 2585/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any consultation with, or been approached by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or his officials in relation to a public planning application for the Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre. However, Planning Service was involved in pre-application discussions led by DETI for a new visitor/study centre based on an international design competition for the

replacement of the existing facilities at the Causeway. These discussions were halted in September 2007.

Planning Service officials have met with National Trust representatives on a number of occasions to discuss their proposal. These discussions are being structured in accordance with the pre-application consultation procedures which were introduced in December 2007. The National Trust has informed Planning Service that they are preparing to submit an application for the replacement of the existing facilities in the next few months.

Fly-Posting

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the actions she is taking to prevent fly-posting. (AQO 2599/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Fly-posting can spoil the appearance of our public spaces in towns and cities across Northern Ireland and this contributes to reduced local environmental quality. I appreciate that fly-posting is a significant problem area for District Councils, in particular Belfast. I also understand that District Councils and other interested groups are of the view that existing legislation dealing with fly-posting is ineffective and needs to be strengthened.

My officials have been considering the current laws on fly-posting with a view to introducing proposals for stronger and more effective laws in the future. This work takes into account developments in the rest of the United Kingdom, in particular, the stronger measures introduced by the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. Full consultation on proposals will be necessary prior to the introduction of any new fly-posting primary legislation for Northern Ireland.

The Programme for Government sets out an ambitious programme for my Department and I am currently considering when and how best to progress the Northern Ireland Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda in the light of the range of key goals set for my Department.

Environmental Protection Directorate

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the plans she has to review the workings of the Environmental Protection Directorate. (AQO 2562/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to review the workings of the Environmental Protection Directorate.

Bog Meadows Nature Reserve

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the findings of surveys undertaken by the Environment and Heritage Service on the Bog Meadows Nature Reserve. (AQO 2582/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Bog Meadows Nature Reserve is managed by the Ulster Wildlife Trust. Environment and Heritage Service has not carried out any surveys of Bog Meadows since the late 1990s and does not hold any information on surveys carried out by the Trust.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on her department's work to progress the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQO 2607/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Report of the Review of Environmental Governance was commissioned, and largely completed, under direct rule and presented to me in June. That report made 38 cross cutting recommendations on a range of issues relating to Environmental Governance, including for an independent Environmental Protection Agency.

I am carefully considering my approach to environmental governance, including whether or not there should be an independent Environmental Protection Agency. In so doing I am considering the recommendations in the report of the Review of Environmental Governance and the Criminal Justice Inspectorate report, along with resource and wider policy considerations.

I am also taking full account of the mixed views which have been expressed by stakeholders in the business, agricultural and Environmental sectors.

I will make a public statement on the way forward before the end of the summer.

Climate Change Commitments

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the consultation and co-ordination between her department and other departments in relation to climate change commitments. (AQO 2565/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Climate change is a cross-cutting issue that will naturally require my officials and me to seek input from other Departments and to co-ordinate action on a range of matters. Some of the most recent examples include:

- the UK Climate Change Bill where my officials engaged with all government Departments to

consider and co-ordinate an agreed position. The success of this can be seen by the fact that the legislative consent motion on the principles of the Bill to be extended to Northern Ireland were agreed without dissent by the Assembly;

- the Carbon Reduction Commitment, a UK trading scheme that is intended to be implemented in 2010, designed to reduce emissions from large non-energy intensive organisations. My officials have taken the lead in discussions with other Departments on design features for the scheme. Very soon I will engage with the Environment Committee and other Ministers to ensure we get agreement on how we should approach the scheme in Northern Ireland;
- my officials have weekly contact with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on a range of energy policy matters including renewable policies;
- officials from many Departments routinely assist in the development of Planning Policy Statements;
- DOE is involved in the Public Sector Energy Campaign on energy efficiency led by the Department of Finance and Personnel;
- On climate change adaptation, for the benefit of other departments and related agencies, my Department has provided a thorough analysis of the impacts of climate change and the need for adaptive actions to ensure Northern Ireland is best prepared. This covers the threats and opportunities presented to the natural environment, the built environment, economic infrastructure and social well being.

You will know that it is the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister that provides central co-ordination on the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy including the climate change elements.

Green Economy

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the discussions she has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the 'green economy'. (AQO 2590/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the 'green economy', to date however it is an area I intend to explore in the future.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the timescale

for the implementation of the Review of Public Administration in relation to local council elections. (AQO 2610/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As I indicated in my statement to the House earlier today my aim is to implement the structural reform package by 2011 and I will now be setting up the necessary structures to take forward the implementation process.

Wild Animal Licences

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of people that hold current dangerous wild animal licences; and (ii) their location, by district council area. (AQO 2549/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- There are 16 current Dangerous Wild Animals licences in Northern Ireland.
- Two in Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council
Three in Ballymena Borough Council
Two in Omagh District council
One in Londonderry City Council
Two in Ballymoney Borough Council
One in Ards Borough Council
One in Down District Council
Two in Craigavon Borough Council
One in Belfast City Council
One in Lisburn City Council

Energy Saving Trust

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what action she has taken to address the findings of the Energy Saving Trust, in November 2007, which were that 18 areas in Northern Ireland were in the top 20 of the worst carbon wasters in the United Kingdom. (AQO 2547/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I take it the member is referring to The Energy Savings Trust's latest Green Barometer report produced in November 2007. The report, as presented, seems to assign emissions from households, though these are not defined, and from transport, to council areas. The Energy Savings Trust uses councils as a convenient proxy for geographical areas. Therefore, the report does not provide commentary on the performance of councils themselves. In any case, you will be aware that local government functions and structures are completely different between Northern Ireland and

Great Britain. The report itself acknowledges the difficulty of regional comparisons.

On the broader message of the report, it would not be surprising to find that emissions from transport are higher in Northern Ireland due to our rural economy and our road infrastructure. This has been shown in the Greenhouse Gas Inventories for Northern Ireland which indicate that 22% of emissions emanated from transport in the 2005 year. As for household emissions you will be aware of the very limited availability of natural gas, which results in a high consumption of coal, burning oil and gas oil compared with Great Britain.

Nevertheless the issue of climate change is one that is relevant to everyone. Government, including district councils, need to play their part and must take responsibility for reducing emissions. This has been signalled in the Programme for Government, in which the Executive has committed to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions of 25% by 2025 from 1990 levels.

Planning Service

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the mechanisms the department has in place to monitor the performance of the Enforcement Section in the Planning Service. (AQO 2553/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Enforcement Teams within my Department provide monthly enforcement statistical returns to Planning Service Headquarters Development Control Section. These statistics provide information on the number of enforcement cases received and closed each month and detail what enforcement action has been taken. This statistical information currently enables the performance of the Enforcement Sections within Planning Service to be monitored. In addition, successful prosecution cases are posted on the Planning Service and the Northern Executive internet sites.

Motor Tax Evasion

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on current levels of motor tax

evasion; and to detail the action her department is taking to reduce these levels. (AQO 2608/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The 2007 roadside survey of the level of evasion of motor tax, carried out across the UK by the Department for Transport, estimated the rate of evasion in Northern Ireland at 2.3%. My Department, through the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA), which carries out vehicle licensing in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Department for Transport, takes robust action against motor tax dodgers. DVA operates several mobile automatic number plate reading detection units, uses wheel clamping and impounding of unlicensed vehicles and takes action on reports of unlicensed vehicles from the police and from parking attendants working under contract to the Department for Regional Development. Since April 2007, 1,929 people have been convicted

for non-payment of motor tax, 10,609 motorists have paid penalties to avoid court action, 14,643 people have paid penalties for being late in renewing vehicle licences and 5,204 vehicles have been clamped or impounded for being unlicensed while on a public road.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service Vacancies

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the location; and (ii) the number, of existing vacancies in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at (a) Administrative Officer; (b) Executive Officer II; (c) Executive Officer I; and (d) Staff Officer, in each government department. (AQW 4639/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The location and number of vacancies in permanent posts in each Northern Ireland Civil Service department at the grades of (a) Administrative Officer; (b) Executive Officer 2; (c) Executive Officer 1; and (d) Staff Officer are set out in the attached table.

VACANCIES (FULL TIME EQUIVALENT BASIS) IN THE ELEVEN NI DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES IN GRADES: AO; EO2; EO1; SO, AT 4 MARCH 2008*

Department	AO		EO2		EO1		SO	
	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)
Agriculture & Rural Development (DARD)	24.5	Belfast(10.5), Antrim(1), Coleraine(1), Cookstown(2), Londonderry(5), Newtownards(2), Newry(2), Omagh(1)	7.5	Belfast(5), Antrim(1.5) Omagh/ Craigavon(1)	6.5	Belfast(5.5), Londonderry(1)	22	Belfast(20), Ballymena(1), Newry(1)
Culture, Arts & Leisure (DCAL)	5	Belfast	0		0		4	Belfast
Education (DE)	9.6	Bangor(2), Londonderry(7.6)	3	Bangor	0		9.5	Bangor
Employment & Learning (DEL)	34.2	Belfast(19.2), Antrim(1.9), Ballymoney(1.4), Carrickfergus(0.9), Coleraine(1.5), Dungannon(1.5), Limavady(1), Lisburn (3.4), Lisnagelvin(1), Newtownabbey(2.4)	13.4	Belfast(11.7), Ballymoney(1), Foyle(0.7)	40.8	Belfast(25.3), Antrim(2), Banbridge(2), Dungannon(2), Enniskillen(1), Foyle(1), Larne(0.5), Lisburn(2), Lurgan(1), Newry(1), Newtownards(1), Omagh(2)	15	Belfast
Enterprise, Trade & Investment (DETI)	2.7	Belfast	3	Belfast	6	Belfast	3	Belfast
Finance & Personnel (DFP)*	29	Belfast(25), Ballymena(1), Craigavon(3)	13	Belfast(11), Londonderry(2)	18	Belfast	15	Belfast
Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS)	6	Belfast(4), Londonderry(2)	3	Belfast	10.5	Belfast	7	Belfast

Department	AO		EO2		EO1		SO	
	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)
Environment (DOE)	62	Belfast(18.5), Armagh(1), Ballymena(1), Coleraine(35), Downpatrick(1.5), Enniskillen(3), Lisburn(1), Omagh(1)	13.5	Belfast(12), Coleraine(1.5)	13	Belfast(10), Coleraine(2), Londonderry(1)	40	Belfast(36), Ballymena(1), Coleraine(2), Lisburn(1)

Department	AO		EO2		EO1		SO	
	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)	Number	Location (posts)
Regional Development (DRD)	22	Belfast(10), Ballymena(5), Craigavon(3), Downpatrick(3), Seaforde(1)	13	Belfast(10), Ballymena(2), Coleraine(1)	18	Belfast(13), Antrim(1), Craigavon(1), Coleraine(2), Omagh(1)	17	Belfast(16), Ballymena(1)
Social Development (DSD)*	255.5	Belfast(234), Carrickfergus(0.5), Downpatrick(2), Londonderry(11.5), Newcastle(1), Newtownabbey(0.5), Newtownards(1.5), Newry(2), Portadown(2.5)	108	Belfast(91.5), Antrim(3.5), Ballymena(1.5), Coleraine(4), Enniskillen(1), Lisburn(1), Londonderry(0.5), Magherafelt(1), Newcastle(1), Newry(1), Omagh(0.5), Portadown(1.5)	40.5	Belfast(34.5), Antrim(1), Bangor(1), Downpatrick(1), Londonderry(1), Magherafelt(1), Newry(1)	55.5	Belfast(53), Ballynahinch(0.5), Coleraine(0.5), Downpatrick(0.5), Omagh(1)
Office of the First & Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)	2	Belfast	1	Belfast	0		10	Belfast
Total	452.5		178.4		153.3		198	

* latest figures available at 1 February 2008 (DFP) and 31 January 2008 (DSD)

Code for Sustainable Homes

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006; and to provide a timescale within which his department will lower the Building Regulations target emission rate of new builds to bring them in line with the UK Government's 'Code for Sustainable Homes'. (AQW 4791/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is still too early to provide a practical assessment of the impact of the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, as the first properties constructed under these regulations are only now being completed.

Work is beginning on another amendment to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 that will result in a further 25% reduction in carbon emissions against existing standards by 2010, increasing to an overall 44% reduction by 2013. These new requirements are the equivalent of Levels 3 and 4 respectively of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

While I do not intend to formally tie building regulations to the Code for Sustainable Homes, the two are closely linked. Building regulations set the minimum standards against which buildings can be constructed. The minimum standards for Code compliance are deliberately set above the requirements of building regulations and are intended to signal the

future direction of building regulations in relation to carbon emissions from, and energy use in homes.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount his department has spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years. (AQW 4849/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total expenditure for Department of Finance and Personnel over the last three years on newspapers, magazines and periodicals is set out in the table below.

Description	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
Newspapers	20,629	22,071	23,405
Magazines	9,405	7,070	8,525
Periodicals	12,226	7,292	12,027
Total	42,260	36,433	43,957

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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 4907/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below provides details of funding awarded under those Measures of the PEACE II Programme for which DFP are the Accountable Department in each of the last two years.

PEACE II (INCLUDING EXTENSION)

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Total Amount Awarded £	
	2005-06	2006-07
Downpatrick	54,800	0
Falls / Clonard	200,954	0
Inner South Belfast	4,600	0
Strabane	0	0
Non-Neighbourhood Renewal Areas	897,961	0
Total funding awarded under DFP measures	1,158,315	0

The information presented was produced by first removing those projects, with total awards greater than £250,000, which were likely to have a regional impact. These projects accounted for 12% of total funding awarded. For the remaining projects, project address information was used to allocate a project to a particular postcode and subsequently a Neighbourhood Renewal Area, where possible. However, if the project address was insufficient to allocate a postcode, organisation address details were used.

The following caveats apply to the geographical information in the table:

- The designation of a particular project as having a regional impact is based on the methodology used in the Community Uptake Analysis of Peace II, where the descriptions of projects with awards greater than £250,000 were examined to determine their spatial remit. This methodology is liable to a degree of subjectivity. Also, there may be further projects, with awards of £250,000 or less, which have not been identified but could be considered to have a regional impact. As the level of funding declines the degree of subjectivity increases.
- When using project address it is important to note that the scope or impacts of the project may extend beyond the geographical location of the project itself. For example, while a project address may fall in Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, the impact may extend beyond this area.
- In addition, where organisation address is used, it is important to note that a project may or may not be situated within the same geographical area as the applicant organisation. For example, Waterside Neigh-

bourhood Renewal Area may be the location of the lead applicant for a project yet the expenditure could be distributed throughout a number of other areas.

The table below provides details of funding awarded under those Measures of the INTERREG IIIA Programme for which DFP are the Accountable Department in each of the last two years.

INTERREG IIIA

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Total Amount Awarded £	
	2005-06	2006-07
Inner North Belfast	125,828	47,419
Triax - Cityside	967,742	1,086,805
Waterside	0	362,032
Strabane	0	131,529
Non-Neighbourhood Renewal Areas	5,921,265	4,437,414
Total funding awarded under DFP measures	7,014,834	6,065,199

Project address information was used to allocate a project to a particular postcode and subsequently a Neighbourhood Renewal Area, where possible. However, if the project address was insufficient to allocate a postcode, organisation address details were used.

The following caveats apply to the geographical information in the table:

- When using project address it is important to note that the scope or impacts of the project may extend beyond the geographical location of the project itself. For example, while a project address may fall in Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, the impact may extend beyond this area.
- In addition, where organisation address is used, it is important to note that a project may or may not be situated within the same geographical area as the applicant organisation. For example, Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Area may be the location of the lead applicant for a project yet the expenditure could be distributed throughout a number of other areas.
- It is also important to note that the Interreg IIIA Programme promotes integrated regional development between Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland. As a result, all approved projects are cross-border in nature. Whilst funding for a particular project may be focused on one or other side of the Border, it must be shown that the operation has a significant impact on the other. Therefore, due to the cross-border nature of the funding, the scope or impacts of all projects will extend beyond the geographical location of the project itself. Hence, while the Interreg projects which have been included for this query have

project addresses in Northern Ireland, they will also have an impact in or more of the six border counties of Ireland. Similarly, there will be projects which have not been included, as they have an address in one of the six border counties of Ireland, but which will have an impact in Northern Ireland.

Sustainable Development Action Plan

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if the carbon emissions from road vehicles, used for government administrative operations, have been cut by the 2% target in his department's Sustainable Development Action Plan. (AQW 4924/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Government car pool provides road vehicles for administrative operations. Over the last 12 months new, fuel efficient vehicles have been introduced to the car pool and these vehicles emit 29% less carbon dioxide than those they replaced on a like for like mileage basis.

Rates Revenue

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to advise whether an estimate has been made of the amount of revenue that has not been collected due to the delay in establishing the rateable values of new build housing, and if so what is this amount. (AQW 4934/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Rate bills are backdated to the date of occupation; in the case of new domestic properties the earliest effective date is 1 April 2007, the commencement date of the current Valuation List. Given the backdating

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below gives the number of neonatal deaths by age and cause of death that occurred in Altnagelvin Hospital, registered in each year since 1997. Prior to 1997 place of death information is not held electronically on the statistical extract from the civil death register.

TABLE: NUMBER OF NEONATAL DEATHS IN ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITAL, BY AGE AT DEATH AND CAUSE OF DEATH, 1997-2006

ICD10 Code	ICD09 Code	Cause of Death	All Ages	Age at Death in days		
				Under 1	1-6	7-27
A00-Y98	001-E999	All Causes	85	47	30	8
P01	761	Foetus and newborn affected by maternal complications of pregnancy	5	2	3	-
P02	762	Foetus and newborn affected by complications	6	3	2	1
P03, P10-P15	763, 767, 772	Foetus and newborn affected by other complications of labour, delivery and also birth trauma	2	-	1	1

provisions, there is therefore no appreciable amount of revenue that has not been collected due to any delay in establishing rateable valuations and no estimate of such loss has been made.

Capital Investment Plans

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what actions he is taking to improve the monitoring and implementation of capital investment plans so that the level of under-expenditure will remain below the agreed capital end year flexibility for 2008-09. (AQW 4948/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In light of the constraint imposed by HM Treasury regarding access to the NI Executive's capital End Year Flexibility (EYF) stock, it is essential that Departments seek to minimise the level of underspend against capital investment plans whilst still ensuring value for money.

To facilitate this, and alongside a renewed focus on general financial management issues, Departments have been asked to prepare Investment Delivery Plans which will be supplemented by a specific focus on improvements in project and programme management.

This work will all be undertaken in the context of a new performance management framework, which will seek to monitor and drive performance against all targets, commitments and goals in PFG and ISNI.

Neonatal Death

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the age; and (ii) the cause of death, in each case of neonatal death at Altnagelvin Hospital, since 1995. (AQW 4974/08)

ICD10 Code	ICD09 Code	Cause of Death	All Ages	Age at Death in days		
				Under 1	1-6	7-27
P20-P29	768-770	Respiratory and cardiovascular disorders specific to the perinatal period	23	8	14	1
Remainder of ICD10 P codes	764-766, 771, 773-779	Other perinatal conditions	26	15	8	3
Q00-Q99	740-759	Congenital malformations deformations and chromosomal abnormalities	23	19	2	2

NJC Pay Increase

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the current status of the 2007 NJC pay increase of 2.475% (3.4% on spinal column 4), which was agreed in November 2007, in relation to education sector employees. (AQW 5014/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In May 2007 the Executive agreed to adopt HM Treasury public sector pay policy in Northern Ireland. This requires all public sector bodies to seek approval from the Finance Minister before any pay awards are implemented.

While the NJC pay award was agreed nationally in November 2007 my Department only received the first pay remit business case from the Department of Education for these staff on 29 February 2008, with the latest received on 12 March 2008. My officials have

already raised a number of issues with DE officials on these cases. Once these have been addressed I will ensure that these pay remits are brought to a timely resolution.

Departmental Demographics

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the actual and percentage composition profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service broad occupational groupings, annually from January 2003 to January 2008 (inclusive), giving the total number broken down by gender, community background (including non-determined), declared disability and ethnic minority. (AQW 5047/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2008

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,096	67.6	12,044	63.1	7,052	36.9	9,279	48.6	9,515	49.8	302	1.6
Typing	806	2.9	805	99.9	1	0.1	548	68.0	249	30.9	9	1.1
Scientific	485	1.7	208	42.9	277	57.1	278	57.3	165	34.0	42	8.7
Technology	1,722	6.1	297	17.2	1,425	82.8	955	55.5	719	41.8	48	2.8
Legal	321	1.1	201	62.6	120	37.4	131	40.8	183	57.0	7	2.2
Computing	614	2.2	156	25.4	458	74.6	326	53.1	277	45.1	11	1.8
Specialisms	3,194	11.3	820	25.7	2,374	74.3	1,779	55.7	1,245	39.0	170	5.3
Centralised Services	627	2.2	274	43.7	353	56.3	430	68.6	167	26.6	30	4.8
No Group	1,392	4.9	59	4.2	1,333	95.8	806	57.9	517	37.1	69	5.0
Total	28,257	100.0	14,864	52.6	13,393	47.4	14,532	51.4	13,037	46.1	688	2.4

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,096	67.6	1031	5.9	22	0.1
Typing	806	2.9	29	4.2	0	0.0
Scientific	485	1.7	19	4.2	4	0.9
Technology	1,722	6.1	44	3.0	6	0.4
Legal	321	1.1	12	3.9	2	0.7
Computing	614	2.2	25	4.4	4	0.7
Specialisms	3,194	11.3	119	4.3	8	0.3
Centralised Services	627	2.2	41	8.1	0	0.0
No Group	1,392	4.9	51	5.2	1	0.1
Total	28,257	100.0	1,371	5.5	47	0.2
			*of those staff who responded			

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2007

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,642	64.7	12,395	63.1	7,247	36.9	9,541	48.6	9,806	49.9	295	1.5
Typing	890	2.9	889	99.9	1	0.1	599	67.3	281	31.6	10	1.1
Scientific	539	1.8	232	43.0	307	57.0	309	57.3	189	35.1	41	7.6
Technology	2,176	7.2	291	13.4	1,885	86.6	1,258	57.8	849	39.0	69	3.2
Legal	281	0.9	172	61.2	109	38.8	120	42.7	156	55.5	5	1.8
Computing	596	2.0	154	25.8	442	74.2	324	54.4	263	44.1	9	1.5
Specialisms	3,162	10.4	802	25.4	2,360	74.6	1,773	56.1	1,219	38.6	170	5.4
Centralised Services	745	2.5	321	43.1	424	56.9	508	68.2	203	27.2	34	4.6
No Group	2,335	7.7	63	2.7	2,272	97.3	1,340	57.4	874	37.4	121	5.2
Total	30,366	100.0	15,319	50.4	15,047	49.6	15,772	51.9	13,840	45.6	754	2.5

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,642	64.7	980	5.5	23	0.1
Typing	890	2.9	35	4.6	0	0.0
Scientific	539	1.8	19	3.8	5	1.0
Technology	2,176	7.2	54	3.0	7	0.4
Legal	281	0.9	13	4.9	2	0.8
Computing	596	2.0	26	4.7	2	0.4
Specialisms	3,162	10.4	111	4.0	8	0.3
Centralised Services	745	2.5	48	7.9	1	0.2
No Group	2,335	7.7	81	5.7	0	0.0
Total	30,366	100.0	1,367	5.2	48	0.2
			*of those staff who responded			

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2006

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	20,051	63.4	12,720	63.4	7,331	36.6	9,742	48.6	10,011	49.9	298	1.5
Typing	966	3.1	965	99.9	1	0.1	657	68.0	297	30.7	12	1.2
Scientific	984	3.1	396	40.2	588	59.8	609	61.9	297	30.2	78	7.9
Technology	2,266	7.2	306	13.5	1,960	86.5	1,309	57.8	886	39.1	71	3.1
Legal	253	0.8	147	58.1	106	41.9	114	45.1	135	53.4	4	1.6
Computing	609	1.9	154	25.3	455	74.7	333	54.7	267	43.8	9	1.5
Specialisms	3,248	10.3	819	25.2	2,429	74.8	1,813	55.8	1,224	37.7	211	6.5
Centralised Services	848	2.7	365	43.0	483	57.0	574	67.7	227	26.8	47	5.5
No Group	2,425	7.7	51	2.1	2,374	97.9	1,413	58.3	890	36.7	122	5.0
Total	31,650	100.0	15,923	50.3	15,727	49.7	16,564	52.3	14,234	45.0	852	2.7

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	20,051	63.4	948	5.2	24	0.1
Typing	966	3.1	36	4.3	0	0.0
Scientific	984	3.1	48	5.2	6	0.7
Technology	2,266	7.2	60	3.1	6	0.3
Legal	253	0.8	10	4.2	2	0.8
Computing	609	1.9	25	4.5	2	0.4
Specialisms	3,248	10.3	111	4.0	10	0.4
Centralised Services	848	2.7	59	8.3	1	0.1
No Group	2,425	7.7	90	6.2	1	0.1
Total	31,650	100.0	1,387	5.0	52	0.2
			*of those staff who responded			

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2005

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,922	62.7	12,654	63.5	7,268	36.5	9,718	48.8	9,905	49.7	299	1.5
Typing	1,094	3.4	1,093	99.9	1	0.1	755	69.0	325	29.7	14	1.3
Scientific	950	3.0	374	39.4	576	60.6	584	61.5	282	29.7	84	8.8
Technology	2,245	7.1	256	11.4	1,989	88.6	1,337	59.6	841	37.5	67	3.0
Legal	282	0.9	163	57.8	119	42.2	139	49.3	137	48.6	6	2.1
Computing	623	2.0	166	26.6	457	73.4	343	55.1	271	43.5	9	1.4
Specialisms	3,190	10.0	771	24.2	2,419	75.8	1,806	56.6	1,203	37.7	181	5.7
Centralised Services	898	2.8	393	43.8	505	56.2	610	67.9	241	26.8	47	5.2
No Group	2,550	8.0	63	2.5	2,487	97.5	1,480	58.0	934	36.6	136	5.3
Total	31,754	100.0	15,933	50.2	15,821	49.8	16,772	52.8	14,139	44.5	843	2.7

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,922	62.7	900	5.0	27	0.2
Typing	1,094	3.4	34	3.6	0	0.0
Scientific	950	3.0	43	4.9	6	0.7
Technology	2,245	7.1	62	3.3	6	0.3
Legal	282	0.9	12	4.7	2	0.8
Computing	623	2.0	21	3.7	1	0.2
Specialisms	3,190	10.0	112	4.1	7	0.3
Centralised Services	898	2.8	59	7.8	1	0.1
No Group	2,550	8.0	95	6.3	0	0.0
Total	31,754	100.0	1,338	4.9	50	0.2
*of those staff who responded						

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2004

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,417	62.2	12,388	63.8	7,029	36.2	9,531	49.1	9,591	49.4	295	1.5
Typing	1,172	3.8	1,171	99.9	1	0.1	806	68.8	348	29.7	18	1.5
Scientific	867	2.8	333	38.4	534	61.6	550	63.4	245	28.3	72	8.3
Technology	2,216	7.1	221	10.0	1,995	90.0	1,349	60.9	789	35.6	78	3.5
Legal	250	0.8	138	55.2	112	44.8	136	54.4	107	42.8	7	2.8
Computing	613	2.0	164	26.8	449	73.2	344	56.1	260	42.4	9	1.5
Specialisms	3,048	9.8	713	23.4	2,335	76.6	1,735	56.9	1,123	36.8	190	6.2
Centralised Services	910	2.9	402	44.2	508	55.8	623	68.5	236	25.9	51	5.6
No Group	2,739	8.8	67	2.4	2,672	97.6	1,576	57.5	1,006	36.7	157	5.7
Total	31,232	100.0	15,597	49.9	15,635	50.1	16,650	53.3	13,705	43.9	877	2.8

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,417	62.2	840	4.8	24	0.1
Typing	1,172	3.8	35	3.5	0	0.0
Scientific	867	2.8	38	4.7	6	0.8
Technology	2,216	7.1	60	3.3	6	0.3
Legal	250	0.8	14	6.3	1	0.5
Computing	613	2.0	19	3.4	1	0.2
Specialisms	3,048	9.8	101	3.9	7	0.3
Centralised Services	910	2.9	55	7.3	1	0.1
No Group	2,739	8.8	106	6.7	0	0.0
Total	31,232	100.0	1,268	4.7	46	0.2
*of those staff who responded						

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AT 1 JAN 2003

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	18,932	61.9	12,090	63.9	6,842	36.1	9,335	49.3	9,298	49.1	299	1.6
Typing	1,182	3.9	1,181	99.9	1	0.1	804	68.0	360	30.5	18	1.5
Scientific	846	2.8	317	37.5	529	62.5	541	63.9	236	27.9	69	8.2
Technology	2,124	6.9	197	9.3	1,927	90.7	1,326	62.4	724	34.1	74	3.5
Legal	209	0.7	110	52.6	99	47.4	118	56.5	84	40.2	7	3.3
Computing	559	1.8	144	25.8	415	74.2	315	56.4	230	41.1	14	2.5
Specialisms	2,842	9.3	666	23.4	2,176	76.6	1,638	57.6	1,023	36.0	181	6.4
Centralised Services	947	3.1	426	45.0	521	55.0	643	67.9	249	26.3	55	5.8
No Group	2,949	9.6	67	2.3	2,882	97.7	1,680	57.0	1,103	37.4	166	5.6
Total	30,590	100.0	15,198	49.7	15,392	50.3	16,400	53.6	13,307	43.5	883	2.9

Occupational Group	Total Staff		*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	18,932	61.9	797	4.8	16	0.1
Typing	1,182	3.9	34	3.4	0	0.0
Scientific	846	2.8	37	4.7	6	0.8
Technology	2,124	6.9	57	3.2	6	0.3
Legal	209	0.7	14	7.8	1	0.6
Computing	559	1.8	17	3.4	1	0.2
Specialisms	2,842	9.3	91	3.7	7	0.3
Centralised Services	947	3.1	62	8.0	1	0.1
No Group	2,949	9.6	117	7.1	0	0.0
Total	30,590	100.0	1,226	4.7	38	0.1
			*of those staff who responded			

Departmental Demographics

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the actual and percentage composition profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service by department/agency, annually from January 2003 to January 2008 (inclusive), giving the total number broken down by gender cross-referenced with

breakdown by community background (including non-determined). (AQW 5048/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. In order to ensure confidentiality it has been necessary to suppress some numbers and percentages where the value for either Protestants or Roman Catholics is less than 10.

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND AT 1 JAN 2008

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
				No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	2,724	9.6	593	49.1	574	47.6	40	3.3	795	52.4	651	42.9	71	4.7
	DCAL	433	1.5	103	57.5	72	40.2	4	2.2	149	58.7	100	39.4	5	2.0
	DE	689	2.4	279	66.4	130	31.0	11	2.6	157	58.4	104	38.7	8	3.0
	DETI	707	2.5	226	59.6	148	39.1	5	1.3	190	57.9	125	38.1	13	4.0
	DFP	3,078	10.9	792	52.9	679	45.3	27	1.8	897	56.8	652	41.3	31	2.0
	DEL	1,858	6.6	511	40.4	730	57.8	23	1.8	242	40.7	344	57.9	8	1.3
	DHSSPS	943	3.3	261	55.9	192	41.1	14	3.0	273	57.4	191	40.1	12	2.5
	DOE	2,797	9.9	681	48.4	691	49.1	35	2.5	729	52.4	605	43.5	56	4.0
	DRD	2,091	7.4	302	43.6	380	54.8	11	1.6	782	55.9	581	41.6	35	2.5
	DSD (Core)	714	2.5	169	43.7	212	54.8	6	1.6	131	40.1	188	57.5	8	2.4
	SSA	5,391	19.1	1,401	40.5	2,011	58.2	45	1.3	735	38.0	1,168	60.4	31	1.6
	CSA	1,742	6.2	418	43.4	532	55.2	14	1.5	354	45.5	409	52.6	15	1.9
	OFMDFM	428	1.5	151	61.6	86	35.1	8	3.3	106	57.9	73	39.9	4	2.2
	NIO	2,016	7.1	795	62.5	455	35.8	21	1.7	471	63.2	250	33.6	24	3.2
	Seconded Staff	1,254	4.4	829	85.7	124	12.8	14	1.4	204	71.1	63	22.0	20	7.0
	Sub-Total	26,865	95.1	7,511	50.7	7,016	47.4	278	1.9	6,215	51.5	5,504	45.6	341	2.8
Industrial	DARD	464	1.6	*	*	*	*	*	*	202	47.0	212	49.3	16	3.7
	DRD	630	2.2	*	*	*	*	*	*	358	56.9	244	38.8	27	4.3
	Others	298	1.1	*	*	*	*	*	*	208	75.9	44	16.1	22	8.0
	Sub-Total	1,392	4.9	38	64.4	17	28.8	4	6.8	768	57.6	500	37.5	65	4.9
Total		28,257	100.0	7,549	50.8	7,033	47.3	282	1.9	6,983	52.1	6,004	44.8	406	3.0

**COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND
AT 1 JAN 2007**

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	2,849	9.4	617	48.8	605	47.8	43	3.4	821	51.8	692	43.7	71	4.5
	DCAL	432	1.4	106	57.0	75	40.3	5	2.7	152	61.8	89	36.2	5	2.0
	DE	695	2.3	294	67.6	134	30.8	7	1.6	155	59.6	98	37.7	7	2.7
	DETI	735	2.4	227	58.1	155	39.6	9	2.3	201	58.4	132	38.4	11	3.2
	DFP	2,987	9.8	767	52.2	679	46.2	23	1.6	870	57.3	616	40.6	32	2.1
	DEL	1,844	6.1	491	40.1	712	58.2	20	1.6	253	40.7	358	57.6	10	1.6
	DHSSPS	985	3.2	266	55.1	206	42.7	11	2.3	293	58.4	197	39.2	12	2.4
	DOE	2,750	9.1	672	48.7	674	48.8	34	2.5	728	53.1	592	43.2	50	3.6
	DRD	3,030	10.0	435	44.8	514	52.9	23	2.4	1,177	57.2	815	39.6	66	3.2
	DSD (Core)	680	2.2	164	44.4	198	53.7	7	1.9	124	39.9	181	58.2	6	1.9
	SSA	5,518	18.2	1,444	40.6	2,068	58.2	41	1.2	749	38.1	1,193	60.7	23	1.2
	CSA	1,896	6.2	463	42.8	606	56.0	13	1.2	380	46.7	419	51.5	15	1.8
	OFMDFM	393	1.3	145	64.7	75	33.5	4	1.8	100	59.2	67	39.6	2	1.2
	NIO	1,906	6.3	760	64.2	402	34.0	22	1.9	477	66.1	220	30.5	25	3.5
	Seconded Staff	1,331	4.4	892	85.8	133	12.8	15	1.4	209	71.8	61	21.0	21	7.2
	Sub-Total	28,031	92.3	7,743	50.8	7,236	47.4	277	1.8	6,689	52.4	5,730	44.9	356	2.8
Industrial	DARD	491	1.6	*	*	*	*	*	*	217	47.6	223	48.9	16	3.5
	DRD	1,527	5.0	*	*	*	*	*	*	861	56.6	583	38.3	78	5.1
	Others	317	1.0	*	*	*	*	*	*	222	75.5	49	16.7	23	7.8
	Sub-Total	2,335	7.7	40	63.5	19	30.2	4	6.3	1,300	57.2	855	37.6	117	5.1
Total		30,366	100.0	7,783	50.8	7,255	47.4	281	1.8	7,989	53.1	6,585	43.8	473	3.1

**COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND
AT 1 JAN 2006**

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	3,578	11.3	774	50.2	712	46.1	57	3.7	1,118	54.9	810	39.8	107	5.3
	DCAL	437	1.4	100	54.1	80	43.2	5	2.7	150	59.5	97	38.5	5	2.0
	DE	697	2.2	292	68.7	128	30.1	5	1.2	162	59.6	103	37.9	7	2.6
	DETI	768	2.4	243	58.0	168	40.1	8	1.9	201	57.6	137	39.3	11	3.2
	DFP	3,013	9.5	764	52.2	675	46.1	25	1.7	897	57.9	617	39.8	35	2.3
	DEL	1,878	5.9	511	40.5	731	58.0	19	1.5	253	41.0	355	57.5	9	1.5
	DHSSPS	1,016	3.2	277	55.5	208	41.7	14	2.8	300	58.0	205	39.7	12	2.3
	DOE	2,666	8.4	659	48.6	665	49.0	33	2.4	693	52.9	564	43.1	52	4.0
	DRD	3,224	10.2	489	46.3	553	52.3	15	1.4	1,248	57.6	855	39.5	64	3.0
	DSD (Core)	699	2.2	163	43.5	204	54.4	8	2.1	135	41.7	181	55.9	8	2.5
	SSA	5,680	17.9	1,492	40.2	2,145	57.8	73	2.0	747	37.9	1,196	60.7	27	1.4
	CSA	1,913	6.0	482	43.2	618	55.4	15	1.3	360	45.1	425	53.3	13	1.6
	OFMDFM	374	1.2	140	65.1	68	31.6	7	3.3	95	59.7	62	39.0	2	1.3
	NIO	1,820	5.8	720	64.4	373	33.4	25	2.2	478	68.1	195	27.8	29	4.1
	Seconded Staff	1,462	4.6	968	85.7	144	12.8	17	1.5	240	72.1	70	21.0	23	6.9
	Sub-Total	29,225	92.3	8,074	50.9	7,472	47.1	326	2.1	7,077	53.0	5,872	44.0	404	3.0
Industrial	DARD	566	1.8	*	*	*	*	*	*	267	50.8	241	45.8	18	3.4
	DRD	1,560	4.9	*	*	*	*	*	*	893	57.4	584	37.5	79	5.1
	Others	299	0.9	*	*	*	*	*	*	222	76.0	48	16.4	22	7.5
	Sub-Total	2,425	7.7	31	60.8	17	33.3	3	5.9	1,382	58.2	873	36.8	119	5.0
Total		31,650	100.0	8,105	50.9	7,489	47.0	329	2.1	8,459	53.8	6,745	42.9	523	3.3

**COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND
AT 1 JAN 2005**

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	3,634	11.4	782	49.7	731	46.5	60	3.8	1,134	55.0	820	39.8	107	5.2
	DCAL	439	1.4	98	53.6	83	45.4	2	1.1	157	61.3	94	36.7	5	2.0
	DE	698	2.2	288	68.4	127	30.2	6	1.4	165	59.6	104	37.5	8	2.9
	DETI	786	2.5	243	57.0	174	40.8	9	2.1	212	58.9	138	38.3	10	2.8
	DFP	2,990	9.4	774	52.9	660	45.1	28	1.9	903	59.1	589	38.5	36	2.4
	DEL	1,831	5.8	493	40.9	694	57.6	18	1.5	257	41.1	360	57.5	9	1.4
	DHSSPS	1,025	3.2	288	56.8	203	40.0	16	3.2	297	57.3	209	40.3	12	2.3
	DOE	2,473	7.8	630	49.8	607	47.9	29	2.3	657	54.4	503	41.7	47	3.9
	DRD	3,280	10.3	494	46.0	566	52.7	15	1.4	1,272	57.7	865	39.2	68	3.1
	DSD (Core)	689	2.2	157	43.1	197	54.1	10	2.7	136	41.8	181	55.7	8	2.5
	SSA	5,793	18.2	1,534	40.3	2,230	58.5	47	1.2	754	38.0	1,200	60.5	28	1.4
	CSA	1,695	5.3	452	44.8	542	53.8	14	1.4	299	43.5	375	54.6	13	1.9
	OFMDFM	418	1.3	154	66.1	72	30.9	7	3.0	113	61.1	68	36.8	4	2.2
	NIO	1,706	5.4	684	65.6	342	32.8	17	1.6	455	68.6	179	27.0	29	4.4
	Seconded Staff	1,747	5.5	1,078	83.4	196	15.2	19	1.5	332	73.1	96	21.1	26	5.7
	Sub-Total	29,204	92.0	8,149	51.3	7,424	46.8	297	1.9	7,143	53.6	5,781	43.4	410	3.1
Industrial	DARD	607	1.9	*	*	*	*	*	*	280	49.9	255	45.5	26	4.6
	DRD	1,619	5.1	*	*	*	*	*	*	927	57.4	606	37.5	82	5.1
	Others	324	1.0	*	*	*	*	*	*	232	74.6	57	18.3	22	7.1
	Sub-Total	2,550	8.0	41	65.1	16	25.4	6	9.5	1,439	57.9	918	36.9	130	5.2
Total		31,754	100.0	8,190	51.4	7,440	46.7	303	1.9	8,582	54.2	6,699	42.3	540	3.4

**COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND
AT 1 JAN 2004**

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	3,392	10.9	724	50.2	659	45.7	58	4.0	1,079	55.3	767	39.3	105	5.4
	DCAL	406	1.3	90	52.9	79	46.5	1	0.6	143	60.6	87	36.9	6	2.5
	DE	623	2.0	253	67.5	117	31.2	5	1.3	141	56.9	99	39.9	8	3.2
	DETI	751	2.4	222	56.3	165	41.9	7	1.8	207	58.0	140	39.2	10	2.8
	DFP	2,892	9.3	759	53.9	618	43.9	31	2.2	891	60.0	561	37.8	32	2.2
	DEL	1,776	5.7	480	41.0	671	57.4	19	1.6	256	42.2	341	56.3	9	1.5
	DHSSPS	1,006	3.2	272	56.1	198	40.8	15	3.1	307	58.9	199	38.2	15	2.9
	DOE	2,158	6.9	553	50.4	516	47.0	28	2.6	594	56.0	419	39.5	48	4.5
	DRD	3,219	10.3	491	46.2	558	52.5	14	1.3	1,252	58.1	835	38.7	69	3.2
	DSD (Core)	621	2.0	151	44.7	180	53.3	7	2.1	120	42.4	155	54.8	8	2.8
	SSA	5,946	19.0	1,577	40.6	2,266	58.3	46	1.2	795	38.6	1,232	59.9	30	1.5
	CSA	1,713	5.5	492	47.4	529	51.0	16	1.5	292	43.2	374	55.3	10	1.5
	OFMDFM	395	1.3	148	67.6	63	28.8	8	3.7	111	63.1	61	34.7	4	2.3
	NIO	1,594	5.1	669	68.5	285	29.2	23	2.4	428	69.4	159	25.8	30	4.9
	Seconded Staff	2,001	6.4	1,200	81.8	242	16.5	25	1.7	377	70.6	124	23.2	33	6.2
	Sub-Total	28,493	91.2	8,081	52.0	7,146	46.0	303	2.0	6,993	53.9	5,553	42.8	417	3.2
Industrial	DARD	635	2.0	*	*	*	*	*	*	298	50.6	264	44.8	27	4.6
	DRD	1,754	5.6	*	*	*	*	*	*	991	56.6	661	37.8	98	5.6
	Others	350	1.1	*	*	*	*	*	*	245	73.6	62	18.6	26	7.8
	Sub-Total	2,739	8.8	42	62.7	19	28.4	6	9.0	1,534	57.4	987	36.9	151	5.7
Total		31,232	100.0	8,123	52.1	7,165	45.9	309	2.0	8,527	54.5	6,540	41.8	568	3.6

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS BY DEPARTMENT, WITH GENDER CROSS-REFERENCED BY COMMUNITY BACKGROUND AT 1 JAN 2003

Dept		Total staff		Females						Males					
				Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Roman Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
Non-Industrial	DARD	3,180	10.4	686	51.1	597	44.5	60	4.5	1,011	55.0	724	39.4	102	5.6
	DCAL	399	1.3	78	54.2	64	44.4	2	1.4	170	66.7	81	31.8	4	1.6
	DE	588	1.9	229	66.6	111	32.3	4	1.2	141	57.8	95	38.9	8	3.3
	DETI	743	2.4	207	54.9	165	43.8	5	1.3	211	57.7	144	39.3	11	3.0
	DFP	2,791	9.1	723	54.2	582	43.6	29	2.2	884	60.7	543	37.3	30	2.1
	DEL	1,677	5.5	455	41.3	627	56.9	19	1.7	248	43.1	318	55.2	10	1.7
	DHSSPS	978	3.2	264	55.8	192	40.6	17	3.6	295	58.4	196	38.8	14	2.8
	DOE	1,986	6.5	516	51.5	461	46.0	25	2.5	560	56.9	382	38.8	42	4.3
	DRD	3,006	9.8	485	46.5	546	52.3	13	1.2	1,157	59.0	741	37.8	64	3.3
	DSD (Core)	536	1.8	130	45.0	153	52.9	6	2.1	103	41.7	136	55.1	8	3.2
	SSA	5,932	19.4	1,580	40.4	2,278	58.3	51	1.3	780	38.6	1,212	59.9	31	1.5
	CSA	1,697	5.5	496	48.2	520	50.5	13	1.3	302	45.2	358	53.6	8	1.2
	OFMDFM	386	1.3	141	65.6	67	31.2	7	3.3	106	62.0	55	32.2	10	5.8
	NIO	1,485	4.9	621	68.3	272	29.9	16	1.8	405	70.3	145	25.2	26	4.5
	Seconded Staff	2,257	7.4	1,293	79.9	289	17.9	36	2.2	443	69.3	150	23.5	46	7.2
	Sub-Total	27,641	90.4	7,904	52.2	6,924	45.8	303	2.0	6,816	54.5	5,280	42.2	414	3.3
Industrial	DARD	651	2.1	*	*	*	*	*	*	300	49.6	278	46.0	27	4.5
	DRD	1,941	6.3	*	*	*	*	*	*	1,092	56.4	739	38.2	105	5.4
	Others	357	1.2	*	*	*	*	*	*	250	73.3	65	19.1	26	7.6
	Sub-Total	2,949	9.6	38	56.7	21	31.3	8	11.9	1,642	57.0	1,082	37.5	158	5.5
Total		30,590	100.0	7,942	52.3	6,945	45.7	311	2.0	8,458	55.0	6,362	41.3	572	3.7

Departmental Demographics

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the actual and percentage composition profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service non-industrial staff annually from January 2003 to January 2008 (inclusive), giving total number broken down by gender, community background (including non-determined), declared disability and ethnic minority.

(AQW 5049/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS NON-INDUSTRIAL STAFF - GENDER

Date	Total Non-Industrial Staff	Gender			
		Female		Male	
		No	Row %	No	Row %
Jan-08	26,865	14,805	55.1	12,060	44.9
Jan-07	28,031	15,256	54.4	12,775	45.6
Jan-06	29,225	15,872	54.3	13,353	45.7
Jan-05	29,204	15,870	54.3	13,334	45.7
Jan-04	28,493	15,530	54.5	12,963	45.5
Jan-03	27,641	15,131	54.7	12,510	45.3

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS NON-INDUSTRIAL STAFF – COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

Date	Total Non-Industrial Staff	Community Background					
		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
		No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
Jan-08	26,865	13,726	51.1	12,520	46.6	619	2.3
Jan-07	28,031	14,432	51.5	12,966	46.3	633	2.3
Jan-06	29,225	15,151	51.8	13,344	45.7	730	2.5
Jan-05	29,204	15,292	52.4	13,205	45.2	707	2.4
Jan-04	28,493	15,074	52.9	12,699	44.6	720	2.5
Jan-03	27,641	14,720	53.3	12,204	44.2	717	2.6

COMPOSITIONAL PROFILE OF NICS NON-INDUSTRIAL STAFF – DECLARED DISABILITY AND ETHNIC MINORITY

Date	Total Non-Industrial Staff	*Declared Disability		*Ethnic Minority	
		No	Row %	No	Row %
Jan-08	26,865	1,320	5.5	46	0.2
Jan-07	28,031	1,286	5.1	48	0.2
Jan-06	29,225	1,297	5.0	51	0.2
Jan-05	29,204	1,243	4.8	50	0.2
Jan-04	28,493	1,162	4.6	46	0.2
Jan-03	27,641	1,109	4.6	38	0.2
		*of those staff who responded			

Agricultural Clauses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a timescale within which primary legislation will be brought to the Assembly for ratification to enable change for properties with agricultural clauses within the regional rate. (AQW 5058/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Following the recent Review of Domestic Rating, the Executive concluded that the existing allowance for farmhouses remained valid and was sufficient to deal with the special circumstances pertaining to farmhouses. No change is therefore being made to the current policy on the treatment of farmhouses. As a result, I have no plans to bring forward primary legislation on this issue nor to initiate any of the pre-legislative steps that would be required, such as the completion of relevant impact assessments and prior consultation. Following representations made by the Member, I have however asked my Department to consider the related issue of

whether there is a need to extend the existing allowance to cover houses which have been granted planning permission subject to a condition restricting occupation to someone engaged in horticulture. This work is currently underway and officials are liaising with other Departments, including DOE and DARD, to gather the evidence required to inform a decision on the matter.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the protocols he follows in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 5075/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that in my capacity as Minister of Finance and Personnel I follow the agreed protocol in that my office will inform MLAs if I am to visit their respective constituencies not less than 24 hours in advance of the visit. This is communicated via email and details will normally include the reason, location and timing of the visit. On the occasions that it is not possible to provide advance information in writing, MLAs are offered a contact number should they wish to receive a verbal update.

Code for Sustainable Homes

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail why he is not following the United Kingdom's Code for Sustainable Homes in formulating building regulations which take a holistic approach to a house and include a renewable energy element. (AQW 5082/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 already

take a holistic approach to energy conservation and have done so since they were amended by the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006. This introduced a “whole building approach” to the application of Part F (Conservation of fuel and power) of the regulations. The regulations continue to facilitate and, by the introduction of onerous emissions targets, encourage the use of renewable energy systems.

Zero-Carbon Rating

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if he would agree that if buildings are to achieve a zero-carbon rating they must incorporate a capability for generating their own electricity. (AQW 5083/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not agree that on-site generation is necessary to achieve a building with zero carbon emissions. While microgeneration would likely be the most popular route to achieve zero carbon emissions, buildings constructed to a high thermal standard such as the Passivhaus standard and that use green electricity could achieve zero carbon emissions without microgeneration.

Data Protection Review

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Executive has agreed the findings of the Data Protection Review which he commissioned on 21 November 2007; and to detail the findings and subsequent recommendations of the review. (AQW 5181/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that the Executive agreed the contents of the Report on The Northern Ireland Data Protection Review submitted for consideration at their meeting of 13 March 2008.

The Review, which was undertaken in December 2007, identified specific areas of good practice operating across Departments and Agencies, particularly in the fields of fraud detection, security and access and connectivity. However, the study also revealed a range of areas where organisations recognised that there was scope for improvement – such as training, information transfer and risk management – and identified a clear need for us to match the rapid change in the technology landscape by updating our policies and procedures.

In light of the Review findings, a series of improvements were agreed and I am pleased to report that Departments, Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies are currently implementing a range of

actions which will help them maintain focus on data protection and ultimately be much better placed to meet the challenges imposed by a growingly complex and modern data protection environment.

A copy of the Report on The Northern Ireland Data Protection Review, which includes findings and recommendations emanating from the Review, has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Capital Realisation Programme

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of funding to be raised through the Capital Realisation Programme during the next three years, that has yet to be committed to projects. (AQO 2655/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Budget for 2008-11, approved by the Assembly on 29 January, took account of the report from the Capital Realisation Taskforce, and in particular the identification of potential asset disposals over that period.

However, there is still work to be done in putting in place the arrangements that will be needed to take forward the work to realise such sums, including the identification of specific assets. This work will also take account of the market conditions, and as such it is not possible to quantify, at this stage, the exact amount of such disposals.

Varney Report

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of the conclusions of the Varney Report. (AQO 2635/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The outcome of the first Varney Review was disappointing as I believe the Executive made a strong, evidence-based case for a differential rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland. There are some specific concerns over the methodology employed by Sir David in calculating the large net costs to the UK Exchequer. These have been highlighted to Sir David by Executive Ministers during recent discussions. Sir David's report, however, provided a very useful analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the local economy.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider the implementation of a zero-based budgetary mechanism to (i) identify where public money is being spent unnecessarily; and (ii)

achieve greater levels of efficiency and value for money for the electorate. (AQO 2552/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As part of the 2008-2011 Budget process a zero based approach was adopted with respect to decisions on the capital allocations to Northern Ireland Departments. This reflects the time bounded nature of most capital projects which means that they are more amenable to a zero based analysis.

Although all Government spending programmes should be regularly evaluated to ensure that the original rationale for intervention remains and services delivered efficiently, it was decided that it would not be appropriate to adopt a zero-based approach with respect to resource allocations in the 2008 Budget process. This was on the basis that a number of significant areas had already been subject to recent review and, importantly, it is simply inconceivable that the Executive would decide to not continue the provision of key services in terms of for example health, education or support to business. Therefore, it would be expected that the costs would outweigh the benefits from such an all encompassing approach.

However, in deciding upon how to deliver the 3% per annum efficiency savings target, it is expected that Northern Ireland Departments will have examined the whole suite of programmes they deliver in order to identify the required level of savings

In addition, the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) will examine the scope for departments to deliver high levels of cash releasing efficiencies, combined with parallel improvements in performance and delivery.

Government Contracts

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the average length of time for vetting contractors and sub-contractors responsible for Government contracts. (AQO 2653/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The level of security vetting required for personnel of contractors, consultants and suppliers depends on the scope, location, and sensitivity of the project being undertaken.

The normal level of vetting is known as the "Baseline Personnel Security Standard". This level of vetting includes a criminal record check and aims to provide an appropriate level of assurance as to the integrity and trustworthiness of personnel of contractors, consultants and suppliers. Requests for this type of clearance are processed through the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the average length of

time for this verification process is approximately 3 weeks from receipt of a fully completed application.

If a higher level of security vetting is required, vetting to Counter Terrorist Check (CTC) level is obtained through the National Security Vetting process. At present this much more detailed process takes in the order of 8 weeks to complete.

Stormont Estate

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what progress has been made in converting heating plants in the Stormont estate to use biomass rather than fossil fuels. (AQO 2623/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In 2006 the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund was launched with a view to stimulating the take-up of renewable energy technology in Northern Ireland. Under EREF, funding was secured to seek to install a biomass heating system within the Stormont Estate. At this time work is progressing with the provision of a biomass boiler at the Stormont Cottages site. A successful contractor was appointed on 23rd January 2008 and is now taking forward design drawings and costs for approval by DFP.

The provision of this biomass boiler has been tied in with other renewable energy projects at 11 sites in all. This work, totalling approximately £1m, will be completed in September 2008.

Peace III Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what safeguards are being put in place to ensure that Peace III funding reaches communities and areas in greatest social need. (AQO 2657/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The overall objective of the PEACE III Programme is to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation. The Programme will target areas and communities adversely affected by the conflict that are often also the communities and areas in greatest social need.

PEACE III will also address poverty as one of its cross cutting themes, conforming to the principles outlined in the Northern Ireland Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy. Programme funds will be allocated using the selection criteria agreed by the PEACE III Monitoring Committee and the Northern Ireland Executive that include a specific element to cover the cross cutting themes. Where appropriate, appropriate statistical indices may also be used to inform the allocation process and ensure that programme delivery targets disadvantage.

Monitoring and evaluation of the two previous EU PEACE Programmes indicates that both have successfully targeted social need. Similar monitoring will take place in respect of PEACE III to ensure that this successful targeting is maintained.

Rates Payment

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of properties that are exempt from rates in (i) Belfast; (ii) Coleraine; (iii) Londonderry; and (iv) Northern Ireland, because the sole occupant or all occupants of the property are in full time education or training. (AQO 2630/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In July 2007 the Executive submitted a strong evidence based case to Sir David Varney's call for evidence. As Finance Minister I have recently met with both Sir David and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to discuss both the conclusions of the first review and ongoing progress on the present study. Executive Ministers have also recently met with Sir David while departmental officials are engaged with the Varney team on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the Executive's submission to Varney's second Review highlighted the main concerns over the conclusions reached in his first report.

Corporate Services

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the action he is taking to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of corporate services across all departments. (AQO 2651/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel is leading a major programme of civil service reform which will reduce bureaucracy, improve service and deliver efficiencies through sharing key corporate services such as human resources, finance, ICT and training across all government departments.

Significant progress has been made on the projects with the Centre for Applied Learning operational since October 2006 and the roll-out of the new civil service Electronic Document and Records Management system completed this month. The new shared service centres for human resources, accounts and ICT have all gone live, are being rolled-out on a phased basis across the NICS, and are due to be complete by April 2009.

In terms of the civil service estate, the Workplace 2010 programme will provide a modern and flexible working environment in a smaller, more efficient portfolio of properties. The two remaining bidders,

Land Securities Trillium and Telereal are currently preparing their best and final offers which were invited earlier this year.

Acute Hospitals

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he supports the proposed investment in acute hospitals including the Mater Hospital, the Downe Hospital and the hospitals in the west. (AQO 2638/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive agreed the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008 – 2018 on 17 January 2008, which was then endorsed by this Assembly on 27 January 2008. This strategy outlines almost £3.7 billion of investment for the health and social care sector, of which £2.2 billion is for the modernisation of local and acute hospitals. This will be the largest capital investment ever in our hospitals and other health care facilities.

As part of the ISNI 2008 – 2018, each department will be publishing an Investment Delivery Plan which will provide further details on which projects they plan to deliver with this level of investment – including a range of hospital modernisation projects. These plans are due to be published in April 2008.

Government Procurement

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he plans to bring forward proposals to reduce the danger of Government procurement being delayed by legal action. (AQO 2529/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Public procurement is heavily regulated by the European Union Procurement Directives and the UK Regulations that implement them.

In addition, all public procurement in Northern Ireland is to be carried out by Central Procurement Directorate or another Centre of Procurement Expertise.

Professional procurement staff within the Centres of Procurement Expertise manage all procurement activity by applying current best practice processes in line with Central Procurement Directorate and Office of Government Commerce guidance.

There are no plans to bring forward new proposals at this time, but processes and procedures are regularly reviewed and will be updated in line with any Court decision.

Varney I

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the representations that have been made to the Treasury in relation to Varney 1. (AQO 2634/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In July 2007 the Executive submitted a strong evidence based case to Sir David Varney's call for evidence. As Finance Minister I have recently met with both Sir David and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to discuss both the conclusions of the first review and ongoing progress on the present study. Executive Ministers have also recently met with Sir David while departmental officials are engaged with the Varney team on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the Executive's submission to Varney's second Review highlighted the main concerns over the conclusions reached in his first report

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Music Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress that has been made in developing a strategic plan for the inclusion of music therapy as an integral part of the work of special schools. (AQW 4973/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): In the interim, funding is being provided to the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust to provide music therapy services across each of the four Health and Social Services Board areas. An evaluation of the Arioso project, to provide music therapy in special schools, has been undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate. In addition, work is underway to review and analyse the impact of other music therapy projects in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Suicide Helpline

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the ongoing monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that the regional suicide helpline is being implemented in relation to working in partnership with existing suicide prevention organisations. (AQW 5116/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health Promotion Agency for

Northern Ireland is in the process of finalising an audit of the pilot suicide prevention telephone helpline service which operated in North & West Belfast and have also been asked to develop the necessary evaluation process for the new regional crisis response helpline. It is envisaged that the learning and best practice from both processes will be fed into the operation of the new regional service on a regular basis.

A regional steering group is being established to oversee and monitor the implementation of the new regional service and local community and bereaved families will be represented on this steering group therefore ensuring that they play an integral part in the implementation of the new helpline. The provider is also required to develop strong linkages/referral pathways/protocols with both existing statutory and community/voluntary sectors.

STARS Preschool

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his proposals to secure funding for the STARS pre-school in Kilrea which is under threat of closure due to lack of funding. (AQW 5166/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Resources have been identified within our Budget to fund Children's Fund-type activities which support the objectives and functions of DHSSPS for another year, until March 2009. These activities include the work of Stars Early Years Initiative.

The project was informed of this decision on 19 March.

Northwest Independent Clinic

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurance he can give that there will be no immediate or future reduction in the number of continuing care beds at Northwest Independent Clinic. (AQW 5171/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer you to my previous answer to you on 5 March 2008 (AQW 4560/08 refers).

Armed Forces Veterans

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Armed Forces veterans receive priority medical treatment from the Health Service in Northern Ireland. (AQW 5186/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland does not currently offer priority treatment to any specific groups,

including veterans of the armed forces. Our Health Service treats all patients on the basis of clinical priority rather than any other personal or social circumstance.

Herceptin Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the last year, (a) the number of patients treated by herceptin; (b) the number of people that did meet the requirements for herceptin treatment; (c) the number of patients that did not meet the requirements for herceptin treatment; (d) the number of patients who met the requirements but did not receive the drug; and (e) the reasons why patients who met the requirements did not receive the drug. (AQW 5229/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007, 86 patients were treated with Herceptin (trastuzumab) for early stage breast cancer. Due to the variation in the method of recording patient information in Trusts, it has not been possible to accurately determine the other statistical information requested; however, approximately 1000 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in Northern Ireland each year, of which 15-25% are likely to meet the requirements for being considered for treatment with herceptin.

The decision to prescribe Herceptin should always be a clinical one. I would expect clinicians to discuss all aspects of care with their patients and that, where an oncologist judges a patient to have a clinical need for Herceptin, that it would be prescribed.

Herceptin Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the issue of postcode prescription for herceptin has been raised, and to detail the locations where this has taken place. (AQW 5230/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Treatment with the cancer drug Herceptin (trastuzumab) is available to all those women in Northern Ireland diagnosed with breast cancer who are found to be clinically suitable for the drug.

The decision to prescribe Herceptin should always be a clinical decision regardless of the place of residence of the patient. I have no evidence that "postcode prescribing" is taking place nor has that issue been raised.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Traffic Congestion in Lurgan Town Centre

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps being taken to reduce traffic congestion in Lurgan town centre and surrounding streets. (AQW 5052/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Lurgan, in common with many of the other cities and towns throughout the north, experiences a degree of traffic congestion particularly at peak times.

The Sub Regional Transport Plan 2015 (SRTP), which I launched in 2007, outlines the types of measures to be undertaken to improve transportation across all its modes. Within Lurgan, measures proposed include improvements to walking, cycling and the highway network.

In relation to the highway network, the SRTP envisages improvements to three main junctions in the town at Flush Place, Gilford Road and Portadown Road/Francis Street and a highway extension at Millennium Way to link Malcolm Road and Gilford Road.

Improvements completed recently at the Flush Place junction have had a positive impact on traffic entering Lurgan from the Banbridge Road direction. In addition, it is planned to conduct a review of the signals at Flush Place and the adjacent Queens Place junction with a view to optimising signal timings.

Work is ongoing in preparation for the acquisition of the land required for provision of the above link road. However, in common with other measures proposed in the SRTP, implementation of the scheme will be subject to the satisfactory completion of an economic appraisal, successful progression through the statutory procedures and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary processes. I am not able, therefore, to provide a commencement date at this time, although I can assure you that Roads Service will continue to bid for the resources necessary to implement the scheme.

The SRTP also highlights the importance of promoting sustainable transport modes and proposes a package of measures to encourage modal shift and reduce traffic volumes in towns such as Lurgan. Indeed, the involvement of Roads Service in the development of the proposed public realm scheme for Lurgan will, on implementation, improve conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and those using buses to access to the town.

Like many other towns the effect of illegal parking was always a problem in Lurgan town centre causing unnecessary traffic congestion. The introduction of Decriminalised Parking Enforcement has had a positive impact on traffic in the town and I can assure you that resources will continue to be aimed at discouraging inappropriate parking behaviour to improve accessibility and traffic progression.

My Department will also continue to identify and deliver other schemes throughout the life of the SRTTP that will benefit Lurgan such as the junction improvement proposed for the incoming financial year at Brownlow House through the Local Transportation and Safety Measures programme.

Bridges Across the River Blackwater

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the consultations that have been carried out with conservation and environmental groups, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Gardai Síochána and riparian owners, in relation to a proposal to construct two new road bridges across the River Blackwater at Annaghroe and Knockginny. (AQW 5053/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 5053/08, as you are aware a number of cross-border roads were closed for security reasons. Due to the current enabling environment, and in recognition of the importance of cross-border road links, the then British Secretary of State in the North and the Taoiseach agreed that there was no longer a security justification for roads remaining closed.

The work to replace Annaghroe and Knockginny bridges is being funded by the Southern Authorities and is being taken forward jointly by Monaghan County Council and my Department's Roads Service. Preliminary meetings and preparation work started in April 2007 and the proposal is still at an early stage.

When plans are suitably advanced, applications will be lodged with the Department of the Environment's Planning Service for full planning consent. All usual consultation procedures will be instigated at that time including notification to neighbouring land owners. Information evenings were also held in Caledon on 11 March 2008 and in Glaslough on 13 March 2008 to allow local communities to view and comment on preliminary drawings for the schemes.

Roads Service has well developed consultation arrangements with the Environment and Heritage Service and Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, Inland Fisheries to identify any specific environmental concerns for works at or close to rivers. Any mitigation measures required will be agreed well in advance of work commencing on site.

With regard to AQW 5054/08 Roads Service has advised that:

- (i) The distance from the Ballagh Crossing to the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater is approximately 3.5km or 2.17 miles using the C423 Derrycourtney Road and A28 Derrycourtney Road to Cortynan Road Bridge.
- (ii) I would refer the Member to my answer above to AQW 5053/08.
- (iii) As the reinstatement of these two bridges is being funded by the Southern Authorities, a cost benefit analysis was not carried out by Roads Service.

Bridges Across the River Blackwater

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the distance from the Ballagh Crossing to the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater; (ii) why he considers it necessary to construct two further road bridges between these points; and (iii) whether a cost benefit analysis has been carried out for this construction work, and if so, by whom. (AQW 5054/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 5053/08, as you are aware a number of cross-border roads were closed for security reasons. Due to the current enabling environment, and in recognition of the importance of cross-border road links, the then British Secretary of State in the North and the Taoiseach agreed that there was no longer a security justification for roads remaining closed.

The work to replace Annaghroe and Knockginny bridges is being funded by the Southern Authorities and is being taken forward jointly by Monaghan County Council and my Department's Roads Service. Preliminary meetings and preparation work started in April 2007 and the proposal is still at an early stage.

When plans are suitably advanced, applications will be lodged with the Department of the Environment's Planning Service for full planning consent. All usual consultation procedures will be instigated at that time including notification to neighbouring land owners. Information evenings were also held in Caledon on 11 March 2008 and in Glaslough on 13 March 2008 to allow local communities to view and comment on preliminary drawings for the schemes.

Roads Service has well developed consultation arrangements with the Environment and Heritage Service and Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, Inland Fisheries to identify any specific environmental concerns for works at or close to rivers. Any mitigation measures required will be agreed well in advance of work commencing on site.

With regard to AQW 5054/08 Roads Service has advised that:

- (i) The distance from the Ballagh Crossing to the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater is approximately 3.5km or 2.17 miles using the C423 Derrycourtney Road and A28 Derrycourtney Road to Cortynan Road Bridge.
- (ii) I would refer the Member to my answer above to AQW 5053/08.
- (iii) As the reinstatement of these two bridges is being funded by the Southern Authorities, a cost benefit analysis was not carried out by Roads Service.

The Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing Over the River Blackwater

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (i) the traffic monitoring that has been carried out on the Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater; and (ii) the average hourly daytime usage at each.

(AQW 5055/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

With regard to AQW 5055/08, my Department's Road Service does not have any traffic monitoring information pertaining to the above crossings. However, local officials have estimated that approximately 200 vehicles per day would use the Ballagh crossing and that approximately 800 vehicles per day would use the Cortynan crossing.

With regard to AQW 5057/08, my Departments Roads Service has indicated that:

- (i) The number of road bridges that cross the River Blackwater from Moybridge at Aughnacloy to Cortynan in County Armagh is three.
- (ii) The distance from Moy Bridge, Aughnacloy to Burns Bridge is approximately 5.6km (3.48 miles) using the A5 Monaghan Road, A28 Caledon Road and C423 Derrycourtney Road. The distance from Burns Bridge to Cortynan Road Bridge is 3.5km (2.17 miles) via C423 Derrycourtney Road and A28 Derrycourtney Road.

Bridges Across the River Blackwater

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of road bridges that cross the River Blackwater between Cortynan in County Armagh and Lough Neagh; and (ii) the distance from each one to the other. (AQW 5056/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are 10 bridges between Cortynan and Lough Neagh. With regard to the distances between the bridges, these have been measured along the river as follows:

Bridges Across The River Blackwater	Distance Between Bridges
Derrywarragh Bridge to M1 Bridge	6400m
M1 Bridge to Verner's Bridge	50m
Verner's Bridge to Bond's Bridge	3400m
Bond's Bridge to Charlemont Bridge	3700m
Charlemont Bridge to Blackwater Bridge	5000m
Blackwater Bridge to Benburb Bridge	3600m
Benburb Bridge to Battleford Bridge	3400m
Battleford Bridge to Blackwater Bridge	11700m
Blackwater Bridge to Burns Bridge	10800m

Bridges Across the River Blackwater

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of road bridges that cross the River Blackwater between Moybridge at Aughnacloy and Cortynan in County Armagh; and (ii) the distance from each one to the other. (AQW 5057/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

With regard to AQW 5055/08, my Department's Road Service does not have any traffic monitoring information pertaining to the above crossings. However, local officials have estimated that approximately 200 vehicles per day would use the Ballagh crossing and that approximately 800 vehicles per day would use the Cortynan crossing.

With regard to AQW 5057/08, my Departments Roads Service has indicated that:

- (i) The number of road bridges that cross the River Blackwater from Moybridge at Aughnacloy to Cortynan in County Armagh is three.
- (ii) The distance from Moy Bridge, Aughnacloy to Burns Bridge is approximately 5.6km (3.48 miles) using the A5 Monaghan Road, A28 Caledon Road and C423 Derrycourtney Road. The distance from Burns Bridge to Cortynan Road Bridge is 3.5km (2.17 miles) via C423 Derrycourtney Road and A28 Derrycourtney Road.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3939/08, to detail the

procedure to be followed by a member of the public who wishes to complain about a roadside memorial that has been erected illegally. (AQW 5064/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

With regard to AQW 5064/08, I can advise that, in accordance with my Department's Road Service Customer Charter, any member of the public wishing to make a complaint about any aspect of the service provided by the Agency should, in the first instance, contact the nearest local or Divisional Roads Service office.

Copies of Roads Service's Customer Charter are available from all Roads Service offices and from the Roads Service web site, www.roadsni.gov.uk/customer_charter. Roads Service office contact details can also be found in the telephone directory.

In relation to AQW 5066/08, I can advise that my Department has not been consulted by any District Councils over the maintenance of illegal roadside memorials.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the roadside memorials that are maintained by district councils in consultation with his department. (AQW 5066/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

With regard to AQW 5064/08, I can advise that, in accordance with my Department's Road Service Customer Charter, any member of the public wishing to make a complaint about any aspect of the service provided by the Agency should, in the first instance, contact the nearest local or Divisional Roads Service office.

Copies of Roads Service's Customer Charter are available from all Roads Service offices and from the Roads Service web site, www.roadsni.gov.uk/customer_charter. Roads Service office contact details can also be found in the telephone directory.

In relation to AQW 5066/08, I can advise that my Department has not been consulted by any District Councils over the maintenance of illegal roadside memorials.

Water Meters

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail why the contract established by Northern Ireland Water in spring 2007 to install 44,000 water meters did not proceed as planned. (AQW 5106/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Following the restoration of devolved government in the North in May 2007, the Northern Ireland Executive deferred the introduction of new charges for water and sewerage services pending the outcome of an Independent Review of the existing arrangements for the delivery of water and sewerage services in the north.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it was neither appropriate nor cost effective to pre-empt the Independent Panel's conclusions on charging and, as a result, the proposed metering of pensioners' properties was postponed pending a decision by the Assembly on arrangements for future domestic billing. Metering of non-domestic properties and new connections has continued.

Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI)

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the establishment and appointment costs (e.g. personnel, estate, travel, consultancy etc.) that were incurred or allocated by Northern Ireland Water for the project (Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI)). (AQW 5107/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the Phase 3 metering contract was procured following advertisement in the European Journal and a detailed quality/cost analysis, including site visits to the lead bidders, was completed. A team of 3 NIW staff based in Northland House, Belfast established the contract and carried out the quality/cost analysis at a cost of £46,284. A consultant was employed, at a cost of £2,500 to carry out the e-auction. The total cost of establishment and appointment was £48,784. Further detail is provided in the table below.

	Description	Cost
Personnel	3 NIW staff	44,784
Estate	Staff based in existing accommodation	nil
Travel	3 NIW staff carrying out quality analysis of lead bidders	£1,500
Consultancy	Specialist consultant to establish and carry out e-auction	£2,500

Water Meters

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the actual costs shed or discontinued upon the decision not to proceed with the works to install 44,000 water meters within the original timescale. (AQW 5110/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the projected cost for the proposed installation of 44,000 meters was estimated at £6.7 million. However, some £4.2 million of costs, including costs associated with meters and meter boxes, surveys and installations, were avoided as a result of the decision not to meter pensioner applicants' homes. The estimated cost of the revised programme, which covers non-domestic and new connection metering only, is £2.5 million.

Water Charges

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm if there are any on-going costs being borne by Northern Ireland Water as a consequence of the decision to defer the introduction of water charges, and to provide a detailed breakdown of costs. (AQW 5113/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the decision to defer the introduction of water charges has impacted on the cost profile for the seven year Crystal Alliance contract. Adjustments for the 2007/08 and 2008/09 financial years have resulted in total projected savings of around £3.7 million over the contract period.

In accordance with the terms of the contract, a single payment of £747,000 was made to the service provider in 2007/08 on account of specific costs which remained with the contractor following the deferral. NIW is not anticipating any further claims from the contractor for costs incurred as a result of the deferral.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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 each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4486/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): 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.

Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall, to detail (i) the number of people that have visited the attraction; (ii) the revenue generated; and (iii) the number of jobs created by the attraction; and to confirm that attraction will be retained for the immediate future. (AQW 4919/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Big Wheel has proved to be a popular attraction for residents and visitors to Belfast City Centre. It has created employment for the equivalent of 15 to 20 full-time staff over a twelve months period. The success of the attraction has resulted in planning approval being sought to extend the initial three months operation to the end of December 2008 and a decision is expected on this in the near future. This is a commercial venture and World Tourist Attractions Ltd, the operators of the Big Wheel advise that information on parts (i) and (ii) above is commercially sensitive.

Social Housing Provision

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the consultation she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the Executive Sub-Group's findings on Planning Policy Statement 14, particularly the proposals on social housing provision. (AQW 4921/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have participated fully in the Executive Sub-Group on Rural Planning and have made some significant proposals in relation to the provision of social and affordable housing in rural areas. The Minister for the Environment and I have had a positive engagement around this issue and I expect we will have further discussions on this and on some of the wider aspects of her PPS14 proposals.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Strand area, Holywood, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5006/08)

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. The Strand area in Holywood 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.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Harbour area, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5011/08)

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. The Harbour area is identified as a small deprived area and is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme. To date £89,880 has been spent on projects in the area and the NIHE, which administers the programme for smaller deprived areas, will take forward proposals for the area in 2008/09. An evaluation of the benefits of the programme will be carried out before any further decision is made on any future funding beyond 2008/09.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Rathgill Estate, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5012/08)

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. The Rathgill Estate in Conlig ward is identified as a small deprived area and is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood

Renewal programme. To date £81,669 has been spent on projects in the area and the NIHE, which administers the programme for smaller deprived areas, will take forward proposals for the area in 2008/09. An evaluation of the benefits of the programme will be carried out before any further decision is made on any future funding beyond 2008/09.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5013/08)

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. Bloomfield Estate 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 3 years.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5044/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Kilcooley Estate, Bangor is within the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland and is one of the 36 designated Neighbourhood Renewal areas which benefit from funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund. A Vision Framework and three year Action Plan for the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2010, which sets out a series of measures to tackle deprivation in the area under the categories of social, community, economic and physical regeneration, has been drawn up by the local Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership. To date over £1,534,664, from a range of sources, has been spent on projects in the area and a further range of projects identified in the Action Plan will be implemented on a rolling financial year basis taking account of other competing priorities.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood

renewal in the Whitehill Estate, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5045/08)

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. Whitehill Estate 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.

Banbridge Town Centre

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps she is taking to improve and enhance the public realms and shopping areas of Banbridge town centre. (AQW 5051/08)

The Minister for Social Development: During the period 2001 to 2004 my Department delivered a major Public Realm improvement scheme in Banbridge. The total project costs were £1,380,000 with my Department contributing £1,080,000. The balance was provided by DRD and Banbridge District Council. The area covered by the scheme included most of the main shopping areas, namely Bridge Street, Newry Street and Church Place.

An evaluation of the scheme carried out in 2005 concluded that the Public Realm improvements had had a very positive impact on the town centre.

With pressure on budgets and competing priorities elsewhere across Northern Ireland, there are no plans for another Public Realm improvement scheme in Banbridge.

Travellers' Sites

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4174/08, to detail the impact that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 has on decisions made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in relation to the positioning of (i) serviced; and (ii) temporary halting, travellers' sites across Northern Ireland. (AQW 5079/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive applies Section 75 obligations in accordance with the guidance issued by the Equality Commission to the positioning of both serviced and temporary halting Travellers sites. The application and impact of Section 75 ensures that the planning and requirement for any schemes is based on the scale

of need within the geographical areas of choice of the Traveller families subject to land availability and planning.

Social Security Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to ensure that the Social Security Agency does not treat student loans as income for the purposes of benefit applications. (AQW 5102/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Where a student is eligible for a student loan, it is taken into account as income when deciding entitlement to Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit.

To ignore the availability of the loan would operate unfairly against the majority of students who are not entitled to these benefits, as well as being contrary to the whole basis on which income-related benefits are paid.

Certain elements of the loan are disregarded such as a standard amount towards books, equipment, travel and childcare. In addition up to £10 of the weekly amount of a student loan may be disregarded, subject to the overall limit of £20 on disregarded income of students.

Child Support Agency

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if she will make recommendations for the reform of the Child Support Agency following consideration of the Public Accounts Committee report, to ensure that child poverty among single parent households is addressed as a matter of priority. (AQW 5115/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Over the next few months I intend to bring forward proposals to simplify and streamline the child maintenance system:

- to remove the requirement that parents with care who claim benefit are to be treated as applying for child maintenance;
- to increase the amount of maintenance which parents with care on benefit can keep before their benefits are affected. This will be increased to £20 by the end of 2008 and to £40 in April 2010;
- to increase the speed with which the Department can obtain arrears owed by non-resident parents;
- to improve the enforcement processes; and
- to increase efforts to collect and manage debt.

As part of these reforms I decided in September 2007 that the existing Child Support Agency should be wound up and service delivery brought under the direct control of my Department. This means that the Department will have ongoing responsibility for all aspects of the child maintenance system.

Where child maintenance is paid it can make a substantial difference to child poverty rates. These proposals will allow the Department to deal more effectively with those who refuse to pay child maintenance and ensure that more parents with care receive the maintenance that is owed to them.

Vacant Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail number of vacant properties in the North Antrim constituency that are owned by (i) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; (ii) the Housing Association; and (iii) private owners. (AQW 5119/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the form requested as Housing Executive District Office boundaries are not coterminous with electoral boundaries. However, tables 1 and 2 below set out the number of vacant Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Association dwellings in the area covered by the Ballymena, Ballycastle and Ballymoney District Office areas. Table 3 contains the number of vacant dwellings across all tenures within the Ballymena, Ballycastle and Ballymoney District Office areas. This information was obtained from the Land & Property Services Agency, at 30 November 2007.

TABLE 1: NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE

District Office	Awaiting imminent relet	Difficult to Let	Undergoing Major Repairs Improvements	Pending Sale or Demolition	Total
Ballymena	0	48	69	48	165
Ballycastle	0	0	6	0	6
Ballymoney	0	0	6	0	6
Total	0	48	81	48	177

TABLE 2: REGISTERED HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

District Office	Awaiting imminent relet	Difficult to Let	Undergoing Major Repairs Improvements	Pending Sale or Demolition	Total
Ballymena	7	0	0	0	7
Ballycastle	3	0	1	0	4
Ballymoney	3	0	0	0	3
Total	13	0	1	0	14

TABLE 3: ALL TENURES

District Council Area	Vacant stock
Ballymena	1044
Ballymoney	502
Moyle (Ballycastle)	475

Housing Executive

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's targets to reduce the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list, over each of the next 3 years. (AQW 5120/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Targets are based on an assessment of need that takes into account the estimated level of relets so as to arrive at a residual level of need. The Programme for Government, announced in January 2008 sets a target of 1,500 units in 2008/09, 1,750 in 2009/10 and 2,000 in Year 3 2010/11. As I announced in my statement to the Assembly in February, my target is to achieve 10,000 units of accommodation over the next 5 years.

Emergency Fund

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to establish an emergency fund for out-of-hours and holiday periods, to be accessed by nominated staff, for those in emergency need due to fire, robbery or other crisis situations. (AQW 5165/08)

The Minister for Social Development: An out-of-hours emergency service is operated by Social Services, weekdays 5.00pm to 9.00am and 24 hours on weekend and public holidays.

I have no plans to establish an emergency fund to provide an out-of-hours and holiday period service.

Affordable Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that co-ownership housing will be made available again to people seeking affordable social housing; and to provide a timescale within which new applications will be accepted and facilitated. (AQW 5225/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Co-ownership will be available to at least 500 applicants in the year ahead. This is in line with the targets set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Tullymally Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm a start date for work to be carried out on the Tullymally Road, to the rear of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties (numbers 22, 24, etc); and to provide an estimation of the length of time that will be taken to complete the work. (AQW 5228/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This Housing Executive road resurfacing scheme is currently programmed to start in August 2008 but to allow the scheme to proceed, the Housing Executive must acquire additional land to allow for surface water drainage. Negotiations for this purchase are continuing between the landowner and the Land and Property Services Agency. It is anticipated that the contract period will be some 12 weeks.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Paintings

Mr McCallister asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the number of paintings and other works of art that are owned by the Assembly; and (ii) the policy on displaying such works. (AQW 4923/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):

- i) The Assembly Commission owns the following works of art:

Description	Location
46 Rowel Friers drawings of Members of the Northern Ireland Parliament 1972	Members bar
Portrait of Mr Seamus Mallon MP by Rita Duffy unveiled 25 March 2003	Members dining room

Description	Location
"The Assembly in Session" by Noel Murphy February 2003	Room 41
"The House will divide" by Noel Murphy unveiled 10th February 2003	Senate
Portrait of Lord Alderdice by Carol Graham unveiled on 11 March 2005	Members dining room
State opening of N.I Parliament small version by William Conor	Room 41
State opening of NI. Parliament large version by William Conor	Senate
A minton gold crown crested plate. Two coins in presentation frame, commemorating the opening of the NI Parliament, June 1921. Collection of a bottle, goblets and saucers in blue pottery. A boxed camera and case and various military items.	Artefacts store
Memorial gift a union flag, a picture of Jesus Christ and a picture of "roaring meg" with accompanying letters. Given to the NI Parliament in memory of Senator James Bailie.	Artefacts store
Model of Thiepval memorial tower	Artefacts store
Gilded throne	In storage
Framed letter from HRH Duke of Edinburgh	Artefacts store
Speakers state robes x 2 (both were fire damaged 1 has been restored) and Speakers full bottomed wig in carry case Collection of clerks' uniforms and wigs Black rod's uniform and sword	Artefacts store
Coronation vase decorated with the Queen's beasts	Room 3
Red leather dispatch boxes embossed with Royal Arms of Ulster	Senate
Maori ink stand	Library
Black Rod's Ward of Office. Presented by the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, First Speaker of the Senate in Northern Ireland	Artefacts store
The Parliament golf handicap challenge cup 1927 silver two-handled trophy dated 1926 and other silver ware	Artefacts store
2 sterling silver maces	Room 41
Items of Silver Diner Service	Artefacts store
Egg timer silver with crest of NI. Presented by Rt Hon Thomas Moles (first chairman of ways and means) to the House of Commons	Artefacts store
The Assembly crest	Room 41
Large Chandelier	Great Hall

Description	Location
Crystal vase Presented to NIA for the Energy Management Award in 2005	Currently in storage
Didgeridoo, presented to the Assembly from the Aboriginal Ambassador to Europe in November 2001	Currently on display in the library

The Commission would act as custodians for the people of Northern Ireland for several paintings and other works of art which are in the possession of Northern Ireland Assembly.

- ii) Decisions on display of works of art within Parliament Buildings have in the past been taken by the Speaker or by the Commission it is likely that any good relations strategy that is developed by the Commission will consider this matter.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm if it has decided to invite Mr George Reid to conduct an assessment of the implementation of his report; and to detail the consultation that will take place with (i) MLAs; (ii) Trade Unions; and (iii) Assembly staff, in relation to any further assessment by Mr Reid, of his report. (AQW 5142/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Both the Right Hon. George Reid and Mr John Hunter will meet the Assembly Commission, to discuss the implementation of the recommendations arising from the Review of the Secretariat. In advance of that, meetings are being arranged with Party Leaders, Whips and trade union representatives (dates to be confirmed but likely to be in late April 2008). Mr Hunter has spoken to some Assembly staff and Mr Reid has met the interim Clerk/Director General.

Assembly Jobs

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm (i) if the information provided in application forms by people applying for the Assembly Clerk posts was considered for short listing purposes, and if not, to detail the reasons why; and (ii) if applicants for Assembly Clerk posts were assessed on the basis of marks scored in tests; and (iii) to give its assessment of the tests being (a) job related; and (b) essential to the post of Assembly Clerk. (AQW 5143/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):

- (i) Following a compliance check by the Recruitment Office, on all application forms

received for the Assembly Clerk posts, all those applicants whose application form was judged as compliant were invited to undertake job-related skills tests. Only the application forms of those who were judged as having met the required standard in these tests were subjected to a further eligibility sift.

Because of the large numbers of applicants for the Assembly Clerk posts, it was judged appropriate to ask applicants to undertake job-related skills tests in order to reduce the numbers to be considered for interview. This process was used in the previous 2004 Assembly Clerk recruitment exercise. The tests used were relevant to the post advertised and were selected by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) following a detailed analysis of the job description supplied by the Assembly.

- (ii) As stated at (i) above the marks scored in the tests were used as a basis for reducing the numbers of applicants to be subjected to the further eligibility sift and potential interview. The eligibility sift was carried out in test score order.
- (iii) The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has confirmed that the tests used were valid, reliable and appropriate to the post advertised. Before deciding on the most appropriate tests to be used in the Assembly Clerk competition, NISRA carried out a detailed analysis of the Assembly Clerk job description supplied by the Assembly. NISRA are confident that the tests were both valid in terms of compliance with equality requirements and appropriate in terms of relevance to the Assembly Clerk post.
- (a)(b) With regard to whether the tests were essential to the post of Assembly Clerk, they are regarded as a valid, appropriate, relevant and necessary method of reducing the number of applicants to a manageable level prior to a full eligibility sift being carried out on all application forms in respect of those applicants who reached the required standard in the job-related skills tests.

Assembly Jobs

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) who recommended that Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staff be given responsibility for change management in the Assembly arising from the Review of the Assembly Secretariat, through the creation of the Implementation Group; (ii) who recommended the individual members of the Implementation Group; and (iii) how it satisfied itself that the Implementation Group would have a

proper understanding of the culture and requirements of a parliamentary legislature, and would have the necessary independence to protect the standing and authority of the Assembly. (AQW 5144/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): At the Assembly Commission meeting on 14 November 2007 it was agreed that additional resources would be required to support the interim Clerk/Director General to take forward the implementation issues arising from the Review of the Secretariat. Following discussions with Chair of the Steering Group, George Reid and the Review Director, John Hunter it was agreed that the Director of Implementation would be supported by two former members of the review team, with additional support provided from within the Secretariat and the Interim Management Board. This is entirely consistent with the interim arrangement whereby the Assembly Commission have, since March 2007, taken 61 staff to work within the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) on emergency re-deployment to supplement the work of the secretariat. The Commission recently agreed a recruitment schedule to full posts substantively. In the case of the Implementation Team these posts will come to an end within the next 6 weeks. The Assembly Commission is satisfied that this partnership approach has provided the necessary range of skills and experience to take forward the key implementation issues.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm if it has any knowledge that individuals and groups, with concerns arising from the Review of the Assembly Secretariat, have been refused the opportunity to speak to it in relation to those concerns. (AQW 5145/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Any requests for meetings with the Assembly Commission are referred to the Assembly Commission support office and the Clerk to the Commission, in particular. The Clerk to the Commission is unaware of any formal requests for meetings with the Assembly Commission that have not been referred to them for consideration.

Assembly Jobs

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission if it acknowledges (i) the lack of capacity within the Assembly Secretariat to fulfil its business, arising from the abolition of the posts of Principal Clerk; (ii) the potential risk of a further reduction in capacity

upon completion of the Assembly Clerk competition; and (iii) the impact on the independence and authority of the Assembly in the event that staff with the experience and institutional knowledge to protect its interests leave. (AQW 5146/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission has endorsed a wide ranging recruitment programme to fill a large number of posts across the Secretariat, by means of open recruitment to permanent posts within the Assembly Secretariat. It has also agreed to move to formal separation from the NICS by 2010. Following the acceptance by the Assembly Commission of the recommendation in the Review of the Assembly Secretariat to achieve a management delaying in Clerking through the removal of the Principal Clerk level, a competition is being progressed to fill on a permanent basis vacant posts at Clerk level. This will help to regularise the current position where the majority of posts in the organisation are filled by staff who have not attained their present posts through any open competition, for example staff seconded from the NICS, agency staff or staff on temporary promotion. The Assembly Commission recognises that inevitably some current staff may not be successful in these competitions, and may leave or return to their parent departments. The Commission regrets this, but recognises its legal obligations to fill posts fairly. The Commission has asked senior officials to ensure that new staff are adequately trained and that experienced staff are deployed to best meet the immediate needs of the Assembly and its committees. The intention is to continue to support the business with minimal or no detriment to the quality of service provided to Members. The Assembly Commission is confident that in the medium term the skills and knowledge base in secretariat staff will improve as a result of the move to fill posts, on a permanent basis.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4806/08, to explain (i) why the letter dated 23 November 2007 from the Chairperson's Liaison Group (CLG) to the Director of Implementation, was then referred to the Director of Implementation; and (ii) how a report on the meeting that took place on 25 January 2008 between the Director of Implementation and the Chairperson of the CLG was provided to the Assembly Commission on 13 December 2007. (AQW 5263/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In clarifying the response to AQW 5263/08 I wish to explain that:

- (i) the letter dated 23 November 2007 from the Chairperson's Liaison Group (CLG) was sent directly to the Director of Implementation (Mr Duffy) and side copied to the Speaker; the Interim Clerk/Director General and the Clerk Assistant. The Assembly Commission was not copied into this correspondence.
- (ii) Mr Duffy replied to the correspondence on 7 December 2007 and this was reported in the Clerk's Monthly Report, tabled at the Assembly Commission meeting on 13 December 2007. The topic was referred to again at the 19 March Assembly Commission meeting when the Clerk's Monthly Report contained details of an FOI request regarding a letter from the Chair of CLG. Following a query by a Commission Member, at this particular meeting, a verbal update was subsequently provided referencing the meeting held on 25 January 2008 between the Chair of CLG, Mr Duffy and other Secretariat officials.

and the Chair of CLG. (a) As stated above the Assembly Commission did not receive a copy of CLG's letter. (b) As stated above, the Clerk/Director General did not provide a report of a meeting between senior staff and the Chair of CLG. Following a query by a Commission Member at 19 March 2008 meeting, the Clerk/Director General informed the Commission that a meeting had been held between the Director of Implementation (Mr Duffy), senior staff and the Chair of CLG. However details of the meeting were not discussed.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm if it discussed (i) a letter dated 23 November 2007 from the chair of the Chairperson's Liaison Group (CLG) in relation to the Review of the Assembly Secretariat; and (ii) a report to the Commission from the Clerk/Director General arising from a meeting between senior staff and the chair of the CLG; and to detail its assessment of (a) the letter; and (b) the report. (AQW 5264/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):

- (i) The Assembly Commission did not receive a copy of a letter dated 23 November from the Chair of the Chairperson's Liaison Group (CLG). However this correspondence was referenced in the Clerk's Monthly Report tabled at the Assembly Commission meeting on 13 December 2007 and again at the 19 March 2008 Commission meeting.
- (ii) The Assembly Commission did not receive a report from the Clerk/Director General giving details of a meeting between senior staff and the chair of CLG. As stated in (i) above the Clerk's Monthly Reports, tabled at 13 December 2007 and 19 March 2008 Commission meetings contained reference to the CLG correspondence. Following a query by a Member at the 19 March 2008 Assembly Commission meeting a verbal explanation of how the correspondence was being handled was given and this included reference to a meeting held between the Director of Implementation (Mr Duffy), other senior staff

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 11 April 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Victims' Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the staff complement of the newly established Victims' Commission. (AQW 3926/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The full staffing complement has yet to be established. There are currently four staff working in support of the Commissioners designate.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the actions it is taking to ensure that Government departments use townland names, where applicable, in view of the decision of the first Assembly to do so. (AQW 4451/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We fully recognise the historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names. It is however a matter for each department to make a decision as to such usage.

Major Capital Investment Projects

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the arrangements in place to oversee the work of (i) the Strategic Investment Board; and (ii) the government departments, in relation to major capital investment projects. (AQW 4613/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: One of the statutory functions of the Strategic

Investment Board (SIB) is to advise the Executive on its long-term capital requirements. The SIB fulfils this obligation through its work in developing the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. SIB worked closely with departments in the development of the latest Investment Strategy to ensure that it provided the optimum approach to meeting the Executive's overall priorities, as outlined in the Programme for Government.

SIB also has a statutory role in helping departments take forward their individual capital programmes. This is fulfilled by SIB providing specialist advisory services to departments. However, departments remain responsible for the delivery of their capital projects in the Investment Strategy and they intend to set out their detailed delivery plans that will be published over the course of the next few weeks. Arrangements through which the Executive will monitor the delivery of the Investment Strategy are currently under consideration.

The SIB, a company limited by guarantee, is directly responsible to us for its output and performance. An extensive framework of controls exists to help us oversee SIB's work. These include: a formal Management Statement and Financial Memorandum, Corporate and Business Plans requiring annual approval; regular detailed reports on progress and finance; and ongoing contact with OFMDFM officials. SIB is also subject to independent audit and publishes an Annual Review and Accounts.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps it is taking to address decisions taken by the Planning Appeals Commission prior to the repeal of Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQW 4944/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The policy provisions of PPS 14 have been re-issued and continue to apply to planning applications. It is not the role of OFMDFM to address previous decisions.

Quango Reduction

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it is taking to reduce (i) the number of Quangos; and (ii) the number of people that serve on them. (AQW 4946/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In addition to a reduction in the number of the core administrative bodies within local government, education and health and social services, the Review of Public Administration (RPA) proposed to reduce

the number of other public bodies/quangos from 81 to 53. Some progress has already been made in delivering these reductions.

The number of public bodies/quangos in Northern Ireland, and indeed the scale of reduction, does not rely on the RPA alone. Each Northern Ireland department is required to keep under review the public bodies it sponsors to ensure that they continue to provide value for money and add best value to the services delivered.

In terms of the people who serve on public bodies/quangos, the 2006 RPA announcements referred to guidelines laid down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments under which people would be appointed to such bodies. It is the responsibility of each sponsoring department to determine and justify the scale of appointments needed to fulfil the aim of having an optimum number of people with appropriate skills on any public body/quango to run it efficiently and effectively.

Civic Forum

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 2264/08, to detail (i) the analysis it has carried out on the work done by the Civic Forum; (ii) the conclusions it has drawn from this analysis; and (iii) the original proposals brought forward by the Civic Forum that were adopted by (a) the previous Executive; and (b) direct rule Ministers, that were subsequently inherited by the current Executive. (AQW 5067/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Among the arrangements for the Civic Forum proposed in the report of the FM (Designate) and DFM (Designate) to the Assembly on 15 February 1999, was the recommendation that a formal review be carried out to consider all matters relating to the structure and effective operation of the Civic Forum. The review, which commenced in Spring 2002, was to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the existing Forum and make recommendations for its improvement. However, suspension of the devolved

institutions in October 2002 meant that the analysis was not completed.

Following the restoration of devolution in May 2007, the Executive decided to commission a fresh review to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current structure, operation and membership of the Forum and to make recommendations on the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

During the period of its operation, the Civic Forum responded to the draft 2nd Programme for Government and the Budget for 2002/03. The Forum also made submissions on Investing for Health, the Review of Post Primary Education, Priorities for Social Inclusion and the role of the Commissioner for Children. It also commented on a working paper produced by the Community Relations Unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister as part of its review of Community Relations policy.

Finally the Forum engaged in a number of research projects into long-term issues affecting society, such as life long learning, combating poverty, social inclusion and sustainable development. By the time of suspension, it had published two reports entitled “Educational Disadvantage in the Context of Lifelong Learning”, and “A Regional Strategy for Social Inclusion”. It is for the relevant Ministers to comment on the extent to which any relevant recommendations made by the Civic Forum were adopted.

Private Finance Initiatives

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the total number of Government contracts presently in place under Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) and to specify the nature of those PFIs and the Government departments responsible for them. (AQW 5104/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are currently 31 Government contracts in place under Private Finance Initiatives, details of which are provided in the attached table.

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS PRESENTLY IN PLACE UNDER PRIVATE FINANCE INITIATIVES (PFI)

Department	Name of Project	Description
Education	Classroom 2000 Small Primaries	IT for small primary schools
	Classroom 2000 Medium/Large Primaries	IT for medium to large primary schools
	Classroom 2000 Post Primary and Special	IT for post primary and special schools
	Classroom 2000 Wide Area Network	Wide Area Network to all grant aided schools
	Classroom 2000 refresh of primary service	Update/replacement of around 13, 000 computers in all grant-aided primary schools

Department	Name of Project	Description
Education	Drumglass High School PFI Project	New school premises (building and facilities management)
	St Genevieve's High School PFI Project	New school premises (building and facilities management)
	Wellington College / Balmoral High School	Two new schools - regional training unit attached to Balmoral High School
	Bangor Academy / Nendrum College PPP Project	New schools
	Holy Cross College, Strabane PPP Project	New purpose built school, Holy Cross College
Regional Development	Roads Service DBFO - Package 1	Westlink, Antrim slip roads, M2 widening and safety fence and communications on M22
	Roads Service DBFO - Package 2	Capital improvements to A1 and A4/A5 and Operation and Maintenance of about 120km of motorway/trunk road in Down, Antrim, Armagh and Tyrone - Newry bypass 4 junction improvements and Dungannon to Ballygawley carriageway
Environment	DVTA Vehicle Testing Project	Replacement of Vehicle Test Equipment and related services - vehicle testing and IT
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Invest NI	New HQ accommodation - Belfast
Employment and Learning	Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (Millfield)	Rationalisation of teaching accommodation
	North West Institute of Further and Higher Education, Northland Building	Rationalisation of teaching accommodation
	Omagh College of Further and Higher Education	New college
	East Tyrone College of Further and Higher Education, Dungannon	New college at Dungannon campus
Social Development	Social Security Agency	SSA Strategic Partnership Contract with EDS - Castle Court, Belfast
Finance & Personnel	Land Registry(LRNI), Lincoln Buildings - IT system	LANDWEB - Computerisation of LRNI operations
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (formerly Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust)	Royal Victoria Hospital Car Park
	Northern Health and Social Care Trust (formerly Homefirst Community HSS Trust)	Contract Energy Services - Holywell Hospital, Antrim
	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (formerly Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust)	New renal dialysis facilities
	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (formerly Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust)	Cancer Centre (equipment, maintenance and consumables)
	Western Health and Social Care Trust (formerly Altnagelvin Hospital HSS Trust)	Services Centre (new pathology pharmacy and changing rooms)
	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (formerly Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust)	Managed Equipment Service
Culture, Arts & Leisure	Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland	All Public Libraries sponsored by DCAL
	South Eastern Education and Library Board	Lisburn City Library
NI Water (DRD)	Kinnegar Waste Water Treatment Works	Sewage Treatment Works
	Alpha Water Treatment Works	PPP Water Project
	Omega Waste Water Treatment Works	PPP Wastewater Project and Sludge Management Solution

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) have an up-to-date course for (i) chipping; (ii) tree-felling; and (iii) using tree harvesters; and to confirm if these courses are available in written form. (AQW 5167/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): CAFRE does not have an up to date course in chipping. CAFRE does have training courses in tree-felling, which are based on the assessment schedules of the National Proficiency Training Council (NPTC) units - CS31, CS 32, and CS33. These courses aim to provide candidates with the knowledge and skills for accreditation in these units. The assessment schedules are available in written form from NPTC and can be downloaded from the NPTC website. CAFRE also has courses in the safe use of tree harvesters, or Forestry Machine operations which also follow the corresponding NPTC assessment schedules which are available in written form or from the NPTC website.

Tree-Felling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of tree-felling trainers employed by (i) the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE); and (ii) the Forest Service. (AQW 5168/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are two members of staff employed by DARD and based at CAFRE who are trained to provide training and assessment in tree felling operations.

Forest Service does not employ any tree-felling trainers.

Tree-Felling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the action taken by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) to ensure it maintains tree-felling training that is up-to-date; and (ii) how often this training is reviewed. (AQW 5169/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Training in tree-felling operations, as with all other vocational competence areas, is regulated by the

sector-skills council (in this case LANTRA) and validated by the appropriate awarding body (in this case the National Proficiency Training Council, NPTC). These organisations have as part of their remit a duty to ensure that the content and delivery of all technical training and assessment is up to date and meets the requirements of the relevant industry.

CAFRE ensures its tree-felling training and assessment is up to date by using qualified trainers and assessors who hold current certification from the awarding body for the specific skills operations and who hold current certification to allow them to assess candidates in these skills.

The awarding body for tree felling is NPTC who stipulate that assessors must be verified once every two years to ensure that their assessment technique and range of knowledge is up to date and attend update days at a minimum of once every four years.

Assembly Questions

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the delays; and (ii) the costs incurred by her department, in translating answers to written Assembly questions into Irish. (AQW 5399/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in common with all other Departments, does not calculate or record information on the cost of individual Assembly Questions and therefore does not hold the information you have sought.

In relation to delays my Department has only returned 1 AQ outside of the timeframe for reply and this case was not related to translation of the answer into Irish.

Food from Britain

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in light of the decision by the 'Food from Britain' organisation to close in March 2009 what plans she has to develop further the promotion of food exports. (AQW 5583/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have only recently been apprised that the DEFRA Minister has decided to terminate grant aid for FFB, which is currently funded by an amalgam of Government grant from DEFRA along with commercial funding. This is likely to result in FFB being wound-up at 31 March 2009. In the interim DEFRA, in liaison with other Agriculture Departments, is likely to be exploring the potential for successor arrangements.

The decision is likely to have a greater impact on activities in Britain than here in the North. We envisage that alternative trade development arrangements in the North can, in large measure, be filled with enhanced local provision. This will complement any successor arrangements to FFB which might emerge. We are also in the process of setting up new structures for the food industry here. In this context we will wish to consider possibilities for collaboration with the South once FFB is wound-down.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Meetings with MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of meetings he has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3826/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Since May 2007 I have held 20 meetings with MLAs.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail discussions he has with representatives of the 2012 Olympic Games; and to outline the (i) events; and (ii) teams, that will be located in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQW 3872/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have met with Lord Sebastian Coe, Chair of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), and with Tessa Jowell, MP, Minister for the 2012 Olympic Games, on a number of occasions to discuss Northern Ireland's involvement in 2012.

My Department is represented, at a senior level, on both the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Inter-Departmental Group and LOCOG's Nations and Regions Group to ensure that Northern Ireland maximises the opportunities arising from the Games.

One venue in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone was successful in being included in the Pre- Games Training Camp Guide (PGTC).

However inclusion in the PGTC Guide does not guarantee that teams from other countries will choose to train there.

Further work is required by NI venue operators, supported by SportNI, to actively seek and secure teams to train in NI.

Leisure Funding

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the initiatives his department is funding to promote leisure in deprived areas, particularly for children and young people. (AQW 5180/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The policies and programmes of DCAL reflect government's commitment to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need, particularly for children and young people.

This commitment is demonstrated in DCAL funding of the Bookstart Programme, One Book Project, Sure Start Storytelling, Sound and Vision Programme, W5 Summer Schemes and the provision of free fish stocks into a number of fisheries.

The Department has also been developing, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), a new 10-year strategy for sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland. The Sports Strategy includes targets and actions to promote greater participation in sport and physical recreation in areas of social need and amongst children and young people

Anglers: Facilities

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the amount of money raised through the purchase of fishing permits in 2007; and (ii) how this money was spent in relation to improving facilities for anglers. (AQW 5215/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

- (i) The amount of money raised through the sale of DCAL fishing permits in 2007 was £200,966.72. This money is returned to a consolidated fund held by the Department of Finance and Personnel (CFER - Consolidated Fund for Extra Receipts). It is not automatically re-allocated to Inland Fisheries for the improvement of angling facilities.
- (ii) A total budget of £258,000 was allocated to DCAL in the financial year 2007/ 08 for maintaining the Public Angling Estate; Rents and Leases and Bailiffing Services. A further £242,000 was allocated to Inland Fisheries Outstations at Movagh and Bushmills. These budgets contribute to the maintenance, development and conservation of angling facilities.

Roller Hockey

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the funding his department has made available to the sport of roller hockey. (AQW 5261/08)

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 roller hockey in the last 3 years.

Roller Hockey

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm if his department formally recognises the sport of roller hockey, and if not, to detail his plans to do so. (AQW 5262/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Roller hockey is recognised as a sporting activity by Sport Northern Ireland.

Crumlin Glen Project

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the funding withheld for the Crumlin Glen project; (ii) the reasons for withholding payment; and (iii) the Departments and bodies that have made up the shortfall in available monies. (AQW 5278/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has fully met its funding commitment regarding Antrim Borough Council's Crumlin Glen Project and therefore is not withholding any funding.

As my Department's role was limited to grant-aiding this project from its Water Recreation Programme we are not privy to details of any funding shortfall by other funding partners

Sports Grounds Legislation

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to (i) give a timescale within which the Safety of Sports Grounds legislation will be implemented; and (ii) detail the impact this legislation will have on crowd capacity in sports grounds. (AQW 5354/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Articles 1 to 3, 9 to 12, 19 and 22 to 27 of The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 came into operation on 14 March 2006. It is currently expected that this legislation will be fully implemented by the end of 2008/09.

The impact this legislation will have on crowd capacities in sports grounds will be determined by local authorities and the safety certificates they issue will set the approved capacity limit for each venue.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the amount spent by his Department in securing the World Police and Fire Games in 2013; and (ii) whether the bid to secure these Games was based on them being held at the proposed Multi Sports stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQW 5356/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through the Northern Ireland Events Company contributed £25,000 towards the cost of securing the World Police and Fire Games in 2013. The bid was not based on them being held at the proposed Multi Sports Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site as they will require a range of venues to accommodate the various sporting activities that will be included in the games.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4532/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5506/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have 4.5 staff working in my Press Office as detailed below:

Principal Information Officer (Grade 7)	1
Senior information Officer (Deputy Principal)	1
Information Officer (Staff Officer)	1
Administrative Officer	1
Administrative Assistant	0.5

Pigeon Racing

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm if he will consider designating pigeon racing as a sport so that those who take part can avail of local authority grants. (AQW 5606/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The designation of sporting activities is a matter for the five sports councils of the UK and is not an issue in which I can intervene. Applications to designate pigeon racing as a sport should be made, in the first instance, to Sport Northern Ireland.

Lá Nua Newspaper

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider funding for the Irish language newspaper La Nua, as part of his Department's role in promoting language diversity. (AQW 5617/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The current funding for the Irish Newspaper Lá Nua is secured from Foras na Gaeilge until 31 December 2008. Any applications for future funding from Lá Nua will be considered on their merits.

EDUCATION

Gaelscoil an Chaistil's LMS Budget

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what assessment she has made of the North Eastern Education and Library Board's decision to debit £12,000 from Gaelscoil an Chaistil's LMS budget, for the purpose of paying rent for their school buildings. (AQW 3350/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):

Gaelscoil an Chaistil recorded a payment for rental of accommodation in a return made to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, though there is no current agreement in place between the school and the NEELB over the reimbursement of rent.

Tá ceist cóiríochta ar cíós go coitianta sna Gaelscoileanna á breithniú faoi láthair ag Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta agus ag an Roinn agus deimhneofar cás an chíosa ag Gaelscoil an Chaistil mar chuid den obair sin.

The issues of rentals generally for accommodation in the Irish medium schools is currently being considered by Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta and the Department and the rental position at Gaelscoil an Chaistil will be confirmed as part of that work.

Public Private Partnerships/ Private Finance Initiatives

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on all current and planned Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, and other major projects; and to outline (i) those projects which are delayed; (ii) the reasons for the delays; and (iii) completion dates for delivering these projects. (AQW 3885/08)

The Minister of Education:

TABLE A

Projects at Contract Stage PPP Projects	Estimated Completion Date
Bangor Academy / Nendrum College (Comber) PPP Project	March 2008 for Nendrum College, May 2008 for Bangor Academy
Holy Cross College (Strabane) PPP Project	October 2008
Conventional Projects	
Drumragh Integrated College	April 2009
Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor	February 2008
St Patrick's Primary School, Saul	May 2008
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	December 2009
St Dominic's High School, Belfast	January 2010
Convent Grammar School, Enniskillen (Final Phase)	June 2008
Maralin Primary School	March 2008
Killen Primary School, Castlederg	March 2008
Fourtowns Primary School, Ahoghill	February 2008
Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush	June 2008
Moorfields Primary School, Ballymena	August 2008
Brookfield Special School	December 2008
St Peter's Primary School, Cloughreagh	February 2009
Burnfoot, Largy, Dungiven Primary School	August 2008
St Colman's College, Newry	June 2009
Waringstown Primary School	September 2008
Ballymacrickett Primary School	November 2008
Abbey Grammar School, Newry	September 2009
Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert	August 2008
Ballinderry Primary School	April 2009
Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn	April 2009

There are six Public Private Partnership projects involving 17 schools at procurement or planning stage, and seven conventionally funded projects where projects are experiencing delays. These are set out in the table B below.

TABLE B

Name of Project	Reason for Delay	Estimated Completion Date
PPP Projects in Procurement		
Derry Diocesan Project St Mary's College, Derry St Cecilia's College, Derry	Completion of the Full Business Case needed to ensure compliance with revised guidance on PPPs.	2009 – 2010
Down & Connor / De La Salle Project St Mary's P.S., Portglenone; St Joseph's P.S., Carryduff; Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock; St Patrick's G.S. Downpatrick.	Completion of the Full Business Case needed to ensure compliance with revised guidance on PPPs.	2010 – 2011
Lagan College/Tor Bank Special School	Need to resolve site issues at Lagan College.	2010 - 2011
BELB Strategic Partnering Project Orangefield P.S. Grosvenor G.S. Ashfield Girls H.S. Belfast Boys' Model School Belfast Model School for Girls	Project is part of proposed strategic partnering arrangement and proceeded more slowly than anticipated because of scale and complexity.	2010 - 2011
PPP Projects in Planning		
Ballymoney H.S. Rainey Endowed School	Production and examination of an Outline Business Case to test the appropriateness of the procurement route and the likelihood to deliver value for money.	2011-2012
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown, Loreto G.S. Omagh	Production and examination of the Outline Business Case.	2011-2012

Name of Project	Reason for Delay	Estimated Completion Date
Conventionally Funded Projects		
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	Delay due to site issues and design changes.	March 2008
De La Salle College, Belfast	Delay due to piling rig problem and delivery of steel.	June 2009
Lurgan College	Revised Economic Appraisal currently being considered.	autumn 2011
Portadown College	Revised Economic Appraisal currently being considered.	autumn 2011
Methodist College, Belfast	Delay in appointment of Project Manager.	spring 2013
Omagh Integrated Primary School	Revised Economic Appraisal being prepared.	spring 2011
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	Revised Economic Appraisal being prepared.	spring 2011

Tá 69 scéim eile ann atá maoinithe go comhghnásach ag céimeanna éagsúla dul chun cinn trí na staideanna pleanála agus a mbraithfidh a ndul chun cinn go mór mór ar sholáthar agus ar fhaomhadh aighneachtaí dearaidh agus costas ag staideanna ábhartha.

There are a further 69 conventionally funded schemes at various stages of progress through the planning stages and whose progress by the relevant education authority and the Department will depend mainly on the provision and approval of design and costs submissions at relevant stages.

Youth Service Budget

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage increase, in real terms, of the youth services budget, in each of the next 3 years.
(AQW 3950/08)

The Minister of Education: Is é an t-athrú faoin gcéad, i dtéarmaí réadacha, sna buiséid don óige agus do chaidreamh pobail, sna 3 bliana seo chugainn ná:

The percentage change, in real terms, in the youth and community relations budgets, in the next 3 years is as follows:

	Recurrent	Capital
2008/09	+0.92%	-36.5%
2009/10	-1.48%	-5.2%
2010/11	-2.22%	-7.7%

The Treasury Gross Domestic Product deflators were used to determine real term changes.

The percentages have been calculated on the basis of the budget allocations for Youth and Community Relations in 2007/08 and the proposed budget allocations for the subsequent three years.

Recurrent

The recurrent budgets in 2009/10 and 2010/11 reflect anticipated efficiencies to be achieved by the transfer of responsibility for youth services and community relations to the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). These efficiencies will result in a reduction in both administrative costs and the duplication of services. They will also release additional funding to be directed at frontline services.

Capital

Capital Youth Service funding shows an investment of £5m in the sector in each of the next three years.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the measures she will take to ensure that objective professional advice is provided to the receiving school. (AQW 4017/08)

The Minister of Education: Táthar ag plé faoi láthair mionsonraithe a bhaineann le socrúithe aistrithe iar-bhunscoile le geallsealbhóirí agus beidh toradh na gcainteanna seo ar fáil go luath. Tá mé féin i ndiaidh mo sheasamh féin ar roghnú acadúil a léiriú go breá soiléir: biodh sé bunaithe ar an Scrúdú Aistrithe nó ar chomhairle gairmiúil oibiachtúil. Measaim féin go bhfuil roghnú acadúil míchothrom agus measaim fosta nach bhfuil gá leis chun córas d'ardchaighdeán oideachais a sholáthar.

The detail of future post-primary transfer arrangements at age 11 is currently under discussion with stakeholders and the outcome of these discussions will be available in due course. However I have made my position on academic selection very clear: whether based on the Transfer Test or on objective professional advice I consider academic selection to be both unjust and also unnecessary to the provision of a high quality system of post-primary education.

Post-Primary Education Policy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail the impact that the delay in providing a policy on post-primary education will have on the next phase of capital investment. (AQW 4222/08)

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.

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 policy on post primary education does not therefore impact on the timing of the next phase of capital investment.

Textbook Service for Blind and Partially Sighted Schoolchildren

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to confirm that a contract for the provision of a textbook service for blind and partially sighted school children will be awarded on a competitive tender basis.

(AQW 4342/08)

The Minister of Education: I understand from the five education and library Boards (ELBs) that if a centralised service is to be developed on behalf of the five ELBs or the proposed Education and Skills Authority then tendering arrangements which are governed by the Board's Standing Orders will apply. These require that where expenditure is over £30,000 tendering is required.

Tendering will require the preparation of tender documents comprising a specification of requirements along with appropriate terms and conditions, the selection of a tender closing date and the advertisement of the tender in the local press. Tender documents would be sent to those requesting them. Tenders received by the tender closing date will then be opened and evaluated using pre-determined evaluation criteria and a contract award made.

Má tá an caiteachas níos mó ná £139,893, caithfidh an próiseas tairisceana a bheith de réir nósanna imeachta an AE, caithfear fógraíocht a dhéanamh ar fud an AE agus caithfidh amscála i bhfad níos faide a bheith ann.

Where the expenditure is in excess of £139,893 the tendering process must be carried out in accordance with EU procedures, with an EU wide advertisement being placed and a much longer timescale.

I want to ensure that the education services provide equality for all. In deciding on the budget priorities, the Department of Education held consultation meetings to ensure all equality aspects were fully considered and relevant groups had an opportunity to contribute. I will be writing to the education and library boards and all bodies funded from the education budget to ensure that their budget

allocations are subject to the full rigors of the equality impact assessment process.

Youth Workers

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of youth workers, funded by her department, who are based in the West Belfast constituency; and (ii) the organisations in which these youth workers are based. (AQW 4499/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ó Bhéal Feirste agus ón Oirdheisceart chomh maith le Stiúrthóir ón gcuideachta Bytes an t-eolas seo a leanas ar fáil maidir le líon na n-oibrithe don aos óg a úsáidtear sa toghlach agus sna heagraíochtaí ina bhfuil siad bunaithe.

The Department of Education currently provides funding to the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards, and the Bytes Project which employ youth workers in the West Belfast constituency. The Chief Executives of the Belfast and the South Eastern Education and Library Boards and the Director of Bytes provided

the following information on the number of youth workers deployed in the constituency and the organisations in which they are based.

	Full-time youth workers	Part-time youth workers	Youth workers funded by
West Belfast Area Project	8	0	BELB
Upper Shankill Area Project	7	0	BELB
Mid Lower Shankill Area Project	3	0	BELB
Glencairn Youth Initiative	1	5	BELB
Matt Talbot Youth Club	1	9	BELB
St Agnes' Youth Club	1	9	BELB
St Michael's Youth Club	1	7	BELB
Carrigart Youth Club	0	6	BELB
Shankill Road Youth Club	0	3	BELB
Willowbank Youth Club	0	11	BELB
Woodvale Youth Club	0	2	BELB
An Munia Tober	1	1	BELB
Clonard Youth Club	1	9	BELB
Corpus Christi Youth Club	1	6	BELB
Holy Trinity Youth Club	1	9	BELB

	Full-time youth workers	Part-time youth workers	Youth workers funded by
St Peters Immaculata Youth Club	1	5	BELB
St Teresa's Youth Club	1	8	BELB
Divis Youth Project	0	1	BELB
Glenparent	0	2	BELB
Horn Drive Drop In	0	2	BELB
Newhill Youth Club	0	6	BELB
St John's Youth Club	0	3	BELB
Streetbeat	0	4	BELB
Townsend Street Social Outreach	0	1	BELB
Colin Area Project	2	5	
Saint's Youth Centre	1	8	
Colin Youth Centre	1	9	
Lagmore Area Project	2	2	
After Schools Project/ Health Education	2	0	
Poleglass Bytes	2	0	
Upper Springfield Bytes	1	1	
Shankill Bytes	1	1	

Children's Fund

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the reasons for the 26.4% underspend in the Children's Fund; (ii) the areas that did not receive funding; and (iii) the mechanisms that have been put in place to ensure that money allocated to the Children's Fund is spent in the future. (AQW 4519/08)

The Minister of Education: We will not know the final out-turn position in relation to the Package until July 2008. However, in total, over £100m has been allocated to the Children and Young People's Funding Package, with around £42m being spent in 2006/07 financial year and the remainder in 2007/08. At the end of the 2006/07 financial year some 11.6% of the resources from the main package had not been spent, however, as a result of end of year flexibility all of these resources were fully utilised.

Under the Children and Young People's Funding Package the six themed areas covered are:

- Extended Schools (£13.25m/£13.3m)
- Extended Early Years provision (£3.85m/£7m)

- Looked-after children / vulnerable young adults (£2.85m/£2.75m)
- Youth outreach (£0.75m/£1.025m)
- Child protection (£1.8m/£2.55m)
- Children with special needs and disabilities (£5.9m/£6.675m)

All of these areas have received funding during the period covered by the Package.

Tagann Pacáiste Maoinithe na bPáistí agus na nDaoine Óga chun críche i Márta 2008 agus faoin am sin beidh cinneadh déanta ag gach Roinn a bhaineann leis i láthair na huaire maidir leis an phroiseas Cuimsitheach Athbhreithnithe um Chaiteachas, cé acu an dtabharfaidís nó nach dtabharfaidís maoiniú príomhshrutha nó maoiniú bunlíne do réimsí a mhaoinigh an Pacáiste roimhe. Má tá na réimsí seo san áireamh, tabharfar maoiniú agus déanfar monatóireacht air de réir moltaí reatha airgeadais agus iniúchta.

With the Children and Young People's Funding Package ending in March 2008 each Department currently involved will have decided as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) process, whether they would provide mainstream or base-line funding for areas previously funded by the Package. If included, funding will be allocated and monitored in keeping with current finance and audit recommendations.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the extent and dates of public and private consultation, including with (i) teacher training colleges; (ii) universities; (iii) voluntary autism groups; (iv) health service providers; and (v) public services, in relation to the Middletown Autism Project. (AQW 4617/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the member to my replies to his previous questions AQW29/08; AQW778/08 published in the Official Report on 28 September 2007 and AQW779/08 published in the Official Report on 2 November 2007. These answers cover consultations carried out by the Middletown Centre for Autism Project until October 2007.

In 2002 a Steering Group comprising members from the two Education Departments, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other education stakeholders was formed to consider the development of the Centre and the services to be provided.

Further consultation carried out by the Project Team on behalf of the two Education Departments included:

a meeting with Professor Rita Jordan, Professor in Autism Studies, University of Birmingham in September 2002 to discuss the development of a Centre of Excellence.

A meeting with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, Registration and Inspection Unit on 9th January 2003 which examined requirements for the residential infrastructure and staffing requirements to meet statutory obligations, a second meeting took place with the renamed Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in August 2007 to update the initial report.

DE Officials also met with Allied Health Professionals from the DHSSPS in May 2005 to discuss health related issues concerning the operation of the Centre.

The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has informed me that 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 outcome 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 stakeholders and the objectives of the two Education Departments.

San iomlán bhí 15 cur i láthair (5 sa Tuaisceart – ceann i ngach ceantar de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, 8 i nDeisceart na hÉireann agus dhá cheann i gCoillidh Chanannáin) inar fhreastail 296 duine orthu.

In total 15 presentations were made (5 in the North – one in each Education & Library Board area, and 8 in the South of Ireland and 2 at Middletown), a total of 296 individuals attended the presentations.

The senior management team have also met with the following organisations:

April 07 - Watgate School, London and Treehouse (autism education charity).

May 07 - Chief Executive Officer of Autism NI; Principal, Camphill Community Glencraig.

June 07 - Fleming Fulton School, Belfast; Principal of Oakwood Assessment Centre, Belfast; G McCann, Special Provision for the Education of Autistic Children (SPEAC).

July 07 - Principal, Hill House School; Vice Principal, Southlands School, Hampshire.

Sept 07 - Director of Training, Autism NI; Professor of Learning Disability, University of Ulster; Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

Oct 07 - Chief Executive Officer, North Eastern Education and Library Board; Chief Executive

Officer and Head of Children and Young People's Services, Southern Education and Library Board; Chief Executive Officer Western Education and Library Board; Chief Executive Officer, South Eastern Education and Library Board; Chief Executive Officer, Belfast Education and Library Board; Inter-Board Regional Strategy Group; Inter-Board ASD Group. Staff at Lisanally Special School; Autism NI; Professor of Psychiatry UNC Chapel Hill North Carolina; Chief Executive Officer, Western Trust; Chief Executive Officer and Assistant Director of Disabilities, South Eastern Trust; Chief Executive Officer of Belfast Trust; Children's Services Director and Assistant Director of Children's Mental Health and Disability, Western Trust; Chief Executive Officer, Director of Children and Young People's Services, Director of Mental Health & Disability Services, Assistant Director or Specialist Child Health & Disabilities, Consultant Paediatrician, Consultant Community Paediatrician and Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Southern Trust; Southern Education and Library Board and Western Education and Library Board Special Educational Needs staff.

Nov 07 - Professor of Learning Disability, University of Ulster; Staff at Clifton Special School, Bangor; Department Education and Science Inspector, Regional Director National Education Programs, Chief Executive Officer, National Council for Special Educational Needs; South Eastern Education and Library Board Special Education Needs staff; Professor from Department of Psychiatry UNC Chapel Hill North Carolina; Northern Eastern Education and Library Board Special Educational Needs staff.

Dec 07 - Health and Safety Executive; Special Education Support Service; Belfast Education and Library Board ASD Support Team; Southern Education and Library Board ASD Support Team; Children's Services Director and Assistant Director of Woman and Children's Services, Northern Trust.

Jan 08 - Sligo Institute of Technology, Western Education and Library Board Educational Psychology Service, Appleby Trust (Careers project).

Feb 08 - National Education Programs (NEPs), Cavan; Consultant for Public Health & Principal Social Worker, Southern Health and Social Services Board; Professor from Faculty of Social Sciences and Professor of Learning Difficulties, University of Ulster; ASD Teams from Sligo and Donegal; National Autistic Society; Barnardo's Forward Steps Service; Directors of Children's Services in Belfast Health & Social Care Trust; Information & Policy Officer, Disability Action; Consultant in Public Health Medicine, Commissioner for the Allied Health Professions, Local Health and Social Care Commissioning Group and Planning and Performance Management Division, Southern Health Trust.

March 08 - Chief Executive Officer and staff, Autism NI; Co-Director of Children's Disability Services in Western Health & Social Care Trust; Chief Executive Officer, SHINE, Irish Progressive Association for Autism; Autism Initiatives.

March 08 - Five Nations SEN Presentation, Belfast; Northern Health & Social Care Trust; lead for ASD in Health Service Executive.

Forthcoming Meetings

April 08 - NEPs, Cavan; Health and Safety Executive function for World Autism Day; Principals of Stranmillis and St Mary's Teacher Training Colleges.

Sustainable Schools Policy

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcomes of the consultation in relation to her Department's Sustainable Schools Policy.

(AQW 4782/08)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh páipéar ina raibh torthaí ón mbabhta comhairliúcháin ar an bPolasaí um Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe faoi bhráid an Choiste Oideachais ar 20 Nollaig 2007.

A paper setting out the results of the consultation exercise on the Sustainable Schools Policy was forwarded to the Education Committee on 20th December 2007. I have arranged for a copy of this paper to be sent to you. I intend to bring forward the Sustainable Schools Policy document shortly in light of the consultation exercise.

Asbestos in Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the buildings owned and leased by her Department that contain asbestos in their construction; and to provide a timescale for the removal of asbestos from these buildings.

(AQW 4784/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards have completed asbestos surveys of schools and other educational buildings. All top priority asbestos has now been removed from school property. Where it is not considered necessary to remove the asbestos immediately, the Boards and other school authorities are responsible for managing the asbestos safely.

Ceangailte leis seo tá liosta de na foirgnimh ina bhfuil aispeist go fóill agus ama scála maidir lena bhaint amach astu, sa chás a mheastar gur cheart sin a dhéanamh.

The attached list contains details of buildings where asbestos remains and a timescale for removal, where it is considered appropriate to do so.

Details of Buildings Containing Asbestos**BELFAST EDUCATION & LIBRARY BOARD**

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Primary Schools (Incl Nursery Schools)		
Arellian Nursery School	Completed	Yes
Brefne Nursey School	Completed	Yes
Edenderry Nursery School	1 year	No
Glenbank Nursery School	Completed	No
Glendhu Nursery School	1 year	No
Malvern Nursery School	Completed	No
McArthur Nursery School	N/A	Yes
New Lodge Nursery School	Completed	No
Oldpark Nursery School	6 months	No
Ravenscroft Nursery School	5 years	Yes
Sandbrook Nursery School	Completed	No
Shaftesbury Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Stanhope Street Nursery School	Completed	No
Tudor Lodge Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Victoria Nursery School	Completed	No
Bethlehem Nursery School	5 years	Yes
Holy Child Nursery School	5 years	Yes
Holy Family Nursery School	Completed	Yes
Holy Rosary Nursery School	Completed	Yes
Matt Talbot Nursery School	Completed	No
Our Lady's Nursery School	N/A	Yes
St Bernadette's Nursery School	Completed	Yes
St Maria Gorreti Nursery School	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Martin's Nursery School	1 year	Yes
St Teresa's Nursery School	Completed	Yes
Avoniel PS	Completed	Yes
Ballygolan PS	Completed	Yes
Ballysillan PS	Completed	Yes
Beechfield PS	Ongoing	Yes
Blackmountain PS	Ongoing	Yes
Blythefield PS	Completed	Yes
Botanic PS	Completed	Yes
Carr's Glen PS	Completed	Yes
Cliftonville Infants PS	Completed	Yes
Currie Junior PS	Completed	Yes
Donegall Road PS	Completed	Yes
Dundela Infants PS	Completed	Yes
Edenbrook PS	1 year	Yes
Euston Street PS	Completed	Yes
Fane Street PS	Completed	Yes
Glencairn PS	N/A	Yes
Glenwood PS	Completed	Yes
Greenwood PS	Completed	Yes
Grove PS	Completed	Yes
Harding Memorial PS	Completed	Yes
Harmony PS	N/A	Yes
Knocknagoney PS	Completed	Yes
Ligoniel PS	Completed	Yes
Malvern Street PS	Completed	Yes
Mersey Street PS	Closed	Yes
Nettlefield PS	Completed	Yes
Orangefield PS	2 years	Yes
Rosetta PS	Completed	Yes
Seaview PS	2 years	Yes
Springfield PS	2 years	Yes
Springhill PS	N/A	Yes
Strand PS	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Strandtown PS	N/A	Yes
Stranmillis PS	N/A	Yes
Suffolk PS	Completed	Yes
Sydenham Infants PS	N/A	Yes
Taughmonagh PS	Completed	Yes
Vere Foster PS	Completed	Yes
Wheatfield PS	N/A	Yes
Bunscoil na tSleibhe Dhuibh	N/A	Yes
Buscoil Bheann Mhadigan	N/A	Yes
Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	Completed	Yes
Edmund Rice PS	Completed	Yes
Gaelscoil an Damba	Completed	Yes
Hazelwood PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Child PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Cross Boys' PS	Completed	Yes
Holy Cross Girls' PS	Completed	Yes
Holy Family PS	Completed	Yes
Holy Rosary PS	Completed	Yes
Holy Trinity Boys' & Girls' PS	Completed	Yes
Mercy PS	Completed	Yes
Our Lady of Lourdes PS	Completed	Yes
Our Lady's PS	N/A	Yes
Sacred Heart PS	N/A	Yes
Scoil an Droichid	N/A	Yes
St Aidan's CB PS	N/A	Yes
St Anne's PS	Ongoing	Yes
St Bernadette's PS	N/A	Yes
St Bride's PS	Completed	Yes
St John the Baptist Boys' PS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS (Holland Drive)	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's PS (Slate Street)	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Mary's Boys' & Girls' (Divis St)	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Star of the Sea PS	Completed	Yes
St Matthew's PS	N/A	Yes
St Michael's PS	N/A	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett PS	N/A	Yes
St Paul's PS	Completed	Yes
St Teresa's PS	Completed	Yes
St Vincent de Paul PS	Completed	Yes
Secondary Schools (Including Special Schools)		
Ashfield Boys'	N/A	Yes
Ashfield Girls'	Completed	Yes
Castle High School	N/A	Yes
Boys' Model	Ongoing	Yes
Girls' Model	Completed	Yes
Orangefield	Ongoing	Yes
Christian Brothers Secondary	Completed	Yes
Corpus Christi Junior	Completed	Yes
Corpus Christi Senior	Completed	Yes
La Salle Boys' Senior	Ongoing	Yes
La Salle Junior	Completed	Yes
Little Flower	Completed	Yes
Meanscoil Feirste	N/A	Yes
Our Lady of Mercy	Completed	Yes
St Gabriel's Boys	N/A	Yes
St Gemma's Girls	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's College	Completed	Yes
St Vincent Centre	N/A	Yes
St Louise's	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's	Completed	Yes
St Rose's Girls	N/A	Yes
Grosvenor Grammar	Completed	Yes
Clarawood Special	Completed	Yes
Fleming Fulton Special	Completed	Yes
Greenwood Assessment	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Mitchell House	Ongoing	Yes
Park Educational Centre	Completed	Yes
Oakwood Assessment	N/A	Yes
St Francis de Sales	N/A	Yes
St Gerard's ERC	N/A	Yes
Other Buildings (Including Youth Centres)		
Board Headquarters	N/A	Yes
Delamont House	N/A	Yes
Hammer Bus Dept	N/A	Yes
Mountcollyer Resource	Completed	Yes
Sandbrook School Meals Kitchen	N/A	Yes
School of Music	Completed	Yes
Ulidea Resource Centre	N/A	Yes
Archway Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Artillery Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Ballysillan Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Blackmountain Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Carrigart Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Donegall Pass Youth Centre	CLOSED	Yes
Finaghy Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Fortwilliam Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Hammer Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Matt Talbot Youth Centre	Completed	No
Mountainhill Youth Centre	Completed	No
Mountcollyer Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Orangefield Youth Centre	CLOSED	Yes
Roslyn Street Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Shankill Road/Riddell YC	Completed	Yes
St Michael's Youth Centre	ongoing	Yes
Suffolk Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Sydenham Youth Centre (closed)	CLOSED	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Taughmonagh Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Topspot Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Trinity Drop In Youth Centre	CLOSED	Yes
Turf Lodge Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Woodvale Youth Centre	Completed	No

WESTERN EDUCATION & LIBRARY BOARD

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Primary Schools (Including Nursery Schools)		
Ballycolman Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Belmont Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Bligh's Lane Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Carnhill Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Enniskillen Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Galliagh Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Limavady Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Omagh North Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Strathfoyle Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Trench Road Nursery School	N/A	Yes
Aghadrumsee PS	N/A	Yes
All Saint's PS	N/A	Yes
Altishane PS	N/A	Yes
Ardstraw PS	N/A	Yes
Artigarvan PS	N/A	Yes
Ashlea PS	Completed	Yes
Ballinamallard PS	N/A	Yes
Ballougry PS	Completed	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Ballykelly PS	N/A	Yes
Barrack Street Boys' PS	N/A	Yes
Bellarena PS	N/A	Yes
Belleek No 2 PS	N/A	Yes
Bridgehill PS	N/A	Yes
Broadbridge PS	Completed	Yes
Brookeborough PS	N/A	Yes
Bunscoil an Traonaigh PS	N/A	Yes
Bunscoil Cholmcille PS	N/A	Yes
Burnfoot PS	N/A	Yes
Chapel Road PS	Completed	Yes
Christ the King PS	N/A	Yes
Cornagogue PS	Completed	Yes
Corranny PS	N/A	Yes
Craigbrack PS	N/A	Yes
Culmore PS	N/A	Yes
Cumber Claudy PS	N/A	Yes
Denamona PS	N/A	Yes
Derrygonnelly PS	N/A	Yes
Donemana PS	N/A	Yes
Dromore PS	N/A	Yes
Drumachose PS	N/A	Yes
Drumahoe PS	N/A	Yes
Drumduff PS	N/A	Yes
Drumlegagh PS	N/A	Yes
Drumlish PS	N/A	Yes
Drumnabey PS	N/A	Yes
Dungiven PS	Completed	Yes
Dunmullan PS	N/A	Yes
Ebrington PS	Completed	Yes
Edwards PS	N/A	Yes
Eglinton PS	Completed	Yes
Enniskillen Integrated PS	N/A	Yes
Enniskillen Model PS	N/A	Yes
Envagh PS	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Erganagh PS	N/A	Yes
Evish PS	N/A	Yes
Faughanvale PS	Completed	Yes
Fountain PS	N/A	Yes
Gaelscoil Éadain Mhoir PS	N/A	Yes
Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh PS	N/A	Yes
Gillygooley PS	N/A	Yes
Glendermott PS	N/A	Yes
Good Shepherd PS	N/A	Yes
Gortin PS	N/A	Yes
Gortnagarn PS	N/A	Yes
Gortnaghey PS	N/A	Yes
Greenhaw PS	Completed	Yes
Groarty PS	N/A	Yes
Hollybush PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Child PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Family PS	Completed	Yes
Holy Trinity PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Trinity PS	N/A	Yes
Irvinestown PS	N/A	Yes
Jones Memorial PS	Completed	Yes
Killyhommon PS	N/A	Yes
Knocknagor PS	N/A	Yes
Lack PS	N/A	Yes
Langfield PS	N/A	Yes
Largy PS	N/A	Yes
Limavady Central PS	N/A	Yes
Lisbellaw PS	N/A	Yes
Lisnagelvin PS	N/A	Yes
Listress PS	Completed	Yes
Derry Model PS	N/A	Yes
Longtower PS	N/A	Yes
Loreto Convent PS	N/A	Yes
Loughash PS	N/A	Yes
Magheralough PS	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Maguiresbridge PS	N/A	Yes
McClintock PS	N/A	Yes
Moat PS	Completed	Yes
Mullabuoy PS	N/A	Yes
Nazareth House PS	Completed	Yes
Newbuildings PS	N/A	Yes
Newtownbutler No 2 PS	N/A	Yes
Newtownstewart Model PS	N/A	Yes
Omagh County PS	N/A	Yes
Omagh Integrated PS	N/A	Yes
Our Lady of Lourdes PS	N/A	Yes
Queen Elizabeth II PS	July 2008	Yes
Recarson PS	N/A	Yes
Roscavey PS	N/A	Yes
Rosemount PS	N/A	Yes
Sacred Heart PS	N/A	Yes
Shanmullagh PS	N/A	Yes
Sion Mills PS	N/A	Yes
Sistrakeel PS	N/A	Yes
St Finlough's PS	N/A	Yes
St Aidan's PS	N/A	Yes
St Anne's PS, Derry	Completed	Yes
St Anne's PS, Strabane	N/A	Yes
St Anthony's PS	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Altamuskin	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Cranagh	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Derry	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Mountfield	N/A	Yes
St Caireall's PS	N/A	Yes
St Canice's PS, Dungiven	N/A	Yes
St Canice's PS, Feeny	N/A	Yes
St Colmcille's PS, Claudy	Completed	Yes
St Colmcille's PS, Omagh	N/A	Yes
St Columban's PS	August 2008	Yes
St Columba's PS, Clady	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
St Columba's PS, Dromore	N/A	Yes
St Columba's PS, Newbuildings	N/A	Yes
St Columbkille's PS, Carrickmore	N/A	Yes
St Conor's PS	N/A	Yes
St Davog's PS, Belleek	N/A	Yes
St Davog's PS, Scraghey	N/A	Yes
St Dympna's PS	Closed	Yes
St Eithne's PS	N/A	Yes
St Eugene's PS, Derry	N/A	Yes
St Eugene's PS, Knocks	N/A	Yes
St Eugene's PS, Tycur	N/A	Yes
St Eugene's PS, Victoria Bridge	N/A	Yes
St John the Baptist PS	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Bligh's Lane	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Dernaflaw	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Donagh	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Drumquin	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Ederney	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Glenmornan	N/A	Yes
St Lawrence's PS	N/A	Yes
St Macartan's PS	N/A	Yes
St Martin's PS	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Altinure	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Brookeborough	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Cloughcor	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Killesher	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Laught	N/A	Yes
Mary's PS, Maguiresbridge	Completed	Yes
Mary's PS, Mullymesker	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Newtownbutler	Completed	Yes
St Mary's PS, Teemore	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
St Mary's PS, Tempo	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Boys' PS	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Girls' PS	N/A	Yes
St Matthew's PS, Drumsurn	Completed	Yes
St Matthew's PS, Garvaghey	N/A	Yes
St Naile's PS	N/A	Yes
St Ninnidh's PS	N/A	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett PS, Beragh	N/A	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett PS, Strathfoyle	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Castleberg	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Creggan	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Derrygonnelly	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Dunamanagh	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Eskra	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Gortin	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Mullanaska	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Newtown Stewart	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Pennyburn	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Seskinore	N/A	Yes
St Paul's PS, Irvinestown	N/A	Yes
St Paul's PS, Slievemore	N/A	Yes
St Peter's PS	N/A	Yes
St Peter's & St Paul's PS	N/A	Yes
St Ronan's PS	Completed	Yes
St Scire's PS	N/A	Yes
St Teresa's PS, Loughmacrory	N/A	Yes
St Theresa's PS, Glebe	N/A	Yes
St Therese PS, Leanmore	N/A	Yes
St Tierney's PS	Completed	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Steelstown PS	Completed	Yes
Strabane PS	N/A	Yes
Stragowna PS	N/A	Yes
Tattygar PS	N/A	Yes
Tempo No 1 PS	Completed	Yes
Termoncanice PS	N/A	Yes
Trench Road PS	N/A	Yes
Trillick PS	Completed	Yes
Tummery PS	N/A	Yes
Secondary Schools (Including Special Schools)		
Belmont House Special	Completed	Yes
Cranny Special	Closed	Yes
Elmbrook Special	N/A	Yes
Erne Special	N/A	Yes
Foyle View Special	N/A	Yes
Glasvey Special	N/A	Yes
Heatherbank Special	N/A	Yes
Limegrove Special	N/A	Yes
Castleberg Secondary School	Completed	Yes
Dean Maguirc SS	Completed	Yes
Devenish Ballinamallard	2008	Yes
Devenish Enniskillen	Completed	Yes
Devenish Kesh	2008	Yes
Erne Integrated	N/A	Yes
Immaculate Conception College	Completed	Yes
Limavady HS	N/A	Yes
Lisnaskea SS	Completed	Yes
Lisneal (Clondermott HS)	April 2008	Yes
Lisneal (Faughan Valley HS)	March 2008	Yes
Omagh SS	Completed	Yes
Our Lady of Mercy SS	N/A	Yes
Sacred Heart College	N/A	Yes
St Aidan's SS	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's SS, Derry	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
St Brigid's SS, Colaiste Bhríde	N/A	Yes
St Cecilia's College	N/A	Yes
St Colman's SS	Completed	Yes
St Comhghall's SS	Completed	Yes
St Eugene's, Castlederg	N/A	Yes
St Eugene's, Roslea	Completed	Yes
St Fanchea's College	N/A	Yes
St John's SS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's, Enniskillen	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's Boys', Derry	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's, Plumbridge	N/A	Yes
St Mary's, Derry	N/A	Yes
St Mary's, Brollagh	N/A	Yes
St Mary's, Limavady	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's SS	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's & St Brigid's	N/A	Yes
St Peter's SS	N/A	Yes
Strabane HS	N/A	Yes
Other Buildings (Including Youth Centres)		
Castlederg Transport Depot	N/A	Yes
Castlederg Grounds Maintenance	N/A	Yes
Central Depot Omagh	N/A	Yes
E'skillen Transport/grounds maint.	N/A	Yes
Irvinestown Grounds Maintenance	N/A	Yes
Limavady Grounds Maintenance	NA	Yes
L'skea Transport/grounds maint.	N/A	Yes
Springtown Depot	N/A	Yes
Strabane Grounds Maintenance	Completed	Yes
Strabane Transport Depot	Completed	Yes
Strabane Transport/Welfare	N/A	Yes

	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is There Other Asbestos On Site Not Requiring Removal And Dealt With By An Asbestos Management Plan?
Education Guidance Centre	N/A	Yes
E'skillen District Office	Completed	Yes
Derry Music Centre	N/A	Yes
Magilligan Study Centre	N/A	Yes
North West Teachers' Centre	Completed	Yes
Strabane Teachers' Centre	Completed	Yes
Strabane Reading Centre	N/A	Yes
Technology Education	N/A	Yes
WELB Headquarters	N/A	Yes
UA Folk Park – Residential Centre	N/A	Yes
Brooke Park/Rosemount YC	N/A	Yes
Carrickmore Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Caw Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Lakeland Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Limavady Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Omagh Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Pilots Row Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Shantallow Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Strathfoyle Youth Centre	Completed	Yes
Waterside Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Derry Area Youth Office	N/A	Yes
Campsie Swimming Pool	N/A	Yes
William Street Learner Pool	N/A	Yes
Corrick Outdoor Education Centre	N/A	Yes
Gortatole Outdoor Educ. Centre	N/A	Yes

NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION & LIBRARY BOARD

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Primary Schools (Including Nursery Schools)		
Ashgrove NS	N/A	Yes
Ballycastle NS	N/A	Yes
Ballyclare NS	N/A	Yes
Ballyhenry NS	N/A	Yes
Ballymena NS	N/A	Yes
Ballymoney NS	N/A	Yes
Ballysally NS	N/A	Yes
Dunclug NS	N/A	Yes
Kylemore NS	N/A	Yes
Larne NS	N/A	Yes
Monkstown NS	N/A	Yes
Mossley NS	N/A	Yes
Steeple NS	N/A	Yes
Sunnylands NS	N/A	Yes
Ashgrove PS	Completed	Yes
Ballynure PS	Completed	Yes
Balnamore PS	Completed	Yes
Bellaghy PS	Completed	Yes
Cairncastle PS	Completed	Yes
Carnalbanagh PS	Completed	Yes
Carnmoney	Completed	Yes
Carrickfergus Central PS	Completed	Yes
Castleroe PS	Completed	Yes
Clough PS	Completed	Yes
Cloughmills PS	Completed	Yes
Drumard PS	Completed	Yes
Gorran PS	Completed	Yes
Harpur's Hill PS	Completed	Yes
Harryville PS	Completed	Yes
Lislagan PS	Completed	Yes
Longstone PS	Completed	Yes
Moyle PS	Completed	Yes
Oakfield PS	Completed	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Parkhall PS	Completed	Yes
Rathcoole PS	Completed	Yes
Silverstream PS	Completed	Yes
The Thompson PS	Completed	Yes
Toreagh PS	Completed	Yes
Upper Ballyboley PS	Completed	Yes
Woodlawn PS	Completed	Yes
St Anthony's NS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's NS	N/A	Yes
All Saints' PS	Completed	Yes
Anahorish PS	N/A	Yes
Ballyhackett PS	N/A	Yes
Ballynease PS	Completed	Yes
Barnish PS	N/A	Yes
Carlane PS	N/A	Yes
Creggan PS	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's Glen PS	N/A	Yes
Glenann PS	N/A	Yes
Glenravel PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Family PS	N/A	Yes
Kilcoan PS	N/A	Yes
Knocknagin PS	N/A	Yes
Lourdes PS	Completed	Yes
Moneynick PS	N/A	Yes
Mount St Michaels PS	Completed	Yes
New Row PS	Completed	Yes
Seaview PS	N/A	Yes
St Anne's PS	N/A	Yes
St Anthony's PS	Completed	Yes
St Bernard's PS	Completed	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Tirkane	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Ballymoney	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Cloughmills	Completed	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Mayogall	Completed	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Ciaran's PS	Completed	Yes
St Colum's PS, Portstewart	N/A	Yes
St Columb's PS, Desertmartin	N/A	Yes
St Columba's PS, Straw	N/A	Yes
St Columba's PS, Garvagh	Completed	Yes
St Columba's PS, Kilrea	Completed	Yes
St Comgall's PS	Completed	Yes
St Eoghan's PS	N/A	Yes
St James' PS, Newtownabbey	Completed	Yes
St John's PS, Carnlough	Completed	Yes
St John's PS, Coleraine	Completed	Yes
St John's PS, Swatragh	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Ahoghill	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS Stiles	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Ballymena	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Dunloy	Completed	Yes
St Louis Convent PS	N/A	Yes
St MacNissi's PS, N'abbey	Completed	Yes
St MacNissi's PS, Tobermore	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Coleraine	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Glenview	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Aghadowey	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Ballymena	Completed	Yes
St Mary's PS, Bellaghy	Completed	Yes
St Mary's PS, Cargan	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Cushendall	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Draperstown	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Greenlough	Completed	Yes
St Mary's PS, Portglenone	Completed	Yes
St Mary's PS, Rathlin	N/A	Yes
St Mary's on the Hill PS	Completed	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Olcan's PS	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's & St Brigid's PS	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Ahoghill	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Glenariffe	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Loughgiel	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Portrush	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Rasharkin	N/A	Yes
St Trea's PS	N/A	Yes
Tir-na-nog PS	Completed	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett PS	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's & St Joseph's PS	Completed	Yes
Secondary Schools (Including Special Schools)		
Ballee Community	Completed	Yes
Ballycastle SS	Completed	Yes
Ballyclare SS	Completed	Yes
Ballymoney SS	Completed	Yes
Crumlin HS	Completed	Yes
Cullybackey SS	Completed	Yes
Downshire SS	Completed	Yes
Dunclug SS	Completed	Yes
Garvagh SS	Completed	Yes
Glengormley SS	Completed	Yes
Larne HS	Completed	Yes
Maghera SS	Completed	Yes
Magherafelt SS	Completed	Yes
Monkstown Community	Completed	Yes
Newtownabbey Community	Completed	Yes
Parkhall College	Completed	Yes
Coleraine College	Completed	Yes
Ballyclare HS	Completed	Yes
Cambridge House	Completed	Yes
Carrickfergus GS	Completed	Yes
Coleraine High	Completed	Yes
Beechgrove Special	Completed	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Dunfane Special	Completed	Yes
Rostulla Special	Completed	Yes
Thornfield Special	N/A	Yes
Hillcroft Special	N/A	Yes
Loughan Special	N/A	Yes
Roddensvale Special	N/A	Yes
Jordanstown Special	Completed	Yes
Cross and Passion SS	Completed	Yes
Edmund Rice SS	Completed	Yes
Our Lady of Lourdes SS	Completed	Yes
St Aloysius SS	N/A	Yes
St Colm's SS	Completed	Yes
St Comgall's SS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's SS	Completed	Yes
St Mary's College	Completed	Yes
St Olcan's SS	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's SS, Ballymena	Completed	Yes
St Patrick's SS, Maghera	Completed	Yes
St Paul's SS	Completed	Yes
Other Buildings (Including Youth Centres)		
Bushmills Education Centre	N/A	Yes
Derganagh House	N/A	Yes
Woodhall Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Ballykeel Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Broughshane Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Ballymena Youth Office	N/A	Yes
Waveny Centre	N/A	Yes
Sunlea Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Sunnylands Youth Office	N/A	Yes
Newtownabbey Youth Office	N/A	Yes
Glengormley Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Rathcoole Youth Centre	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Whitehead Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Garvagh Youth Centre	N/A	Yes

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION & LIBRARY BOARD

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Primary Schools (Including Nursery Schools)		
Abbey PS	N/A	Yes
Academy PS	July 08	Yes
Alexander Dickson PS	N/A	Yes
Andrews Memorial PS	Boiler House removal complete	Yes
Annahilt PS	N/A	Yes
Annsborough PS	N/A	Yes
Ballinderry PS	N/A	Yes
Ballycloughran PS	N/A	Yes
Ballyholme PS	completed	No
Ballykeigle PS	N/A	Yes
Ballymacash PS	N/A	Yes
Ballymacrickett PS	New build underway	Yes - in old building until demolition
Ballymagee PS	N/A	Yes
Ballynahinch PS	N/A	Yes
Ballyvester PS	N/A	Yes
Ballywalter PS	N/A	Yes
Bangor Central PS	Complete	Yes
Bangor NS	July 08	Yes
Belvoir PS	N/A	Yes
Bloomfield Road PS	24 months	Yes
Braniel PS	N/A	Yes
Brooklands PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Brownlee PS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Cairnshill PS	N/A	Yes
Carrowdore PS	Completed	Yes
Carryduff PS	N/A	Yes
Castlereagh NS	N/A	Yes
Castlewellan PS	N/A	Yes
Christ The King PS	N/A	Yes
Clandeboyne PS	N/A	Yes
Clough PS	N/A	Yes
Comber PS	N/A	Yes
Conlig PS	N/A	Yes
Convent of Mercy NS	N/A	Yes
Convent of Mercy PS	N/A	Yes
Crawfordsburn PS	N/A	Yes
Crossgar PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Derriaghy PS	N/A	Yes
Derryboyne PS	N/A	Yes
Donaghadee PS	N/A	Yes
Downpatrick PS	N/A	Yes
Downshire PS	N/A	Yes
Dromara PS	N/A	Yes
Drumaghlis PS	N/A	Yes
Drumaness PS	N/A	Yes
Drumbo PS	N/A	Yes
Dunmurray PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Forthill PS	N/A	Yes
Gilnahirk PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Glencraig PS	N/A	Yes
Good Shepherd NS	N/A	Yes
Good Shepherd PS	N/A	Yes
Grange Park PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Greyabbey PS	N/A	Yes
Groomsport PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Guinness PS	N/A	Yes
Harmony Hill PS	N/A	Yes
Hilden IPS	12-24 Months	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Holy Family PS	N/A	Yes
Hollywood NS	12-24 Months	Yes
Hollywood PS	Completed	Yes
Kilcooley PS	N/A	Yes
Killinchey PS	N/A	Yes
Killowen PS	N/A	Yes
Kings Road NS	N/A	Yes
Kircubbin IPS	Completed	Yes
Kirkistown PS	N/A	Yes
Knockbreda PS	N/A	Yes
Knockmore PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Largymore PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Lead Hill PS	N/A	Yes
Legamaddy PS	N/A	Yes
Lisburn Central PS	N/A	Yes
Lisnasharragh PS	N/A	Yes
Derry PS	N/A	Yes
Maghaberry PS	N/A	Yes
Millisle PS	12-24 Months	Yes
Moneyrea PS	N/A	Yes
Newcastle PS	N/A	Yes
Newport PS	N/Q	Yes
Newtownards NS	N/A	Yes
Newtownbreda PS	N/A	Yes
Old Warren PS	Completed	Yes
O'Neill Memorial PS	Completed	Yes
Pond Park NS	N/A	Yes
Pond Park PS	New build underway	Yes
Portaferry IPS	N/A	Yes
Portavogie PS	Completed	Yes
Rathmore PS	12-24 months	Yes
Redburn PS	N/A	Yes
Sacred Heart PS	N/A	Yes
Seymour Hill PS	N/A	Yes
Spa PS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Aloysius PS	N/A	Yes
St Anne's PS	N/A	Yes
St Bernard's PS	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS	12-24 Months	Yes
St Colman's PS, Lambeg	N/A	Yes
St Colman's PS, Moira	N/A	Yes
St Colmcille's PS, Downpatrick	N/A	Yes
St Colmcille's NS	N/A	Yes
St Finian's PS	N/A	Yes
St Francis PS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Lisburn	12-24 Months	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Newcastle	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Killough	12-24 Months	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Tyrella	12-24 Months	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Carryduff	Completed	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Ballycruttle	N/A	Yes
St Kieran's PS	N/A	Yes
St Luke's PS	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Bangor	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Castlewellan	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Kilcoo	N/A	Yes
St Mark's PS	Completed	Yes
St Mary's Boys' PS, Newcastle	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Girls' PS, Newcastle	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Ardglass	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Aghlisnafin	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Kircubbin	12-24 Months	Yes
St Mary's PS, Killyleagh	12-24 Months	Yes
St Nicholas' PS	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's Boys' PS, D'patrick	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Ballynahinch	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Patrick's PS, Castlewellan	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Portaferry	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Saul	N/A	Yes
St Caolan's PS	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Crossgar	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Strangford	N/A	Yes
St Kieran's PS	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Kilclief	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Saintfield	N/A	Yes
Tonagh PS	N/A	Yes
Towerview PS	N/A	Yes
Trinity NS	N/A	Yes
Tullycarnet PS	N/A	Yes
Tyrella PS	N/A	Yes
West Winds PS	N/A	Yes
Secondary Schools (Including Special Schools)		
Regent House GS	N/A	Yes
De La Salle SS	12-24 Months	Yes
Down Academy	12-24 Months	Yes
Dundonald HS	N/A	Yes
Dunmurry HS	12-24 Months	Yes
Fort Hill Girls HS	12-24 Months	Yes
Glastry HS	Complete	Yes
Newtownbreda HS	12-24 Months	Yes
St Colmcille's HS	12-24 Months	Yes
St Columbanus College	12-24 Months	Yes
St Mary's HS	12-24 Months	Yes
The High School, Ballynahinch	12-24 Months	Yes
Donaghadee HS	N/A	Yes
Down High School	N/A	Yes
Knocknabreda HS	N/A	Yes
Laurelhill HS	N/A	Yes
Lisnagarvey Boys' HS	N/A	Yes
Lisnasharragh HS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Movilla HS	N/A	Yes
Priory College, Holywood	N/A	Yes
Saintfield HS	N/A	Yes
St Colm's HS	N/A	Yes
St Columba's HS	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's HS	N/A	Yes
Lagan College	N/A	Yes
Ardmore House SS	12-24 Months	Yes
Beechlawn SS	N/A	Yes
Brookfield Special Primary	N/A	Yes
Broomhedge	N/A	Yes
Killard House School	N/A	Yes
Lakewood SS	N/A	Yes
Longstone School	N/A	Yes
Tor Bank School	N/A	Yes
SEELB Headquarters	N/A	Yes
Cabra Towers Outdoor Ed. Centre	N/A	Yes
Killyleagh Outdoor Educ Centre	N/A	Yes
Other Buildings (Including Youth Centres)		
Ardnabannon Outdoor Ed. Centre	N/A	Yes
The Music Centre Ballynahinch	N/A	Yes
Rathvarna Resource Centre	N/A	Yes
Ardcarnet Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Ards Arena Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Moneyrea Primary Youth Club	N/A	Yes
Downpatrick Resource Centre	N/A	Yes

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Primary Schools (Including Nursery Schools)		
Ashgrove NS	N/A	Yes
Banbridge NS	N/A	Yes
Cookstown NS	Sept 09	Yes
Downshire NS	N/A	Yes
Dungannon NS	N/A	Yes
Edenderry NS	Sept 09	Yes
Fivemiletown NS	N/A	Yes
Grove NS	N/A	Yes
Harrison NS	Sept 09	Yes
Kilkeel NS	N/A	Yes
Millington NS	Sept 09	Yes
Railway Street NS	N/A	Yes
St John the Baptist NS	N/A	Yes
Abercorn PS	N/A	Yes
Agahavilly PS	N/A	Yes
Annaghmore (Portadown)	N/A	Yes
Annalong PS	N/A	Yes
Ardmore PS	N/A	Yes
Armstrong PS	N/A	Yes
Augher Central PS	N/A	Yes
Aughnacloy Regional PS	N/A	Yes
Ballyoran PS	Sept 09	Yes
Ballytrea PS	N/A	Yes
Benburb PS	N/A	Yes
Bessbrook PS	N/A	Yes
Birches PS	N/A	Yes
Bleary PS	N/A	Yes
Bocombra PS	Sept 09	Yes
Brackenragh West PS	N/A	Yes
Bush PS	N/A	Yes
Carntall PS	N/A	Yes
Carrick PS, Lurgan	Sept 09	Yes
Churchill PS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Churchtown PS	N/A	Yes
Clare PS	N/A	Yes
Clogher Regional PS	N/A	Yes
Coagh PS	N/A	Yes
Collone PS	N/A	Yes
Cookstown PS	N/A	Yes
Cortamlet PS	N/A	Yes
Craigavon PS	Sept 09	Yes
Darkley PS	N/A	Yes
Derryhale PS	Sept 09	Yes
Dickson PS	Sept 09	Yes
Donacloney PS	Sept 09	Yes
Donaghey PS	N/A	Yes
Donaghmore PS, Dungannon	N/A	Yes
Dromore Central PS	N/A	Yes
Dromore Road PS, Warepoint	N/A	Yes
Drumgor PS	Sept 09	Yes
Drumhillery PS	N/A	Yes
Drumsallen PS	N/A	Yes
Dungannon PS	N/A	Yes
Edenderry PS, Banbridge	N/A	Yes
Edenderry PS, Portadown	Sept 09	Yes
Eglis PS, Dungannon	N/A	Yes
Fair Hill PS	N/A	Yes
Fivemiletown PS	N/A	Yes
Foley PS	N/A	Yes
Granville PS	N/A	Yes
Hamiltownsbawn PS	N/A	Yes
Hardy Memorial PS	N/A	Yes
Hart Memorial PS	Sept 09	Yes
Howard PS	N/A	Yes
Iveagh PS	N/A	Yes
Keady PS	N/A	Yes
Kilkeel PS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Killylea PS	N/A	Yes
Killyman PS	N/A	Yes
King's Park PS	Sept 09	Yes
Kingsmills PS	N/A	Yes
Lisnadill PS	N/A	Yes
Loughbrickland PS	N/A	Yes
Lurgan Model PS	N/A	Yes
Maralin Village PS	N/A	Yes
Markethill PS	N/A	Yes
Millington PS	Sept 09	Yes
Minterburn PS	N/A	Yes
Moneymore PS	N/A	Yes
Mountnorris PS	N/A	Yes
Moy Regional PS	N/A	Yes
Moyallon PS	N/A	Yes
Mullaglass PS	N/A	Yes
Mullavilly PS	N/A	Yes
Newmills PS	N/A	Yes
Newtownhamilton PS	N/A	Yes
Orritor PS	N/A	Yes
Poyntzpass PS	N/A	Yes
Queen Elizabeth II Pomeroy PS	N/A	Yes
Richmount PS	N/A	Yes
Scarva PS	N/A	Yes
Stewartstown PS	N/A	Yes
Tamnamore PS	Sept 09	Yes
Tandragee PS	Sept 09	Yes
The Cope PS	N/A	Yes
Toberlane PS	N/A	Yes
Tullygally PS	Sept 09	Yes
Tullymacarette PS	N/A	Yes
Tullyroan PS	N/A	Yes
Walker Memorial PS	N/A	Yes
Waringstown PS	N/A	Yes
Windsor Hill PS	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
The Kinnego Centre	N/A	Yes
All Saints' PS, Ballela	N/A	Yes
Anamar PS	N/A	Yes
Armagh Christian Brothers' PS	N/A	Yes
Aughamullan PS	N/A	Yes
Ballyholland PS	N/A	Yes
Ballylifford PS	N/A	Yes
Bunscoil an Luir PS	N/A	Yes
Carrick PS, Warrenpoint	N/A	Yes
Clay PS	N/A	Yes
Clintyclay PS	N/A	Yes
Clonalig PS	N/A	Yes
Clontifleece PS	N/A	Yes
Crievagh PS	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Decomet	N/A	Yes
Derrychrin PS	N/A	Yes
Dromintee PS	N/A	Yes
Edendork PS	N/A	Yes
Grange PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Cross PS	N/A	Yes
Holy Trinity PS	N/A	Yes
Jonesborough PS	N/A	Yes
Killeen PS	N/A	Yes
Laghey PS	N/A	Yes
Lissan PS	N/A	Yes
St Matthew's PS, Magheramayo	N/A	Yes
Moneydarragh PS	N/A	Yes
Mount St Catherine's PS	N/A	Yes
Presentation PS	N/A	Yes
Primate Dixon PS	N/A	Yes
Roan PS	N/A	Yes
Sacred Heart PS, Rock	N/A	Yes
Rostrevor Convent of Mercy PS	N/A	Yes
Seagoe PS	Sept 09	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Anthony's PS	Sept 09	Yes
St Brendan's PS	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Augher	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Drumilly	N/A	Yes
St Brigid's PS, Mountjoy	N/A	Yes
St Clare's Convent PS, Newry	N/A	Yes
St Colman's PS, Annaclone	N/A	Yes
St Colman's PS, Dromore	Sept 09	Yes
St Colman's PS, Kilkeel	N/A	Yes
St Colman's PS, Bann	N/A	Yes
St Colman's Abbey PS, Newry	N/A	Yes
St Colmcille's PS	N/A	Yes
St James' PS, Drumatee	N/A	Yes
St James' PS, Tandragee	N/A	Yes
St Jarlath's PS	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Gilford	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Glenn	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Kingsisland	N/A	Yes
St John's PS, Moy	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Ballymartin	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Bessbrook	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Caledon	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Galbally	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Kileenan	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Madden	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Meigh	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's PS, Poyntzpass	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	N/A	Yes
St Laurence's PS, Belleeks	N/A	Yes
St MacCartan's Convent PS	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Armagh	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Malachy's PS, Ballymoyer	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Carnagat	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Carrickcroppan	N/A	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Drummullan	Sept 09	Yes
St Malachy's PS, Glencull	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Ballygawley	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Banbridge	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Barr	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Cabra	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Derrymore	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Derrytrasna	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Dunamore	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Fivemiletown	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Glasdrumman	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Granemore	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Lisbuoy	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Maghery	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Mullabawn	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Pomeroy	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Rathfriland	N/A	Yes
St Mary's PS, Stewartstown	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Boys' PS, Rostrevor	N/A	Yes
St Michael's PS, Clady	N/A	Yes
St Michael's PS, Finnis	N/A	Yes
St Michael's PS, New'hamilton	N/A	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett's PS, B'regan	N/A	Yes
St Oliver Plunkett's PS, Forkhill	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Oliver's PS, Carrickrovaddy	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Aughadarragh	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Aghaccommon	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Annaghmore	Sept 09	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Armagh	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Ballymaghery	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Crossmaglen	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Cullyhanna	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Derrynaseer	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Drumgreenagh	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Loup	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Magheralin	Sept 09	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Mayobridge	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Moneymore	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Mullinahoe	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's PS, Newry	N/A	Yes
St Paul's PS, Cabra	N/A	Yes
St Peter's PS, Cloughreagh	N/A	Yes
St Peter's PS, Collegelands	N/A	Yes
St Peter's PS, Moortown	N/A	Yes
St Ronan's PS, Newry	N/A	Yes
St Teresa's PS, Lurgan	N/A	Yes
Tannaghmore PS	N/A	Yes
The Drelincourt PS	Sept 09	Yes
St Therese's PS, Tullyherron	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Francis of Assisi PS, Keady	N/A	Yes
St Francis PS, Lurgan	Sept 09	Yes
Kilbroney PS	N/A	Yes
Secondary Schools (Including Special Schools)		
Aughnacloy HS	Sept 09	Yes
Clounagh JHS	N/A	Yes
Cookstown High	N/A	Yes
Craigavon Senior High (P'down)	N/A	Yes
Dromore High	Sept 09	Yes
Fivemiletown HS	N/A	Yes
Kilkeel HS	N/A	Yes
Killicomaine Junior High School	N/A	Yes
Lurgan JHS	Sept 09	Yes
Markethill HS	N/A	Yes
Newry HS	N/A	Yes
Newtownhamilton HS	N/A	Yes
Rathfriland HS	N/A	Yes
Tandragee JHS	N/A	Yes
City of Armagh HS	N/A	Yes
Drumcree College	Sept 09	Yes
Holy Trinity	N/A	Yes
Lismore Comprehensive	Sept 09	Yes
St Brigid's Boys' HS	N/A	Yes
St Catherine's College	N/A	Yes
St Columban's College	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's Boys' HS (Newry)	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's HS (Coalisland)	N/A	Yes
St Joseph's HS (Crossmaglen)	N/A	Yes
St Mark's HS (Warrenpoint)	N/A	Yes
St Mary's Girls' JHS (Lurgan)	Sept 09	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
St Mary's HS (Newry)	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's Girls (D'gannon)	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's Boys (D'gannon)	N/A	Yes
St Patrick's College (Banbridge)	N/A	Yes
St Paul's HS (Bessbrook)	N/A	Yes
St Paul's HS (Lurgan)	Sept 09	Yes
Brownlow College	Sept 09	Yes
Banbridge Academy	N/A	Yes
Lurgan College	Sept 09	Yes
Portadown College	Sept 09	Yes
Fallowfield Special Needs	N/A	Yes
Sperrinview Special Needs	N/A	Yes
Premises Name (Non School Buildings)		
Lough Road Learning Centre	N/A	Yes
Vehicle Maint. Depot (Armagh)	N/A	Yes
Vehicle Maint Depot (Aughnacloy)	N/A	Yes
Vehicle Maint Depot (Cookstown)	N/A	Yes
Vehicle Maint Depot (D'gannon)	N/A	Yes
Vehicle Maint Depot (Newry)	N/A	Yes
Craigavon Teachers Centre	Sept 09	Yes
Dungannon Teachers Centre	N/A	Yes
Newry Teachers Centre	N/A	Yes
Bann House CASS Centre	Sept 09	Yes
Clounagh Centre	N/A	Yes
Armagh YC	N/A	Yes
Banbridge YC	N/A	Yes

School Name	Timescale for Removal (if required)	Is there other asbestos on site not requiring removal and dealt with by an Asbestos Management Plan?
Brownlow Resource/ Youth Centre	Sept 09	Yes
Drumgor Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Lurgan Youth Centre	N/A	Yes
Tagnevan Youth & Comm Centre	N/A	Yes
Aughnacloy YC	N/A	Yes
Binnian	N/A	Yes
Shannaghmore	N/A	Yes
SELB HQ Charlemont Place	N/A	Yes
SELB HQ Central Equip. Store	N/A	Yes
SELB HQ Beresford Row	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint. Depot Armagh	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint. Depot Banbridge	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint. Depot Dungannon	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint. Depot Kilkeel	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint Depot Newry	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint Depot N'hamilton	N/A	Yes
Grounds Maint. Depot Portadown	N/A	Yes

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to confirm if the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism has charitable status, and if it does not to detail the reasons why; and to further detail (i) the current rates bill; and (ii) other statutory charges for the centre, including (a) to whom they are payable; and (b) who has responsibility for payment. (AQW 5007/08)

The Minister of Education: The Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd does not have charitable status. This was considered during the economic appraisal process and legal advice was taken into account.

There were two reasons why it was not deemed appropriate for the Centre to have charitable status. One reason was because under charitable law there may be difficulties for funding organisations to try to recoup any assets or funds held by a charity. Secondly there is limited legislation in the North concerning the financial accountability of charities, so for effective corporate governance it was considered prudent not to apply for charitable status at that time.

D'inis Príomhfheidhmeannach an Lárionaid Uathachais i gCoillidh Chanannáin dom go bhfuil £1474.00 le híoc fós i dtaobh rátaí ag an nGníomhaireacht um Bhailiúchán Rátaí.

The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has informed me that the current rates bill is £1474.00 payable to the Rates Collection Agency. Other statutory charges for 2007/08 are a Combined Public and Employer's Liability Policy for £16,950.41 and Director's Liability Insurance £1,312.50 payable to AON McMillan Brokers. The Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd has responsibility for and pays these charges

Controlled Sector: Christian Ethos

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to outline how the Christian ethos will be preserved in schools within the controlled sector. (AQW 5027/08)

The Minister of Education: The three main Protestant Churches will maintain their right to nominate representatives to the Boards of Governors of those controlled primary schools that they originally owned even if those schools have since been replaced by new schools.

It is also my intention to enable the Education and Skills Authority to appoint representatives of the Protestant Churches to the Boards of Governors of other controlled primary schools and of controlled secondary schools where the majority of pupils enrolled at these schools are drawn from the Protestant community.

Tá an dá bheart ceaptha chun éiteas Críostaí scoileanna rialaithe a chosaint.

Both measures are designed to protect the Christian ethos of controlled schools.

Irish Medium School in Dungannon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans to open an Irish Medium School in (i) Dungannon; and (ii) elsewhere in South Tyrone. (AQW 5097/08)

The Minister of Education: I understand that on behalf of the Committee of Bunscoil Uí Chléirigh, the

Southern Education and Library intends to publish a Development Proposal, during the week beginning 14 April 2008, for the establishment of a grant-aided co-educational Irish-medium primary school in Dungannon to be called Bunscoil Uí Chléirigh. The publication of a Development Proposal initiates a two-month consultation period during which all interested parties can comment on the proposal directly to the Department. At the end of this period, I will make a decision on the proposal following due consideration of all the relevant information.

I limistéar níos leithne Thír Eoghain Theas, tá beartaithe ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Deiscirt Togra Forbartha a fhorbairt ar son Ghobharnóirí Choláiste Speirín le linn na seachtaine dar tús 14 Aibreán, a mbeidh mar éirim aige go dtabharfar stádas cabhair dheontais don scoil, ar scoil iarbhuideoachais neamhspleách ilchumais trí mheán na Gaeilge í.

In the wider South Tyrone area, the Southern Education and Library Board intends to publish a Development Proposal on behalf of the Board of Governors of Coláiste Speirín during the week beginning 14 April, to the effect that the school, an independent all-ability Irish-medium post-primary school, be awarded grant aided status.

Musical Traditions in Ireland

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for the reclassification of 'Musical Traditions in Ireland' to a non-compulsory subject on the GCSE curriculum, as set by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

(AQW 5100/08)

The Minister of Education: The decision to make Musical Traditions in Ireland an optional component on the GCSE Music specification was made by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), in consultation with Music teachers from post primary schools representing all sectors. From September 2009, this component will be one of three options from which students must study two options, in addition to one compulsory core component.

Beidh níos mó roghanna agus solúbthachta ag múinteoirí de bharr an chinnidh seo. Ligfidh sé dóibh an cúrsa staidéir is fóirsteanaí do riachtanas a gcuid mac léinn a roghnú. Tá Traidisiúin Cheoil in Éirinn ar fáil go fóill mar rogha do na scoileanna sin ar mian leo é a theagasc.

This decision offers greater choice and flexibility for teachers. It allows them to choose the course of study best suited to the needs of their students.

Musical Traditions in Ireland is still available as an option for those schools that wish to teach it.

Educational Psychologist

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of pupils from (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary, school that have been referred to an educational psychologist, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 5137/08)

The Minister of Education: The number of primary and post-primary school children who were given initial assessments by educational psychologists to determine special educational needs in each of the last five years is set out in the tables below.

Tagraíonn na figiúirí don chéad teagmháil dhíreach a bhí ag síceolaí oideachais le dalta bunscoile nó iarbunscoile ag cuid ar bith den Chóid Chleachtais ar Aithint agus Meastúcháin ar Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais.

The figures refer to the first direct contact an educational psychologist had with a primary or post-primary school pupil at any stage of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs. They do not include referrals for any type of review assessment of children already known to an educational psychologist.

PRIMARY

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
BELB*	610	521	433	412	374
NEELB*	544	590	557	488	463
SEELB*	593	601	614	598	589
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
SELB**	675	731	818	602	564
WELB***	760	756	656	772	850

POST-PRIMARY

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
BELB*	223	161	127	114	101
NEELB*	251	255	385	362	327
SEELB*	189	190	177	187	292
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
SELB**	169	183	205	150	141
WELB***	152	126	108	128	119

* Calendar Years

** Academic Years

*** Financial Years

Temporary Teachers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers who do not have permanent full-time jobs. (AQW 5153/08)

The Minister of Education: Figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for February 2008 show that 193 job seeker allowance claimants specified teaching as the occupation sought. Information on the proportion of these claimants who might be seeking part-time as opposed to full-time teaching jobs is not collected by DETI.

The substitute teachers' register contains information on teachers who are actively seeking employment in grant-aided schools here. Latest available figures show that there are some 6,777 teachers on the register. It is important to note, however, that not all teachers on the register are seeking full-time permanent posts.

It is also important to note that not all teachers who are currently in employment wish to work on a full-time basis, and information from the Department's teacher payroll system shows that there were 1,522 permanent part-time teachers employed in our grant-aided schools as at 1 April 2008.

Ba chear tduit bheith ar an eolas chomh maith gurb é earcú múinteoirí fhreagracht fostaithe múinteoirí. Mhol an Roinn do scoileanna, áfach, gur cheart dóibh earcú do fholúntais ar bhonn buan níos mó ná ar bhonn sealadach ach amháin sa chás go bhfuil sé soiléir go bhfuil an folúntas ann ar bhonn sealadach.

You should also be aware that the recruitment of teachers is the responsibility of teachers' employers. However, the Department has advised schools that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education, further to her departmental press release on 10 March 2008, (i) to identify the 'experts on autism' who visited Stormont on that occasion; (ii) to indicate which experts were consulted about the Middletown project, and of those, which supported this project; and (iii) to detail the considered opinion of these experts on this project. (AQW 5174/08)

The Minister of Education: In answer to part (i) of your question, the job titles of those who attended

the Autism Stock-take Event on 10 and 11 March 2008 were:

Officials from the Department of Education and Science (DES):

- Head of The Inspectorate Division, Special Education Business Unit;
- Divisional Inspector from The Inspectorate Division, Special Education Business Unit seconded to Special Education Section; Assistant Principal Officer, Special Education Section;
- Divisional Inspector, The Inspectorate Division, Special Education Business Unit;
- Inspector, Special Education Business Unit, DES;
- Assistant Chief Inspector DES,

Officials from the Department of Education:

- Assistant Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI);
- Managing Inspector for Special Education, Alternative Education and Inclusion (ETI);
- Two District Inspectors (Special Education), (ETI);
- Head of Supporting and Safeguarding Children Division;
- Head of Special Education Branch; administration staff, Special Education Branch;

Representatives from Education and Library Boards:

- Principal Educational Psychologist, North Eastern Education and Library Board;
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Co-ordinator, Western Education & Library Board; ASD Assistant Advisory Officer Southern Education and Library Board;

Other Attendees:

- Director of National Educational Psychological Service, Ireland;
- Inspector for Education and Training in Wales;
- Lead Inspector Additional Support Needs HMIE (Scotland);
- Chief Executive Officer, Middletown Centre for Autism;
- Head of Learning Support and Assessment Division,
- Middletown Centre for Autism;
- Head of Training, Advice and Research Division, Middletown Centre for Autism.

The purpose of this event was to help inform the development of an autism strategic plan for the Department of Education as well as establishing common strategic thinking in respect of autism across Britain and Ireland, laying the foundations for further links and the harmonising of inspection

perspectives. The seminar included a presentation on the Middletown Centre for Autism but did not include any consultation about the Centre.

Déarfainn leis an bhall tagairt a dhéanamh don fhreagra a thug mé ar an cheist dheireanach a chuir sé orm AQW 4617/08 maidir leis na comhairliúcháin faoi Ionad Middletown don Uathachas.

I would refer the member to my reply to his previous question AQW 4617/08 regarding consultations about the Middletown Centre for Autism.

Members' Expenses

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the total amount of remuneration and expenses paid to members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board in its last full financial year before control of the Board was passed to Commissioners. (AQW 5183/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá molta ag Roinn Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt gurb é £75, 820 an méid iomlán a díoladh le baill an bhoird sa bhliain airgeadais 2005/06. Seo an bhliain dheiridh iomlán airgeadais a raibh an Bord ann sular ceapadh na Coimisinéirí ar an 6 Iúil 2006.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that the total amount paid to members of the Board in the 2005/06 financial year was £75,820. This is the last full financial year the Board was in place before the appointment of the Commissioners on 6 July 2006.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the individual Irish Medium schools; and (ii) other Irish Medium groups, to which rent is owed by her department for 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 5185/08)

The Minister of Education: Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) has submitted claims for rent in respect of the following schools:

- Gaelscoil Éadain Mhoir
- Gaelscoil na Mona
- Bunscoil an Traonaigh
- Gaelscoil na gCrann
- Gaelscoil an Damba
- Gaelscoil Éanna
- Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach

InaG has also submitted claims on behalf of the following Irish medium groups:

An Drothead Ltd in respect of Scoil an Drochid

Pobal an Chaistil in respect of Gaelscoil an Chaistil

I láthair na huaire tá an Roinn i dteagmháil le hIontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta maidir lena gcead lóistín faofa a fháil ar cíós agus tá breis eolais le cur ar fáil ag InaG.

The Department is currently liaising with InaG on the entitlement to rent for approved accommodation and additional information is to be provided by InaG.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the policies that are in place to advise pupils of the dangers and possible consequences of alcohol consumption. (AQW 5204/08)

The Minister of Education: My department has policies in place to educate our young people with regard to the dangers and consequences of substance abuse. Schools are required to draw up a drug and alcohol policy and a drug and alcohol education programme. All schools must have a discipline policy under which suspected drug and/or alcohol related incidents can be managed. The revised curriculum includes a new area of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding/Learning for Life and Work, which provides opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with issues such as drugs and alcohol. Schools are supported in the delivery of drugs and alcohol education by the education and library boards' Drugs and Alcohol Education Officers.

Bíonn córais tréadach i gceist ag gach scoil agus caithfear múinteoir ainmnithe a bheith ann ar mhaithe le cosaint páistí. Is féidir le daoine óga in iar-bhunscoileanna teacht ar chórais ghairmiúla comhairliúcháin, atá neamhspleách ó na scoileanna, le linn tréimhsí ina saol a motháionn siad deacair nó leochaileach iontu. Níl plean ar bith ann maidir le polasaithe breise a thabhairt isteach a dhíríonn go huile is go hiomlán ar fhadhbanna a bhaineann le halcól.

All schools have pastoral care systems in place and must have a designated teacher for child protection. Professional counselling services, independent of schools, are now accessible to young people in post primary schools during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives. There are no plans to introduce additional policies specifically aimed at alcohol related problems.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education if she will give a commitment to review, and if necessary, introduce new policies aimed at assisting pupils with alcohol related problems. (AQW 5205/08)

The Minister of Education: My department has policies in place to educate our young people with regard to the dangers and consequences of substance abuse. Schools are required to draw up a drug and alcohol policy and a drug and alcohol education programme. All schools must have a discipline policy under which suspected drug and/or alcohol related incidents can be managed. The revised curriculum includes a new area of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding/Learning for Life and Work, which provides opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with issues such as drugs and alcohol. Schools are supported in the delivery of drugs and alcohol education by the education and library boards' Drugs and Alcohol Education Officers.

Bíonn córais tréadach i gceist ag gach scoil agus caithfear múinteoir ainmnithe a bheith ann ar mhaithe le cosaint páistí. Is féidir le daoine óga in iarbhunscoileanna teacht ar chórais ghairmiúla comhairliúcháin, atá neamhspleách ó na scoileanna, le linn tréimhsí ina saol a motháíonn siad deacair nó leochaileach iontu. Níl plean ar bith ann maidir le polasaithe breise a thabhairt isteach a dhíríonn go huile is go hiomlán ar fhadhbanna a bhaineann le halcól.

All schools have pastoral care systems in place and must have a designated teacher for child protection. Professional counselling services, independent of schools, are now accessible to young people in post primary schools during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives. There are no plans to introduce additional policies specifically aimed at alcohol related problems.

Ulster-Scots Teaching

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the books that are provided for (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools, in the teaching of Ulster-Scots. (AQW 5216/08)

The Minister of Education: Níl mionsonraithe ag mo Roinn maidir leis na leabhair a cuireadh ar fáil fá choinne teagasc na hAlbainies-Uladh mar is faoi na scoileanna féin a bhíonn sé rogha a dhéanamh de na cineáil leabhar ar mhaithe leo a roghnú chun an curaclam a theagasc agus a chur ar fáil dóibh.

My Department does not hold details of the books provided in relation to the teaching of Ulster-Scots as it is for schools to decide which books they wish to use in delivering the curriculum and to provide for them.

Falling Pupil Numbers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the discussions she has held with the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the challenges of falling pupil numbers, and the impact that this will have on the teaching profession. (AQW 5288/08)

The Minister of Education: I routinely meet with the Minister for Employment and Learning to discuss matters of common interest for our Departments. At our last meeting, in February, we met to discuss a range of education issues, including the impact of falling pupil numbers on the 2008/09 academic year intakes to initial teacher education courses.

Chomh maith leis sin tá Sir Reg Empey agus mé féin i ndiaidh socrú a dhéanamh bualadh leis na daoine a bhíonn ag obair i gColáiste Ollscoile an tSrutháin Mhilis agus Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire ar an 24 Aibreán chun plé a dhéanamh ar an tionchar a bheidh ag na hinstitiúidí

sin ar an íslíú déimeagrafach maidir le huimhreacha daltaí.

In addition, Sir Reg Empey and I have arranged to meet with Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College on 24 April to discuss the impact on those particular institutions of the demographic downturn in pupil numbers.

Pupil Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of pupil numbers for each primary school in Bangor. (AQW 5396/08)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a cuartaíodh

The information requested is as follows:

TOTAL ENROLMENTS IN BANGOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2007/08

DENI number	School Name	Total enrolment ¹
4011645	Crawfordsburn PS	188
4011650	Ballyholme PS	600
4011670	Clandeboyne PS	188
4013023	Bloomfield Road PS	307
4013045	Grange Park PS	364
4016002	Kilcooley PS	127
4016067	Rathmore PS	482
4016111	Towerview PS	385
4016192	Kilmaine PS	654

DENI number	School Name	Total enrolment ¹
4016430	Ballymagee PS	404
4036146	St Comgall's PS	286
4036148	St Malachy's PS	321
4051680	Bangor Central PS	562
4610097	Glenlola Collegiate Prep. Department	76
4620015	Bangor Grammar School Prep. Department	137

Source: Annual school census.

Note:

¹ Includes children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.

Assembly Questions

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the delays; and (ii) the costs incurred by her department, in translating answers to written Assembly questions into Irish. (AQW 5397/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department endeavours to answer all written Assembly Questions within the set timescales for doing so. However, there can be delays as it usually takes between 3 and 5 working days for an Irish translation to be included in answers.

The member will be pleased to know that this will improve once there is an Irish Language Official employed in the Department.

Ó tugadh isteach aistriúcháin go Gaeilge ar cheisteanna an Tionóil is é £883.14 an costas atá ann go dtí seo.

Since introducing Irish translations in answers to Assembly Questions the cost incurred has been £883.14

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

South Eastern Regional College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail why courses being conducted at the Kircubbin and Ballyboley outreach centres of the South Eastern Regional College were not advertised in the College's 2007/2008 prospectus. (AQW 5156/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Further Education colleges are responsible for promoting the services they provide, including the production of prospectuses. The issue of

advertising courses at the Kircubbin and Ballyboley outreach centres is, therefore, a matter for the South Eastern Regional College. While, the Department does not have a role in this process, I can confirm that courses at the two centres in question are, in fact, included in the college's part-time prospectus for the 2007/08 academic year.

South Eastern Regional College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the methodology used by the South Eastern Regional College in deciding what courses to run at its outreach centres at Kircubbin and Ballyboley. (AQW 5157/08)

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. Therefore, the provision offered at the Kircubbin and Ballyboley outreach centres is a matter for the South Eastern Regional College.

Steps to Work

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to (i) confirm that Annex A of the Steps to Work Guidelines booklet can be amended to reflect a greater range of qualifications on NDAQ; and (ii) detail the process by which his department identified vocationally relevant qualifications which are currently signposted on the Annex list. (AQW 5287/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

'Steps to Work' is currently a pilot programme. The list of qualifications at Annex A of the Steps to Work guidelines has recently been reviewed and, as a result, Annex A is no longer relevant. Personal Advisers now have authority to approve a wide range of vocationally relevant qualifications in line with an individual's job goal and requirements of local job vacancies. The Department's internet site has been updated to reflect this change.

Steps to Work

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm that his department is maximising efficiency by reducing the number of contracts being issued under the new Steps to Work scheme; and to outline the changes this will have on the management of contracts by the lead contracting organisations. (AQW 5290/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I can confirm that the Department will achieve efficiencies

in management, monitoring and administrative terms, while creating contracts of sufficient size to be commercially viable for potential suppliers.

Each of the ten contracts for the delivery of Steps to Work will be awarded to a single contractor who may employ sub-contractors to deliver elements of provision as required to meet the conditions of the contract. The Department will have a single point of contact through the Lead Contractor who will have sole responsibility for all aspects of the delivery of the contract and compliance with the operational guidelines of the programme. This also includes the quality of provision delivered in line with the Department's Success through Excellence Strategy.

Approved Qualifications

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the role awarding bodies have in assuring the robust quality assurance of Prescribed List of Approved Qualifications courses. (AQW 5327/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: To ensure robust quality assurance and that courses are fit for purpose, all college submissions for courses to be included on Prescribed List of Approved Qualifications must meet the stringent criteria specified by the Department. Included in the criteria for submissions is that Awarding Bodies must be:-

- a National Qualifications Framework listed body; or
- an Awarding Body, where the award is included within the Testing and Trialling projects for the development of the new Qualifications and Credit Framework, or has been fully accredited and appears on the National Database of Accredited Qualifications.

Approved Qualifications

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his department's position on the role of awarding bodies submitting courses to be accepted onto the Prescribed List of Approved Qualifications. (AQW 5329/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Awarding Bodies do not submit courses for approval and inclusion on the Prescribed List of Approved Qualifications. It is the Further Education Colleges that complete submissions. College submissions must include full details of the awarding bodies and their courses as this is part of the criteria used to evaluate submissions. An evaluation panel, comprising of senior personnel from the regulatory authorities and DEL, carries out the evaluations.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total value of foreign direct investment, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3933/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): It is not possible to detail the total value of foreign direct investment as requested, because neither Invest NI nor DETI collect the full range of information required to present complete coverage of this activity. Figures for planned inward investment supported by Invest NI during the five year period 2002/03 – 2006/07 are provided below. I will make the figures for 2007/08 available to the Honourable Member as soon as they become available. However, these figures relate only to Invest NI's externally-owned client companies, which are in the export-oriented manufacturing and tradeable service sectors. They do not include inward investment in the retail and distribution, and other sectors, which primarily serve the local marketplace.

It should be noted that parliamentary constituency areas are not self-contained labour markets. A project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas, 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.

Further information and analysis on Invest NI support of inward investment is available in the Invest NI Performance Information Report which was published at the end of January 2008 (<http://www.investni.com/performance-report0203-0607.pdf>).

Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs (i) created; and (ii) safeguarded, by foreign direct

investment, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3934/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

It is not possible to present information relating to all foreign direct investment as requested because neither Invest NI nor DETI collect the full range of data required to present complete coverage of this activity. The table below provides an analysis, by Parliamentary Constituency Area, of new job promotions and jobs safeguarded through inward investment projects supported by Invest NI during the five year period 2002/03 – 2006/07.

These figures relate to Invest NI's externally owned client companies, which are in the export-oriented manufacturing and tradeable service sectors. Therefore, they do not include inward investment in the retail and distribution, and other sectors, which primarily serve the local marketplace.

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 usually be determined by the existing location of the business.

Further information and analysis on Invest NI support of inward investment is available in the Invest NI Performance Information Report which was published at the end of January 2008 (<http://www.investni.com/performance-report0203-0607.pdf>)

NEW JOBS PROMOTED AND JOBS SAFEGUARDED THROUGH INWARD INVESTMENT (2002/03 – 2006/07)

Parliamentary Constituency	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05		2005-06		2006-07		Total	
	New	Safe	New	Safe	New	Safe	New	Safe	New	Safe	New	Safe
Belfast East	0	0	0	369	410	79	232	0	624	60	1,266	508
Belfast North	0	0	163	218	27	0	46	0	44	0	280	218
Belfast South	216	0	649	671	1,379	0	675	47	987	123	3,906	841
Belfast West	35	0	72	0	750	0	120	0	0	0	977	0
East Antrim	100	0	67	0	112	0	190	358	0	0	469	358
East Londonderry	0	0	24	0	0	0	0	787	0	0	24	787
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	350	0	202	214	0	38	11	65	441	0	1,004	317
Foyle	93	1,033	486	0	40	117	361	1,258	754	0	1,734	2,408
Lagan Valley	0	0	0	0	16	17	71	278	0	0	87	295
Mid Ulster	32	0	0	0	166	118	40	0	0	0	238	118
Newry & Armagh	75	0	0	0	0	0	1,002	30	304	0	1,381	30
North Antrim	0	0	0	518	23	123	0	0	0	0	23	641
North Down	41	0	200	0	140	147	0	0	233	0	614	147
South Antrim	5	48	0	0	319	0	67	96	0	0	391	144
South Down	0	0	0	0	0	0	127	362	0	0	127	362
Strangford	70	0	5	0	19	0	0	0	20	16	114	16
Upper Bann	16	807	110	680	13	616	49	0	0	5	188	2,108
West Tyrone	0	1,127	175	0	53	57	109	0	44	0	381	1,184
Northern Ireland	1,033	3,015	2,153	2,670	3,467	1,312	3,100	3,281	3,451	204	13,204	10,482

1. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients.
2. Jobs promoted represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
3. Jobs safeguarded represents the number of jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.
4. The inward investment figure does not include business development activities, including R&D, training, knowledge management or trade development.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 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 4908/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI assistance in Neighbourhood Renewal areas is as follows:

Invest NI Assistance & Investment

- Over the 4 year period 2003/04 to 2006/07 Invest NI has offered assistance totalling over £489m contributing towards a total investment of over £2,037m.
- Of this assistance 39% (£191m) of assistance and 38% (£770m) of investment was offered to businesses located within neighbourhood renewal areas.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

- 148 FDI projects were approved over 2003/04 to 2006/07 contributing to an investment of over £897m and a total assistance offered of almost £188m.
- 56% (£106m) of this assistance and 51% (£457m) of the investment were approved to clients within or intending to locate within neighbourhood renewal areas.
- Through these investments Invest NI has assisted in the creation of 12,177 new jobs and also safeguarded a further 7,467.
- 64% of these new jobs and 38% of the jobs safeguarded were based in neighbourhood renewal areas.

In respect of the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal area, over the 2 year period 2005/6 and 2006/7, Invest NI offered assistance of £714,744 contributing to investments of £2,850,932.

In addition to this a pilot Exploring Enterprise Programme is underway in the five areas of North, South and East Belfast, Greater Shankill and Rathcoole through the Renewing Communities Action Plan with a budget allocation of £1.69m over the period 06/07 to 08/09.

DETI has recently supported a next generation residential high-speed broadband trial in a new social housing development being built by Clanmil Housing Association on the Ormeau Road, Belfast. Total resources committed by DETI being £67k.

DETI, through the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Peace II) issued a Letter of Offer of £247,122 to one project located within a Neighbourhood Renewal Area in 2006/07. There were no Peace II Letters of Offer issued to projects located within a Neighbourhood Renewal Area in 2005/06.

There have been no Peace II Letters of Offer issued to projects located within the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area in the last 2 years.

Northern Ireland Trade

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total value of Northern Ireland trade with (i) Scotland; (ii) England; (iii) Wales; and (iv) the Republic of Ireland, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5304/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to provide information on the total value of Northern Ireland trade with Scotland, England and Wales on an individual country basis. However, table 1 below provides the total value of trade to Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland Manufacturing companies in each of the last five years.

TABLE 1. NI MANUFACTURING SALES TO GREAT BRITAIN AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND BETWEEN 2002/03 TO 2006/07 (CURRENT PRICES)

	2002/03 £m	2003/04 £m	2004/05 £m	2005/06 £m	2006/07 (provisional) £m
Great Britain	£6,382	£5,949	£6,005	£6,052	£6,190
Republic of Ireland	£978	£1,115	£1,243	£1,308	£1,519

Source: Northern Ireland Manufacturing Sales & Exports Survey 2006/07

Tourist Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the measures being taken to redress the significant imbalance in tourist funding by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Invest NI, between the West Belfast parliamentary constituency and the other parliamentary constituencies. (AQW 5358/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is working with Belfast City Council and Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to scope an Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework and associated Action Plan for the wider Belfast area. The report will provide an analysis of how local community tourism development and visitor servicing activity should be conducted across the City of Belfast. In particular, it will seek to identify how the outer areas of Belfast (including the West Belfast Parliamentary

Constituency) can share the tourism benefits provided by the city centre. The report is due by end June 2008.

West Belfast already benefits indirectly from NITB assistance provided to tourism projects in the Belfast City Council area. In the last three years NITB has provided more than £4.7 million to projects in the Belfast City Council area in respect of regional tourism activity, domestic marketing and tourist information support.

Invest NI capital support may be considered for hotel projects throughout Northern Ireland with the exception of projects within a ten mile radius of Belfast City centre (a moratorium on capital assistance for hotel development within a 10 mile radius of Belfast city centre has been in place since 1997). However, it is recognised that certain areas of Belfast are not experiencing the same level of market buoyancy as other parts of the city. The moratorium therefore allows the consideration of hotel projects in areas of social need. Invest NI is aware a number of potential hotel projects in West Belfast and has met with the promoters of these projects.

NITB has recently assisted the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) Cultural Diversity Project which falls within the West Belfast Parliamentary Constituency.

A significant level of financial assistance provided by NITB cannot be allocated against any single constituency as the projects being supported in many cases span 2 or more constituency areas. The West Belfast constituency gains benefits from significant investment in projects that cover all 4 Belfast constituencies.

Belfast City Council area received over £4.7 million funding for 19 projects over the last 3 years. In particular regional tourism activity, domestic marketing and tourist information support (Belfast Welcome Centre and the two Belfast based airports) benefit all Belfast constituencies as well as constituencies outside of Belfast due to the city's ability to act as a gateway into the rest of Northern Ireland.

District Council Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the amount of funding allocated by his department to each District Council. (AQW 5368/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The information requested is not readily available. My officials are currently working on preparing an answer for the Member.

When the answer has been prepared I will write to the Member, with the figures he has requested, and ensure that a copy of the letter is placed in the Assembly Library.

Reconnect Scheme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to replace the Reconnect Scheme. (AQW 5408/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Reconnect scheme will need to be evaluated before any decisions in respect of further support for domestic microgeneration can be made. Any future financial provision for a household renewables scheme will need to take into account wider UK wide support available, proposed actions to meet EU Directives, changing market conditions, value for money and the effect on competitiveness.

Chicken Waste Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4108/08, (i) to give an update on discussions his department has had with Rose Energy; and (ii) if he has committed any funding to assist Rose Energy with its proposals to locate a chicken waste plant at Glenavy. (AQW 5499/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has had ongoing commercial dialogue with the Rose Energy Consortium regarding their proposal. No funds have been committed by my Department to the project.

Townland Names

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5542/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Where an individual or organisation uses a townland name when writing to the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment, this is included in the address when responding.

ENVIRONMENT

Foundations for the Future

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment what action she will take on the recommendation contained in 'Foundations for the Future',

the final report of the Review of Environmental Governance. (AQO 201/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I will carefully consider my approach to environmental governance. In so doing I will take account of the recommendations in “Foundations for the Future” and of resource considerations, the views of the Environment Committee and of any points which stakeholders wish to make.

I expect to make a public statement on the way forward towards the end of the year, following discussion with my colleagues on the Executive.

Retirement Dwellings

Mr O’Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the applications approved for retirement dwellings in the Moyle District Council area, in the past five years. (AQW 2809/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been 24 outline and full planning approvals on 22 sites in the Moyle District Council area over the past five years where the proposal submitted was described as a retirement dwelling. These are detailed below.

Of these 22 sites, 8 did not lie in a policy area such as Greenbelt or Countryside Policy Area CPA) where stricter policy provisions apply.

Year of approval	No. of Approvals	Application Number	Location
2003	7	E/2002/0360/F	Glenmakeeran Road, Ballycastle
		E/2002/0375/O	Castlecatt Road, Ballyness, Bushmills
		E/2002/0396/F	Lisnagat Road, Liscolman
		E/2002/0413/O	Drumnagee Road, Lisnagunogue
		E/2003/0131/F	Glenariffe Road, Glenariffe
		E/2003/0053/O	Ballyemon Road, Cushendall
		E/2003/0046/O	Moyarget Road, Ballycastle
2004	3	E/2003/0486/O	Magheramore Road, Ballycastle
		E/2004/0089/F	Ballynagard Road, Ballyvoy
		E4/2004/0243/F	Ballyemon Road, Cushendall

Year of approval	No. of Approvals	Application Number	Location
2005	5	E/2004/0096/O	Moyarget Road, Ballycastle
		E/2004/0155/O	Coolkeeran Road, Armoy
		E/2005/0098/F	Ballybrack Road, Cushendall
		E/2005/0296/O	Whitepark Road, Ballintoy
		E/2005/0330/O	Churchfield Road, Ballyvoy, Ballycastle
2006	6	E/2004/0586/F	Ballykenver Road, Armoy
		E/2005/0195/O	Whitepark Road, Bushmills
		E/2005/0412/O	Straid Road, Ballycastle
		E/2005/0430/O	Carrowcroey Road, Armoy
		E/2005/0601/F	Tromra Road, Cushendall
		E/2005/0613/O	Castlecatt Road, Ballyness, Bushmills
2007	3	E/2005/0118/O	Tureagh Terrace, Armoy
		E/2006/0283/F	Ballyemon Road, Cushendall
		E/2007/0027/O	Carnbore Road, Liscolman

Rat Population

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to address the rising number of vermin rats in council areas; and to provide figures for the rat population in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4774/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment is not the responsible Department for the policy and legislation on rats and I would ask that the question be redirected to the Minister for Health Social Services and Public Safety.

Rat Population

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the financial assistance she is providing to local councils to address the rising rat population.

(AQW 4775/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment is not the responsible Department for the policy and legislation on rats and therefore does not provide financial assistance to councils. Northern Ireland Water, in some areas, bait

sewers to control vermin. Several District Councils have contracts to carry out sewer baiting on behalf of Northern Ireland Water.

Road Bridges

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if she has indicated her support for the construction of two new road bridges across the River Blackwater at Annaghroe and Knockginny. (AQW 5126/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Road and bridge infrastructure is within the remit of DRD. This question is not within my remit as Minister of the Environment.

Graduated Driver Licensing Scheme

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to give her assessment of the graduated driver licensing scheme. (AQW 5154/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Graduated driver licensing (GDL) aims to provide a staged progression from initial learning through various restricted stages to unrestricted solo driving.

Northern Ireland driving regulations already contain some elements of GDL including:

- display of “R” (restricted) plates for a year after passing the driving test;
- a 45mph restriction on “R” (and “L”) drivers, limiting their exposure to higher speeds; and
- more severe penalties for newly qualified drivers committing traffic offences - new full licence holders who receive six or more penalty points within the first two years of passing the driving test have to surrender their licences and re-sit both tests (theory and practical).

There is a considerable amount of evidence available on the success of GDL in other countries and we are keen to draw on best practice elsewhere in our efforts to improve our road safety record. Officials are reviewing the current arrangements in Northern Ireland, including proposals to reform the “R” and “L” driver schemes and other elements of GDL. These proposals will form the basis of a public consultation in the near future.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for single homes in the countryside that have met the “infill”

criteria as defined under draft Planning Policy Statement 14 since the introduction of that policy. (AQW 5189/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The information held by Planning Service on its computer system does not include a category related specifically to ‘infill’ dwellings. Unfortunately the only way this information could be ascertained would be through a manual search which could not be done in the time available and would incur disproportionate costs. In 2006/2007 alone there were 7,607 applications for ‘outline’ and ‘full’ single dwellings in rural areas. This figure does not include replacement dwellings.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for single homes in the countryside that have met the “replacement” criteria as defined under draft Planning Policy Statement 14 since the introduction of that policy. (AQW 5190/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In the 2006/2007 financial year 306 applications for single replacement dwellings in the countryside met the criteria for draft Planning Policy Statement 14 and were subsequently approved. Data preceding this date is not available due to the new statistical reporting system outlined in my letter to all Members in December 2007. Provisional figures for April 2007 to September 2007 will be available towards the end of April and provisional figures for October 2007 to December 2007 will be available in June.

Emerging Findings Paper

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what consideration has been given to the needs for single homes in the countryside of non-farming families in the Emerging Findings paper on draft Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQW 5192/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The work of the Executive Subcommittee, as set out in the paper on the findings emerging from the review of draft PPS 14 has included consideration of:

- the re-instatement of a policy allowing for dispersed rural communities (paragraphs 17 – 21);
- the introduction of a new policy to allow appropriately sized vacant non-residential buildings to be sympathetically restored for use as single dwellings (paragraph 27 – 28);
- a more relaxed test for the replacement of single dwellings which would allow some dwellings currently regarded as “abandoned”, and therefore

not currently eligible for replacement, to be replaced (paragraphs 29-33);

- broadening of the existing policy on social housing so that it also applies to all affordable housing (i.e. housing provided at an affordable rent or on a co-ownership basis); outside of Greenbelts and Countryside Policy Areas (CPAs), the maximum number of houses permitted in a group might be increased from 8 to 14 (paragraphs 22 - 24);
- whether for ribbon development, outside of Greenbelt and CPAs, it would be appropriate to allow two dwellings in a gap which is sufficiently large to allow dwellings of similar size and character (paragraph 34 – 35); and
- the re-introduction of a policy which provided for a dwelling in cases where there were compelling personal, health or domestic circumstances which required someone to live on a specific site and where genuine hardship would be experienced if they could not do so (paragraph 25 – 26).

The Subcommittee will shortly make recommendations to the Executive on the outcome of its review of draft PPS 14.

Climate Change Committee

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to give her assessment of the need for a Northern Ireland sub committee to the Climate Change Committee in Westminster; and to confirm whether she is confident that Northern Ireland's interests are effectively represented on the Climate Change Committee.

(AQW 5208/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Committee on Climate Change is intended to be first and foremost a committee of independent expertise to advise on the UK as a whole. I am content that provisions in place now will ensure that Northern Ireland's interests will be represented effectively in the work of the Committee on Climate Change. For example:

- in recent weeks I have been involved in the appointment of the Chair, Lord Turner, and the first five Committee members
- Committee will have experience and/or knowledge of differences between the constituent parts of the UK
- when operational, the Committee must provide, at the request of a national authority, advice, analysis, information on targets, budgets, trading schemes or any other requirement relating to greenhouse gas emissions
- the national authorities will also have powers to give guidance and direction to the Committee as to matters to take into account, though not to direct

the committee as to the content of any advice or report.

On 18 March Lord Turner visited Northern Ireland. I am already impressed by his willingness to listen to the various stakeholders here and I remain confident that he and his team will deliver the advice that we require. However, as I have said previously, I am willing to review this arrangement in light of experience.

West Tyrone Area Plan

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timeframe for the completion of the West Tyrone Area Plan. (AQW 5237/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As you may be aware, my Department has recently been involved in legal proceedings related to the judicial challenge of the Environmental Reports which accompanied the draft Northern and Magherafelt Area Plans. The judgement of the High Court in this particular case raised a number of issues regarding the role of the Department in the strategic environmental assessment of area plans. Following careful consideration of the case, my Department has lodged an appeal against certain aspects of the Court judgement.

In light of the judgement and the ongoing legal proceedings it would not be appropriate to continue work on the draft West Tyrone Area Plan until the outcome of the appeal is known. I very much regret that as a result, for a temporary period, my Department will cease to carry out any further substantive work on the preparation of the plan. I am therefore unable to provide a timetable for the completion of the West Tyrone Area Plan at this point in time.

I will, of course, review the position again once I have had the opportunity to consider the judgement handed down following the appeal proceedings.

I remain committed to the preparation of development plans as expeditiously as possible within the framework set out by European Directives and the Regional Development Strategy.

Larne Draft Area Plan

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment when the Larne Draft Area Plan will be published. (AQW 5286/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As you may be aware, my Department has recently been involved in legal proceedings related to the judicial challenge of the Environmental Reports which accompanied the draft Northern and Magherafelt Area Plans. The judgement of the High Court in this particular case raised a number of issues regarding the role of the Department in the

strategic environmental assessment of area plans. Following careful consideration of the case, my Department has lodged an appeal against certain aspects of the Court judgement.

In light of the judgement and the ongoing legal proceedings it would not be appropriate to continue work on the draft Antrim, Ballymena and Larne Area Plan until the outcome of the appeal is known. I very much regret that as a result, for a temporary period, my Department will cease to carry out any further substantive work on the preparation of the plan. I am therefore unable to provide a timetable for the publication of the draft Antrim, Ballymena and Larne Area Plan at this point in time.

I will, of course, review the position again once I have had the opportunity to consider the judgement handed down following the appeal proceedings.

I remain committed to the preparation of development plans as expeditiously as possible within the framework set out by European Directives and the Regional Development Strategy.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why planning application T/2007/0146/F has been delayed by the Planning Service; and to confirm whether an MLA can delay the approval of a planning application after it has been passed for approval by a District Council. (AQW 5336/08)

The Minister of the Environment: An MLA for the area raised the issue of road safety in relation to the proposed access for the development. His constituents, who live opposite the proposal, were concerned that a new access would cause congestion and possible accidents on a narrow country road. Planning Service sought the views of Roads Service, in relation to this matter, and that Service discussed the details with both Road Safety Branch and PSNI Traffic Management Branch. Planning Service will not issue a decision until any outstanding issue has been addressed satisfactorily, even where the view of the District Council has been sought and received.

Any matters raised by political representatives will be considered and addressed before a decision is issued. While it is preferable that this should happen before a final opinion is put before the local Council, issues raised by MLAs and indeed any political representative or member of the public have to be considered before a decision is issued.

Planning Applications

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if the revised Planning Policy Statement 14 will permit housing applications from rural dwellers, as well as farm families. (AQW 5347/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The paper on the findings emerging from the Subcommittee's work on the review of draft PPS 14, published on 11 February 2008, indicated that the Subcommittee is seeking to address the needs of both farming and non-farming rural dwellers.

For non-farming rural dwellers this includes consideration of:

- the re-instatement of a policy allowing for dispersed rural communities;
- the introduction of a new policy to allow appropriately sized vacant non-residential buildings to be sympathetically restored for use as single dwellings;
- a more relaxed test for the replacement of single dwellings which would allow some dwellings currently regarded as "abandoned", and therefore not currently eligible for replacement, to be replaced;
- broadening of the existing policy on social housing so that it also applies to all affordable housing (i.e. housing provided at an affordable rent or on a co-ownership basis); outside of Greenbelts and Countryside Policy Areas (CPAs), the maximum number of houses permitted in a group might be increased from 8 to 14;
- whether for ribbon development, outside of Greenbelts and CPAs, it would be appropriate to allow two dwellings in a gap which is sufficiently large to allow dwellings of similar size and character; and
- the re-introduction of a policy which provided for a dwelling in cases where there were compelling personal, health or domestic circumstances which required someone to live on a specific site and where genuine hardship would be experienced if they could not do so.

The Subcommittee will shortly make recommendations to the Executive on the outcome of the review of draft PPS 14.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why the Planning Service's office in Ballymena is stating that the Roads Service has concerns in relation to planning application T/2007/0146/F. (AQW 5377/08)

The Minister of the Environment: An MLA for the area raised the issue of road safety in relation to the proposed access for the development. His constituents, who live opposite the proposal, were concerned that a new access would cause congestion and possible accidents on a narrow country road. Planning Service sought the views of Roads Service, in relation to this matter, and that Service discussed the details with both Road Safety Branch and PSNI Traffic Management Branch. Planning Service will not issue a decision until any outstanding issue has been addressed satisfactorily, even where the view of the District Council has been sought and received.

Any matters raised by political representatives will be considered and addressed before a decision is issued. While it is preferable that this should happen before a final opinion is put before the local Council, issues raised by MLAs and indeed any political representative or member of the public have to be considered before a decision is issued.

Plastic Bags

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps she has taken to encourage the public to use alternatives to plastic bags.

(AQW 5460/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department continues to support voluntary initiatives aimed at reducing carrier bag usage such as the current UK-wide agreement between Government, the Waste Resources Action Programme and retailers which aims to reduce the overall environmental impact of all carrier bags by 25% by the end of 2008. Retailers are seeking to achieve this reduction by:

- encouraging customers to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags they use;
- reducing the impact of each carrier bag e.g. by using less material or incorporating recycled content; and
- enabling the recycling of more carrier bags where appropriate.

Chicken Waste Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4650/08, to confirm Rose Energy has submitted a planning application for a chicken waste plant in Glenavy, County Antrim.

(AQW 5488/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Rose Energy has not yet submitted a planning application.

Architectural Heritage

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment what proposals she has to improve information to the public of the potential of designations of 'Area of Townscape Character' and 'Area of Village Character' to maintain and enhance architectural heritage.

(AQO 2592/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Areas of Townscape and Village Character are implemented through the development plan process. The background and policy for these designations are set out in Planning Policy Statement 6 -Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage and its Addendum (Areas of Townscape Character). Both of these documents went through a public consultation exercise prior to publication. They are available on the Planning Service website and in hard copy at Divisional Planning Offices.

The ATC concept is also widely publicised as part of the development plan consultation process through which individuals also have the opportunity to submit any suggestion they might have regarding ATCs to the Department. My Department commits significant resources to public consultation in the preparation of plans to encourage as many people as possible to take the opportunity to be involved.

I am content that the current arrangements offer the public both the necessary information about Areas of Townscape and Village Character and the opportunity to influence their designation.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how 'Lifetime Opportunities', Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, identified as a key cross-cutting priority of the Comprehensive Spending Review, has informed the department's spending plans for all government departments, given that the strategy has yet to be adopted by the Executive.

(AQO 209/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The draft spending proposals put forward by departments as part of the 2007 Budget process were informed by a broad range of issues including the need to address poverty and social exclusion.

The priorities for the restored Executive will be set out in the draft Programme for Government which is due to be published for public consultation in November and December, alongside the draft Budget.

Consultancy Fees

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total value of consultancy fees paid (i) in the last three years; and (ii) planned for the next three years, broken down by department. (AQW 3871/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Departments have spent the following on consultancy for the years 2005/06 and 2006/07, which reflect the information provided to PAC and set out in the PAC's 6th report (session 2007/08). The figures for 2007/08 are estimated outturn and the future figures are estimates of currently planned consultancy and commitments of ongoing projects. Additional expenditure will be required as new consultancy work is identified.

£m						
Department	2005/06 Actual Outturn	2006/07 Actual Outturn	2007/08 Estimate outturn	2008/09 Estimate	2009/10 Estimate	2010/11 Estimate
DARD	0.49	0.78	1.26	0.82	0.73	0.81
DCAL	0.76	1.61	4.02	0.75	0.58	0.57
DE	3.21	4.05	5.04	0.30	0.26	N/A
DEL	0.62	0.38	0.59	0.61	0.62	0.64
DETI	3.01	3.23	3.07	2.77	2.69	2.85
DFP	2.51	4.37	8.37	8.22	2.19	1.98
DHSSPS	3.56	4.13	3.70	3.00	3.00	3.00
DOE	1.51	2.28	2.55	1.97	1.80	1.71
DRD	8.61	15.94	2.22	1.50	1.37	1.13
DSD	0.72	0.64	2.38	2.26	2.14	2.02
OFMDFM	6.71	4.60	5.87	7.82	6.55	5.83
Total	31.71	42.01	39.07	30.02	21.93	20.54

Rates Relief

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the uptake of rates relief, broken down by district council area. (AQW 4888/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The amount of Rate Relief that has been awarded, broken down by district council area, is detailed in the attached table.

District Council	Number of Properties	Total Awarded
Antrim	169	£25,169.37
Ards	300	£40,027.91
Armagh	235	£35,978.60
Ballymena	217	£32,065.18
Ballymoney	124	£16,426.30
Banbridge	191	£25,823.82
Belfast	1,179	£157,621.35
Carrickfergus	188	£29,016.99
Castlereagh	299	£39,426.57
Coleraine	220	£31,047.59
Cookstown	119	£16,336.06
Craigavon	451	£59,936.15
Derry	474	£63,016.72
Down	241	£33,463.48
Dungannon & South Tyrone	150	£18,780.08
Fermanagh	225	£28,516.28
Larne	141	£16,750.44
Limavady	135	£17,058.47
Lisburn	392	£56,439.95
Magherafelt	123	£13,820.50
Moyle	77	£11,997.19
Newry & Mourne	385	£55,028.33
Newtownabbey	460	£66,528.23
North Down	305	£50,043.12
Omagh	159	£21,231.64
Strabane	195	£25,079.57
Totals	7,154	£986,629.89

Rates Revenue

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an estimate of the amount of revenue that has been lost due to rates not being paid for occupied properties which are claimed to be vacant. (AQW 4937/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is no liability for rates on vacant domestic properties. The overall level of domestic vacancy is taken into account when striking the regional and district rates.

Domestic properties previously categorised as vacant, which are subsequently found to be occupied, are billed back to the date of occupancy.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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 5015/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In answering this question it has been assumed that public appointments relate only to appointments made through the Public Appointments Process which is regulated and monitored by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and covers the four bodies which my Department sponsors. Appointments made to Monitoring Bodies and Review groups have not therefore been included.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has not made any such public appointments since the restoration of devolution.

Ministerial Drivers

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the process by which ministerial drivers are appointed to their respective positions. (AQW 5046/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At the time when the Assembly was reinstated, as there were more drivers than estimated Ministerial posts, the names of all available drivers were placed in a draw. Names were then drawn to provide an ordered list. As Ministers were announced drivers were allocated in order from the list and assigned to Ministers and Departments.

Unoccupied Commercial Properties

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of unoccupied commercial properties across Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of those properties in respect of which the department has been able to collect rates; and (iii) the total amount of rate revenue collected by the department with respect to these properties. (AQW 5188/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

- (i) There are 7,081 unoccupied commercial properties in Northern Ireland with a net annual value of £2k or more which are potentially liable for vacant rating.

- (ii) Rates due were collected in full for 3,629 of these properties. Rates remain owing on another 2,852 properties and these are at various stages of the collection and or recovery processes. LPS is seeking to identify the person entitled to possession for a further 600 vacant non domestic properties so that a rate bill can be issued and if necessary recovery action started.
- (iii) The total revenue collected including discharges for non domestic rated properties during 2007/2008 (for the 3,629 cases) was almost £12,250,000. A discharge is applied to the rates due when a property receives an exemption from vacant rate liability. This outturn figure is provisional subject to the annual audit.

Rates Collection Agency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of items of correspondence regarding rating issues and other related topics waiting to be processed by the Rates Collection Agency. (AQW 5240/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services (LPS) assumed responsibility for the billing, collection and recovery of rate liability from 1 April 2007.

On the 4 April 2008 LPS had 8479 items of correspondence relating to rating issues waiting to be processed.

Rates Valuations Staff

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made in relation to the impact, of reducing staff levels within his department and across the Civil Service, on the current backlog of rates valuation work. (AQW 5241/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land & Property Services (LPS) continues to work closely with my Department to ensure that the ongoing work to reduce the backlog in rate arrears and reduce the number of valuations awaited is not impacted by reductions in staff levels within the Department and across the Civil Service.

A dedicated team is dealing with rate arrears and this team will remain, outside any headcount reduction, until backlogs are removed

Rates Valuations Staff

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of rates valuations

staff currently employed in assessing the rating potential of all properties, domestic and commercial, and (ii) how this compares with staffing numbers five years ago. (AQW 5242/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 31st March 2008 there were some 155 Land & Property Services operational staff employed in the valuation, for rating purposes, of domestic and commercial properties.

Five years ago (2003) there were some 160 staff involved in similar activities.

Rates Collection Agency: IT Systems

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if all the problems that occurred in the migration of data between the two Information Technology systems within the Rates Collection Agency have now been resolved. (AQW 5243/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are two remaining areas of data migration which have still to be fully addressed. Firstly, there are about 4000 pre-2006/07 enforced debt cases where the data is in the wrong rate category and work to resolve these cases is ongoing. Secondly, the new system has introduced structured addresses in line with Pointer, the address database created and maintained by Ordnance Survey. Addresses in the old system were unstructured and it was impossible to map the data correctly to the new structure, so they were migrated in field sequence to maintain the integrity of the original addresses.

A project is currently underway to match the addresses with Pointer addresses and where a match is found to replace them with the Pointer address.

Childcare Places for Civil Servants

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the action he is taking to ensure, as part of his priority for economic activity, that childcare places are available for civil servants, particularly women returning to work. (AQW 5302/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As an employer the Northern Ireland Civil Service is keenly aware that access to good quality, affordable childcare is of huge importance to many staff however, like any activity funded by public money, any assistance that is offered must be subject to the normal economic appraisal process and represent value for money. Attempts in the past to establish a Northern Ireland Civil Service workplace nursery were unable to satisfy

these requirements and therefore the focus has been on other forms of assistance, such as flexible working arrangements and special leave.

A significant new scheme will become available for all Northern Ireland Civil Service staff later this year when the new payroll system is launched. The Salary Sacrifice Childcare Voucher scheme will enable staff to sacrifice part of the salary due to them and receive vouchers that can be used to pay for childcare.

Since 1991 my Department has provided grant-in-aid to support the operation of a network of holiday playschemes that are set up and run by staff on a voluntary basis. The schemes are open to school age children of civil servants during the summer holidays.

Rates Collection Agency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if there have been any problems with the recently installed computer system within the Rates Collection Agency; and (ii) what steps have been taken to rectify any such problems. (AQW 5319/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Problems with the recently installed rate collection computer system have, in general, been due to two underlying reasons:

- (i) inadequacies in the original specification of requirement – either gaps in the specification or lack of detail in some areas; and
- (ii) data migration problems.

With regard to the specification, Requests for Change have been agreed to define the missing details and in one area, Finance, a review is currently underway to improve and update the original specification in light of experience. In relation to data migration, a programme to improve the quality of the data is ongoing and only two areas remain, enforced debt and addresses.

Rates Collection Agency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if the Rates Collection Agency's new IT system is now fully operational. (AQW 5322/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is one area of the IT system which is not yet fully operational. Phase 3 (Housing Benefit) was delayed due to business pressures. An upgraded Phase 3 is now due to go live at the end of July.

Domestic and Commercial Valuations

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current backlog in correspondence in relation to (i) domestic; and (ii) commercial valuations. (AQW 5323/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The valuation area of Land and Property Services' business receives low levels of correspondence and, as such, there are no significant backlogs. However, Land and Property Services is currently dealing with some 1,920 application-based challenges to the domestic valuation list and some 1,270 to the commercial valuation list. These involve ongoing correspondence.

These challenges form part of Land and Property Services' normal levels of 'work in hand' and they are being completed on an ongoing basis

Rates Income

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the income generated in rates from vacant/derelict commercial properties, broken down by District Council area. (AQW 5325/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The non-domestic vacant rating scheme (NDVR) was introduced from 1 April 2004. During 2004/2005 the NDVR scheme generated an additional £4.6m in rate revenue. Unfortunately, information in relation to the rate revenue generated in subsequent rating years 2005/06 and 2006/07 is not readily available. However, the total value of payments and discharges for NDVR properties during the 2007/08 rating year was £12.2m.

Economic Growth

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the rate of growth in the economy in each of the last five years; and (ii) how much of this growth was attributable to the public sector. (AQW 5339/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The rate of growth of the Northern Ireland economy, measured by changes in total Gross Value Added (GVA), in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	GVA Growth (%)
2005-2006	5.6
2004-2005	4.5
2003-2004	6.5
2002-2003	6.2

Year	GVA Growth (%)
2001-2002	5.0

An official estimate of the public sector's share of Northern Ireland's recent economic growth is currently unavailable. However, it should be noted that public expenditure as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product in Northern Ireland has increased from 58.1 per cent in 2001-02 to 62.7 per cent in 2005-06 while public sector jobs as a proportion of total employee jobs in Northern Ireland has remained fairly static at just over 30 per cent over the same period.

Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give a timescale within which the provisions within the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 are expected to be applied to Northern Ireland. (AQW 5362/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are currently no plans to replicate the provisions of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 in Northern Ireland.

Press Office Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4678/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5387/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff working in the DFP Press Office is 7. The breakdown of staff by grade is as follows:

- Principal Information Officer
- Senior Information Officer
- Information Officer X 2
- Assistant Information Officer
- Deputy Principal
- Administrative Officer

Energy Initiatives

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the sustainable energy initiatives; and (ii) the energy efficiency measures, that have been discussed in relation to (a) current; and (b) future Workplace 2010 contracts. (AQW 5407/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Workplace 2010 contract has not yet been let. The following sustainability and energy efficiency

requirements have been included in the draft Workplace 2010 contract issued to bidders as part of the best and final offer (BAFO) process:

- A minimum of 10% of energy supply to be achieved from Low and Zero Carbon Technologies (LZCT) at the facilities e.g. biomass, solar water heating, combined heat and power, ground source heating and cooling etc. by year 6;
- Additionally a minimum of 10% green electricity to be included in the energy sourcing mix;
- The achievement of a Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) rating of “Excellent” for new Facilities and at least “Very Good” for refurbished facilities;
- A 30% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions per square metre over the life of the contract;
- Reduction of water consumption at the facilities by 25% by Contract year 20;
- Promotion of materials recovery, reuse and recycling.

Civil Service Employment in South Down

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people employed by the Civil Service in the South Down constituency. (AQO 2650/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total number of public sector employees in South Down at September 2005 was 7,856.

By 1 February 2008, a total of 549 civil servants (permanent and temporary), based on headcount, were employed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the South Down constituency.

Vioxx

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of patients who have died as a result of the side effects of taking the drug Vioxx. (AQW 5595/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Rofecoxib, a drug used to treat arthritis and acute pain, was also marketed in the UK under the brand name Vioxx and Vioxx Acute. In the last 10 years, 1998 to 2007, no deaths were registered in Northern Ireland where the drugs, Vioxx, Vioxx Acute or Rofecoxib were mentioned on the death certificate.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Official Visits

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) when; and (ii) how, he informed Landmark East of his visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008. (AQW 5160/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I did not inform Landmark East of my visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008.

Mental-Health Clients

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of complaints relating to the treatment of mental health clients that have been made against each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years; (ii) the number of such complaints subsequently brought to the relevant Health and Social Services Board; (iii) the number of such complaints then brought to the Commissioner for Complaints; and (iv) the number of complaints upheld. (AQW 5187/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The following table shows the number of complaints relating to the treatment of mental health clients that have been made against each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years:

	Number of complaints made				
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Altnagelvin Hospital	0	0	0	0	0
Armagh & Dungannon Hospital	22	8	8	7	19
Belfast City Hospital	4	6	8	3	3
Causeway	11	33	50	14	17
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	12	11	16	9	10
Down Lisburn	27	25	21	36	35
Foyle	13	8	10	8	9
Green Park	0	0	0	0	1
Homefirst Community	37	31	45	41	47

	Number of complaints made				
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Mater Hospital	12	7	14	7	7
Newry & Mourne	3	8	5	9	4
North & West Belfast	5	5	5	9	14
Royal Group of Hospitals	0	0	0	0	0
South & East Belfast	41	56	30	43	65
Sperrin & Lakeland	12	6	4	13	11
Ulster Community & Hospital	10	28	16	14	9
United Hospitals	0	0	0	0	0
NI Ambulance Service	0	0	0	0	0
Northern Ireland	209	232	232	213	251

Source: Hospital Information Branch

- (ii) Complaints referred to HSS Boards for consideration of independent review are not categorised by specialty. Therefore information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

- (iii) & (iv)

Your request has been passed to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, who will reply directly to you.

Prescription Charges

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the cost benefit review into the current system of prescription charges. (AQW 5198/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I established a cost and benefit review of prescription charges as promised in the Assembly debate on this issue in May last year. The review group have now completed their analysis of the current system of prescription charging and sent their report to me. I will bring forward proposals to the Assembly when I have concluded my deliberations. In the interim, and in recognition of the fact that I am still considering the options, I have decided to freeze prescription charges for 2008/2009.

Childminder Registration

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to improve the current system of childminder registration. (AQW 5199/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my department to Department of Education (DE) in November 2006 with Early Years policy. DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders.

The '0-6 Early Years Strategy' currently being developed by DE will include recommendations in relation to the areas of regulation and inspection and the development of the early years workforce, which includes childminders. My department will then consider these recommendations. In the meantime, DE is currently working alongside the Health and Social Care Trusts to streamline registration procedures, to ensure consistency across Northern Ireland.

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 relation to delays. In addition, senior officials will be meeting with Bridget Nodder, Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss their organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Childminder Registration

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his action plan for reducing the delays in the registration process for childminders. (AQW 5200/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my department to Department of Education (DE) in November 2006 with Early Years policy. DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders.

The '0-6 Early Years Strategy' currently being developed by DE will include recommendations in relation to the areas of regulation and inspection and the development of the early years workforce, which includes childminders. My department will then consider these recommendations. In the meantime, DE is currently working alongside the Health and Social Care Trusts to streamline registration procedures, to ensure consistency across Northern Ireland.

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

relation to delays. In addition, senior officials will be meeting with Bridget Nodder, Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss their organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Childminder Registration

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to introduce a requirement that registered childminders obtain public liability insurance. (AQW 5201/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my department to Department of Education (DE) in November 2006 with Early Years policy. DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders.

The '0-6 Early Years Strategy' currently being developed by DE will include recommendations in relation to the areas of regulation and inspection and the development of the early years workforce, which includes childminders. My department will then consider these recommendations. In the meantime, DE is currently working alongside the Health and Social Care Trusts to streamline registration procedures, to ensure consistency across Northern Ireland.

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 relation to delays. In addition, senior officials will be meeting with Bridget Nodder, Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss their organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Childminder Registration

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to introduce a requirement for registered childminders to undertake basic training, including first aid training. (AQW 5202/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my department to Department of Education (DE) in November 2006 with Early Years policy. DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders.

The '0-6 Early Years Strategy' currently being developed by DE will include recommendations in relation to the areas of regulation and inspection and the development of the early years workforce, which

includes childminders. My department will then consider these recommendations. In the meantime, DE is currently working alongside the Health and Social Care Trusts to streamline registration procedures, to ensure consistency across Northern Ireland.

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 relation to delays. In addition, senior officials will be meeting with Bridget Nodder, Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss their organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Medical Secretaries

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why medical secretaries in the Ulster Hospital have been graded at level 3, when medical secretaries throughout the rest of Northern Ireland and England and Wales have been graded at level 4. (AQW 5209/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not accurate to say that medical secretaries throughout the rest of Northern Ireland and England and Wales have been graded at grade 4. There is a mixture of grade 3 and grade 4 jobs within the medical secretary roles in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the UK. The 129 medical secretaries in the Ulster Hospital have been awarded their Agenda for Change grade 3 based on their job description and using the same process that has been used for grading all jobs in the Health and Social Care. I understand that the management and staff representatives in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have agreed to carry out a review of the grading assigned to the medical secretaries. This review will be carried out during week commencing 21 April 2008.

Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of dentists in general dental services in the North Down constituency (i) currently; (ii) at 1 April 2004; (iii) at 1 April 2005; (iv) at 1 April 2006; and (v) at 1 April 2007. (AQW 5210/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below. Data is not available prior to 2005.

	Number of NHS dentists in North Down
(i) Currently	49
(ii) at 1 April 2004	Information not available
(iii) at 1 April 2005	47
(iv) at 1 April 2006	49
(v) at 1 April 2007	49

Source: Central Services Agency

Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients registered in dental capitation arrangements in the North Down constituency (i) currently; (ii) at 1 April 2004; (iii) at 1 April 2005; (iv) at 1 April 2006; and (v) at 1 April 2007. (AQW 5211/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below. Data is not available prior to 2005.

Patients registered in dental capitation arrangements in the North Down constituency

	Age			
	0-5	6-12	13-17	Total
(i) Currently	2,648	5,065	3,872	11,585
(ii) at 1 April 2004	Information not available			
(iii) at 1 April 2005	2,500	4,978	3,945	11,423
(iv) at 1 April 2006	2,425	4,875	3,836	11,136
(v) at 1 April 2007	2,493	5,100	3,928	11,521

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: The figures shown relate to patients registered with dental practices located within the North Down constituency. These patients do not necessarily reside in the North Down constituency, and likewise, some people resident in the North Down constituency may be registered under such arrangements with other dental practices outside of the constituency.

Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients registered in dental continuing care arrangements in the North Down constituency (i) currently; (ii) at 1 April 2004; (iii) at 1 April 2005; (iv) at 1 April 2006; and (v) at 1 April 2007. (AQW 5212/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below. Data is not available prior to 2005.

Patients registered in dental continuing care arrangements in the North Down constituency

	Age		
	18-64	65 and Over	Total
(i) Currently	20,687	4,977	25,664
(ii) at 1 April 2004	Information not available		
(iii) at 1 April 2005	25,051	5,604	30,655
(iv) at 1 April 2006	23,981	5,224	29,205
(v) at 1 April 2007	25,388	5,362	30,750

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: The figures shown relate to patients registered with dental practices located within the North Down constituency. These patients do not necessarily reside in the North Down constituency, and likewise, some people resident in the North Down constituency may be registered under such arrangements with other dental practices outside of the constituency.

Prostate Cancer

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps his department is taking to raise public awareness of prostate cancer. (AQW 5213/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Cancer Control Programme for Northern Ireland, published by the Department in 2006, contains several recommendations for action relating to improving the awareness of possible cancer symptoms and the early detection of cancer. Whilst the Department is not at present running public awareness programmes specifically focusing on prostate cancer, we are currently engaged with Boards and Trusts in working to ensure the Control Programme recommendations for improvements in cancer detection and care are fully implemented.

In May 2007 the Department, working in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Cancer Network, issued referral guidance for patients suspected of having cancer, including prostate cancer, to every GP practice in Northern Ireland. Many GP practices display a range of informative leaflets aimed at raising awareness of particular conditions, including cancer and in addition, information about prostate cancer is available through the Northern Ireland cancer and palliative care online resource www.capricorn-ni.org

Emergency Calls

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of emergency calls received by (i) the Ambulance Service; and (ii) the Fire and Rescue Service, in 2007. (AQW 5214/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During 2007, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service received 135,766 emergency calls and the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service received 52,490.

Children Adoption

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people waiting to adopt children in each of the last three years. (AQW 5218/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Dental Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of dentists that currently provide NHS dental services. (AQW 5220/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: According to Central Services Agency figures, at 1 April 2008, there were 806 dentists registered to provide NHS dental services.

Fire Appliances

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the age of all fire appliances located in each fire station. (AQW 5221/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is set out in the following table.

TABLE: NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – AGE OF APPLIANCES

Station	Number of Appliances	Year of Manufacture
Antrim Fire Station	2	2007
		2000
Armagh Fire Station	2	2004
		2000

Station	Number of Appliances	Year of Manufacture
Ballycastle Fire Station	2	1993
		1994
Ballyclare Fire Station	2	1994
		1997
Ballymena Fire Station	2	2007
		1995
Ballymoney Fire Station	2	1996
		1993
Ballynahinch Fire Station	2	2007
		1995
Ballywalter Fire Station	1	2001
Banbridge Fire Station	2	2005
		1996
Bangor Fire Station	2	2006
		1994
Belleek Fire Station	1	1995
Cadogan Fire Station	2	2007
		2007
Carnlough Fire Station	1	1996
Carrickfergus Fire Station	2	2007
		1996
Carryduff Fire Station	1	1996
Castlederg Fire Station	2	2004
		1993
Central Fire Station	2	2007
		2005
Clogher Fire Station	2	2005
		1995
Coleraine Fire Station	2	2007
		2006
Comber Fire Station	1	1996
Cookstown Fire Station	2	2004
		2001
Crescent Link Fire Station	2	2006
		1996
Crossmaglen Fire Station	1	1995
Crumlin Fire Station	1	2000
Cushendall Fire Station	1	2004
Donaghadee Fire Station	1	2004

Station	Number of Appliances	Year of Manufacture
Downpatrick Fire Station	2	2005
		1998
Dromore Fire Station (Down)	1	1992
Dromore Fire Station (Tyrone)	1	1995
Dungannon Fire Station	2	1998
		1996
Dungiven Fire Station		2004
Enniskillen Fire Station	2	1995
		2007
Fintona Fire Station	1	2004
Glengormley Fire Station	2	2007
		1995
Holywood Fire Station	2	2004
		1996
Irvinestown Fire Station	1	1995
Keady Fire Station	1	2006
Kilkeel Fire Station	2	1996
		1996
Kilrea Fire Station	1	1994
Knock Fire Station	2	2005
		2005
Larne Fire Station	2	1994
		2006
Limavady Fire Station	2	2000
		1995
Lisburn Fire Station	2	2005
		2001
Lisnaskea Fire Station	2	1998
		1995
Lurgan Fire Station	2	2007
		2004
Maghera Fire Station	2	2006
		1993
Magherafelt Fire Station	2	2005
		2004
Newcastle Fire Station	2	2005
		2005
Newry Fire Station	2	2005
		2000

Station	Number of Appliances	Year of Manufacture
Newtownards Fire Station	2	2007
		2005
Newtownhamilton Fire Station	2	2004
		1991
Newtownstewart Fire Station	1	1995
Northland Road Fire Station	2	2005
		2005
Omagh Fire Station	2	2007
		2006
Pomeroy Fire Station	1	1994
Portadown Fire Station	2	2007
		1998
Portaferry Fire Station	1	1993
Portrush Fire Station	2	2005
		1994
Portstewart Fire Station	2	2005
		1997
Rathfriland Fire Station	2	1990
		1993
Rathlin Island Fire Station	1	1990
Springfield Fire Station	2	2007
		2007
Strabane Fire Station	2	2006
		2000
Warrenpoint Fire Station	2	2000
		2001
Westland Fire Station	1	2007
Whitehead Fire Station	1	2004
Whitla Fire Station	2	2007
		2007

Dental Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (a) number, and (b) percentage change in the number, of NHS dental patients in each of the last three years.
(AQW 5222/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Year	(a) Dental Registrations	(b) Percentage change
2008	859,519	-4.54%
2007	900,363	-1.06%
2006	909,981	0.29%

Source: Central Services Agency

Dental Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of dentists that have stopped providing NHS treatment in each of the last three years. (AQW 5224/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available but the following statistics are known:

Number of dentists coming off the list of all dentists registered to provide NHS dentistry during the financial year.

Year	Number of dentists
2007/08	39
2006/07	51
2005/06	34

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: The above figures for dentists coming off the registered list include dentists who have retired or moved to another country, in addition to those who may have moved wholly into private practice

Dentists who were on list for duration of the financial year but did not submit an NHS claim during that period

Year	Number of dentists
2007/08	23
2006/07	24
2005/06	26

Source: Central Services Agency

Adoption Home Studies

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time taken to have adoption home studies completed in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 5226/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Respite Provision

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the respite provision available to adults, between the ages of 30 to 65, with neurological diseases such as Parkinson's, Motor Neuron Disease, and Multiple System Atrophy; and to provide a breakdown of the provision available by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5227/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no dedicated respite care services available specifically for those aged between 30 and 65 who have suffered from neurological diseases such as Parkinson's, Motor Neurone Disease and Multiple System Atrophy.

Five respite beds specifically for people with neurological conditions are available in Spruce House in the Western Health and Social Care Trust and a further eleven beds are also available in Forster Green Hospital in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

The Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Centre in Ballycastle is a dedicated respite care facility for people suffering from MS and all the Health and Social Care Trusts contract respite bed days from this Centre.

All the Trusts provide respite provision in a variety of forms. It can be delivered in people's own homes, day facilities and nursing and residential homes to meet the user's own needs or the needs of carers and families.

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.

Developing Better Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total costs per annum for salaries, broken down by grade, since the Developing Better Services project was set up. (AQW 5233/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Developing Better Services is not being implemented as a single regional project and no specific budget has been allocated for its implementation. Whilst some Boards and Trusts have established specific project teams, others are managing their projects on an ad-hoc basis, using staff resources from within their organisations. It is therefore not possible to provide the information

requested to an acceptable degree of accuracy other than at disproportionate cost.

Staff Cutbacks

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff cutbacks in (i) managerial posts; (ii) catering staff; (iii) domestic staff; (iv) porters; (v) telephonists; (vi) groundsmen; (vii) joiners; and (viii) maintenance staff, since the formation of the new Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5235/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Trust advises that there have been reductions of 71.0 whole-time equivalent managerial staff and 0.76 whole-time equivalent telephonists during the period since their formation. There have been no further changes in any of the other requested staff groups.

Residential Provision

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the long term residential provision his department is making for adults, between the ages of 30 and 65, with neurological diseases such as (i) Parkinson's; (ii) Motor Neuron Disease; and (iii) Multiple System Atrophy, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5238/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no dedicated specialist long-term residential care facilities available in Northern Ireland specifically for those aged between 30 and 65 who have suffered from neurological diseases such as Parkinson's, Motor Neurone Disease and Multiple System Atrophy.

All the Health and Social Care Trusts provide long term residential care provision for those aged between 30 and 65 mainly by contracting services from a range of independent and statutory Nursing and Residential Home providers. The process of identifying appropriate long-term residential care provision is person-centred and in full consultation with the service user and carers.

The Trusts also work in partnership with the voluntary and independent sectors to provide a range of supported and sheltered housing schemes within the Trust areas for people with these types of conditions.

Epilepsy Medication

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of Epilepsy medication in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5271/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is only available in respect of drugs dispensed in primary care and therefore excludes medication costs incurred in hospital. The costs for each calendar year are shown in the table below.

Ingredient cost before discount of antiepileptic drugs, 2002 – 2006

Year	Ingredient cost before discount – Antiepileptics
2006	£12,573,528
2005	£10,976,738
2004	£8,816,905
2003	£7,470,264
2002	£6,427,431

Source: Prescription Cost Analysis NI, Central Services Agency

Adoption Home Studies

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his department's policy on contracting out Adoption Home Studies to other bodies such as the Family Care Society. (AQW 5282/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department values the contribution of voluntary adoption agencies and encourages Boards and Trusts to work in partnership with the voluntary sector to promote the adoption of children. Responsibility for commissioning and delivering services has been delegated to Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts. It is, therefore, for Boards and Trusts to determine whether to commission 'home study' assessments from external providers in order assist them in the discharge of their statutory functions or in taking forward Departmental priorities.

Adoption Applications

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time taken to process adoption applications, from the initial application to adoption taking place, for (i) domestic; and (ii) foreign adoptions. (AQW 5283/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Childminder Registration

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action his department is taking to address the backlog of registered childminders awaiting clearance after vetting procedures have been carried out.

(AQW 5300/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my department to the Department of Education (DE) in November 2006 with Early Years policy. DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders.

The '0-6 Early Years Strategy' currently being developed by DE will include recommendations in relation to the areas of regulation and inspection and the development of the early years workforce, which includes childminders. My department will then consider these recommendations. In the meantime, DE is currently working alongside the Health and Social Care Trusts to streamline registration procedures, to ensure consistency across Northern Ireland.

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 relation to delays. In addition, senior officials will be meeting with Bridget Nodder, Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss their organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Attacks on Hospital Staff

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) location, of attacks on hospital staff in 2006; 2007; and 2008.

(AQW 5333/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Violent attacks against healthcare staff have been formally monitored by my Department since April 2004 and are recorded on a 6 monthly basis. The figures provided in the table below detail the recorded number of physical attacks on all healthcare staff in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Location : Health and Social Care Trust Area	Number of Physical Attacks reported on Healthcare Staff		
	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008 ¹
Belfast HSC Trust	1304	1295	774
Northern HSC Trust	655	810	474
Southern HSC Trust	401	406	172
Western HSC Trust	496	869	281
South Eastern HSC Trust	695	822	483
Total	3551	4202	2184

Figures only available for the first six month reporting period from 1 April 2007 to 30 September 2007

Domestic Violence

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to ensure that women, with immigration status, who have no recourse to public funds and who are the victims of domestic violence, can access the support and services they need.

(AQW 5406/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department recently funded research by the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland into access to services for people from ethnic and minority communities. The report of this research, which has only recently been received by the Department, highlights this very issue and describes the particular difficulties faced by victims of domestic violence when they have no recourse to public funds.

The report is now being considered by officials and the NI Regional Steering Group on Domestic Violence who will bring forward proposals to address this important issue.

Sexual-Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the timescale for publishing the Sexual Health Strategy. (AQW 5409/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The draft Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan is in its final stages of preparation. The intention is that the Strategy will be published by June 2008. This, however, is subject to engagement with the Health Committee and the need for the document to be agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Drug Addicts

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide his most recent estimate of the number of (i) cocaine; and (ii) heroin addicts in Northern Ireland; and to detail the percentage change from the previous year. (AQW 5411/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Drug Addicts Index holds information on all those persons registered in concurrence with the Misuse of Drugs (Notification of and Supply to Addicts) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 1973. The table below shows the number of persons registered for addictions to cocaine and heroin in Northern Ireland on the 31st December 2006 and the 31st December 2007, and the percentage change from the previous year.

	31st December 2006	31st December 2007	% change
Cocaine	24	15	-37.5%
Heroin	218	193	-11.5%
Total number of addicts on register	288	257	-10.8%

Agenda for Change

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all departments, specialties and Grades that have not had their Agenda for Change sorted out. (AQW 5448/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not held centrally and could only be obtained from individual HSC employers at a disproportionate cost. HSC employers are at various stages of the implementation process but I have instructed them to have all staff moved to the new Agenda for Change rates of pay by 30 June 2008 and I expect them to meet this target.

Outpatient Clinics

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of additional outpatient clinics, including weekends and evenings, that have been arranged over the last three years under the waiting list initiative. (AQW 5490/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The need for people to have timely access to appropriate outpatient services is one of my highest priorities. Access to outpatient services

has been transformed over the last two years. At the beginning of April 2006, over 180,000 people were waiting for a first outpatient appointment, of which 110,000 were waiting longer than 13 weeks, some for as long as ten years. Today, only a handful of patients are waiting longer than 13 weeks.

This transformation in performance has been achieved through the implementation of a comprehensive programme of reform together with an increase in outpatient activity, both in the public and independent sectors. Activity has been increased both by seeing more patients at existing clinics and by holding additional clinics, sometimes at evenings and weekends.

Information on the number of additional outpatients clinics carried out in the public sector is not collected. Similarly, information on the number of outpatient clinics held by independent sector providers is not collected, however, I can advise that 1,795 people were referred to independent sector providers for assessment in 2005/06, 43,319 in 2006/07, and 22,417 in 2007/08 (provisional figures).

Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that no further early closures will take place at the Accident and Emergency Unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. (AQW 5500/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to close Mid-Ulster Hospital's A&E department early on the weekend of 4 April was taken in the interest of patient safety due to staff shortages.

To address this issue the Trust has recently completed a recruitment exercise for staff grade doctors in A&E and it is anticipated that the outcome of this will provide the appropriate medical cover to enable the A&E Department to maintain its normal level of service.

Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons for the closure of the Accident and Emergency Unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital at 5pm on Friday 4 April 2008. (AQW 5501/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The A&E Department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital normally opens from 9:00am to 11:00pm each day. To provide this service, the A&E Department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital depends on a team of 4 staff grade doctors. However currently only

2 of these posts are filled permanently and the Trust is therefore heavily dependent on locum doctors to provide input. Obtaining appropriately skilled locum cover at weekends can be problematic and on Friday 4 April the Trust found it impossible to arrange suitable cover, despite repeated efforts.

In light of the absence of appropriately skilled medical staff the decision to close the A&E Department early was taken to address an immediate issue of patient safety.

Locum Doctors

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the salary levels of locum doctors in each hospital. (AQW 5502/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The salary levels of locum doctors employed directly by trusts are set out in the Pay and Conditions of Service for junior doctors and consultants. Salaries for junior doctors are paid at an hourly rate. The basic hourly rate depends on the grade of doctor and ranges from £10.90 an hour for an F1 doctor to £17.97 an hour for a specialty registrar (at 2007-2008 rates). In addition, there may be banding supplements depending on the working pattern of the doctor. The salary level for a locum consultant is related to the pay of a consultant and is dependent on whether or not the locum consultant is in a substantive consultant post. The minimum point on the salary scale is £73,510 per annum.

The above salary levels do not include doctors recruited from locum agencies. In circumstances where it is difficult to recruit locum doctors directly, for example in specialties where there are particular shortages, trusts may agree higher salary levels with the locum agency. These salary levels will vary across locum agencies.

Strategic Review of Sensory Support Services

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an update on the strategic review of sensory support services, following the completion of the consultation exercise on 2 June 2006. (AQO 300/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A Regional Steering Group for Sensory Support Services was established in October 2006 to take forward the recommendations of the Social Services Inspectorate inspection report 'Challenge and Change', published in May 2005. This reported on the situation with regard to social work

and related services for adults with a sensory loss across Northern Ireland.

The Regional Group is chaired by Fionnuala McAndrew, Director of Social Services in the Southern Health and Social Services Board, and comprises a wide range of stakeholders including service users, voluntary sector and statutory sector representatives.

The Group has been addressing some of the key recommendations in the report, having identified the first tranche of priority issues to be the provision of equipment, the development of an assessment framework and the development of resource centres across Northern Ireland.

The Regional Group met on 18 September 2007 to discuss progress and developments. A workshop is planned for 28 November 2007 as part of the consultation process on these developments and a wide range of stakeholders will be invited. The Group is intending to complete this phase of its work by March 2008. My Department will then be asked to issue the agreed outcomes to the service.

Two-Tier Health System

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his department's policy on the two-tier health system, where patients with serious illness can have immediate consultation provided that they can afford to pay for it. (AQO 1100/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Access to consultation within the health service is dependent on clinical need and is free at the point of delivery of care. In recent years there has been a huge improvement in the speed of access to consultant opinion and hospital services. At the end of March 2006 there were 74,000 patients waiting over six months for a first outpatient appointment – some for many years. By the end of March 2007 this had reduced to 32, and I am confident the target I have set to further reduce the maximum waiting time to 13 weeks by March 2008 will be achieved.

It is my aim that access to publicly funded health services will continue to improve and patients will no longer consider it necessary to pursue private treatment. However, despite the significant improvements in access being achieved by the health service some individuals may, for a variety of reasons, still choose to enter into private contracts with clinicians for consultation, diagnosis or treatment. It is their right to make that choice and we should respect it.

Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that he has no plans to reduce the service provision at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, in light of the recent early closure of the Accident and Emergency Unit. (AQW 5548/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The recent early closure of the Accident and Emergency Unit has not affected our plans for future services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

Those plans, as set out in Developing Better Services, include the development of the Mid-Ulster as a local hospital supporting the services provided by Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital. However, those changes will only be made when robust alternative arrangements are in place at other hospitals to ensure that safe, high quality services can be provided to people of the Mid-Ulster area.

In the meantime, subject to patient safety issues, the Mid-Ulster Hospital will continue to provide its current range of services.

Smoking Ban

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the health benefits for the population 12 months after the introduction of the smoking ban in public places. (AQO 2750/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A comprehensive research project to enable my Department to gauge the impact of smoke-free legislation will be available later in the year.

Although the legislation is designed to protect the public and employees, it has also encouraged smokers to try to stop. Provisional figures show that 16,227 people attending cessation services set a quit date between April 2007 and January 2008. The figures for the whole of the 2006/07 and 2005/06 years were 13,795 and 8,702 respectively.

Support for the legislation remains high with 98.2% of over 25,000 premises inspected up to September 2007 compliant with the no smoking requirement and 94.7% displaying correct signage.

In the longer term, I anticipate that major health benefits will accrue from smoke-free legislation and these should be reflected.

Dental Care Provision

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assess-

ment of the availability of health service dental care provision, particularly in relation to child dental health. (AQO 2729/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of access to Health Service dental care provision throughout Northern Ireland has become increasingly problematic, with a drift by General Dental Practitioners towards private dentistry. This has been the case since before I assumed responsibility for Health matters.

There are currently no contractual arrangements in place to compel

dentists to accept any patient for health service treatment. However, in the majority of cases, dental practices are still continuing to provide health service dental care provision for children. Child dental registrations have remained constant over the past 4 years.

Midwife Support

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support is available for midwives, and others working in maternity services, for treating women who do not have English as their first language. (AQO 2724/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Support is available for all Health and Social Care staff, including midwives and others working in maternity units. In recognition of our changing society and cultural diversity, the Regional Interpreting Service offer courses to instruct staff on the proper use of and access to interpreters for patients who do not have English as their first language. All Trusts offer Equality and Diversity training to staff and innovative projects are underway to produce useful information to staff, including multi-cultural phrasebooks and cultural awareness guides.

Satellite Cancer Care Centre in the North-West

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the consideration he has given to the establishment of a satellite cancer care centre in the North West; and (ii) any discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in relation to such a facility. (AQO 2694/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As indicated in my statement to the Assembly on 15 January 2008, I discussed the issue of radiotherapy services in the northwest with Mary Harney at the North South Ministerial Council

Health and Food Safety Sectoral in November 2007. It was agreed that our departments should assess the potential for cooperation in this area. I have asked commissioners to develop a business case to ensure an increase in radiotherapy provision in Northern Ireland by that time. The business case process will be informed by ongoing discussions with the Department of Health and Children on this issue.

Prescription Charges

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress on the review of prescription charges and to give a timescale within which he expects to publish the results and bring forward his proposals. (AQO 2774/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The prescription charge review group have now reported back to me. The report presents a number of options which I am currently considering. I will bring forward proposals to the Assembly when I have concluded my deliberations. In the interim, and in recognition of the fact that I am still considering the options, I have decided to freeze prescription charges at their current level for 2008/09.

MRI Scan Waiting Times

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for (i) obtaining an MRI scan; and (ii) obtaining the results from such a scan, for patients in each hospital that provides this procedure. (AQO 2728/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: MRI scans are provided at the Belfast City, Mater, Musgrave Park, Royal Victoria, Antrim Area, Ulster, Craigavon Area, and Altnagelvin hospitals.

I set a target last year to ensure that no patient was waiting longer than 13 weeks for a diagnostic test to be carried out, including an MRI scan, by the end of March 2008. Excellent progress has been made by all Trusts: in June 2007 more than 7,000 patients were waiting more than 13 weeks for a diagnostic test; I am delighted to announce today that, at the end of March, my target was achieved in full and no patient is now waiting longer than 13 weeks for an MRI scan or other diagnostic test.

Furthermore, most patients are seen much more quickly: more than three quarters are now receiving their MRI scan in less than six weeks.

Waiting times for obtaining the results from MRI scans are not currently available. This information will be collected from the end of April 2008 onwards.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of current ambulance response times. (AQO 2771/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Provisional figures indicate that in the month of March 2008 the Ambulance Service responded to 68% of category A life threatening calls within 8 minutes, falling short of its target of 70% for the month.

The Ambulance Service is engaged in a wide ranging modernisation programme which I anticipate will secure sustained improvement in performance during 2008/2009.

Fire Stations

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timetable for the construction of new fire stations in Coleraine and Limavady. (AQO 2672/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the honourable member to the answer I gave during Oral Questions on 25th February to a supplementary question asked by David McClarty and to the answer given to question AQW 4863/08 asked by Iris Robinson. I indicated that Coleraine and Limavady were on the list of stations for upgrade, but were not listed for priority action for the next three years.

Patients Discharged from Long-Term Mental-Health Care

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the community support that is available for patients who have been discharged from long-term mental health care. (AQO 2721/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The support available to a patient on discharge from a psychiatric hospital is through a community care package, tailored to his or her particular needs and circumstances, including consideration of any element of risk to the person or to others.

There is a variety of supports available, which typically include psychological therapy, home treatment

services, specific healthcare interventions, access to day care centres, to vocational and leisure opportunities, to supported accommodation, and advice on mental health promotion.

The aim is always to provide patient-centred services, informed by the views of the service user and his or her carer or family, so that the person can achieve the highest standards of living possible and be fully integrated into society.

Bed Blocking

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are being taken to reduce bed blocking in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 2718/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set stringent new targets for delayed discharge, which mean that, by March 2008, non-complex cases should be discharged within 6 hours of being declared fit and complex cases should be discharged within 72 hours of being declared fit. These targets are subject to rigorous monitoring arrangements and I can report that achievement rates for February 2008 are 96% and 83% respectively.

In tandem with improving systems within hospitals, we are also working to expand the range of flexible and responsive intermediate care services in the community. This will ensure that those who need it can be discharged safely and promptly into an appropriate service in the community.

Productivity

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps he has taken to increase productivity across the health service. (AQO 2663/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Good progress has been made on improving productivity and I am committed to ensuring that productivity is further increased across the CSR period. Some of the actions that my Department has taken to make better use from existing resources are:

- **Efficiency savings** - over the period 2005-06 to 2007-08, the Department has realised total annual efficiencies of £260 million of which at least £146 million were resource releasing. Improved productivity has also enabled the Department to meet the non resource releasing efficiency target of £115m by 2007/08.
- **Comprehensive Spending Review Efficiency Savings** - Over the CSR period 2008/9 to 2010/11

my Department is required to deliver efficiency savings of £118m/£233m/£344m. These savings are cash releasing and will lead to improvements in productivity. My Department has been engaged in identifying efficiencies together with robust options to deliver cash releasing savings of at least 3% of the department's budget in each year of the CSR period while continuing to improve services for customers. It has also been developing plans to deliver 5% annual real reduction in administration costs over the CSR period.

- **Reform and modernisation** - across a wide range of healthcare activity. This has facilitated significant reductions in hospital waiting times and is making radical changes in how clinics are managed and how patients are booked into hospital, all aimed at increasing the number of patients that can be seen within existing resources.
- **Introduction of Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services (ICATS)** - this provides new integrated multi-disciplinary teams of health care professionals to better manage the transfer of patients between primary and secondary care.
- **Reform of A&E** - a programme of changes to A&E services has been implemented and from April 2008, 95% of patients who attend A&E should be either treated or admitted within 4 hours of their arrival in the department.
- **Benchmarking** - Trusts are currently expected to identify, in a register now embedded within each Trust's Delivery Plan (planning document), the full range of benchmarking activity planned or ongoing, whether initiated as a result of highlighted reference unit cost variations or otherwise.
- **Acute Hospital portfolio** - The Acute Hospital Portfolio is a performance information and improvement tool consisting of a collection of audits of key services areas allowing detailed comparison against information systematically collected and validated from GB and NI Trusts.
- **Departmental value for money audit strategy** - The Department has in place a value for money audit strategy and has conducted 2-3 studies each year on a range of topics such as maternity services and statutory residential care. Trusts must take action to deal with the issues arising from these reports.
- **Productivity targets** - A set of productivity indicators and associated targets are being monitored on a biannual basis to facilitate sharing of best practice and benchmarking across the region. The primary target is hospital activity and supplementary targets include sickness absence reduction, reduction in admin and clerical staff, skill mix ratios for Nursing and Allied Health Professionals and staff turnover.

- **Consideration of new finance regime** – the current finance regime is being reviewed to consider how to facilitate and incentivise reform and increased productivity. An example of this is the “final offer” scheme which is used to move resources from one Trust to another should a waiting time breach be unmanageable within the original Trust.

Non-Access-Related Housing Adaptations

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the appropriate assessment route and the criteria applied for non-access related housing adaptations. (AQO 2752/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HSC Trust Occupational Therapists have delegated responsibility to undertake statutory assessment of need of disabled and older people for housing adaptations under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 section 1.

Occupational therapy assessment of need and recommendations for housing adaptations include access and safety needs of disabled or older people and their carer(s) within their environment.

Bed Blocking

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of beds that were blocked in Lagan Valley Hospital in 2007; and (ii) the average number of days a bed was blocked. (AQO 2702/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of patients whose discharges were delayed in Lagan Valley Hospital at the end of each month in 2007 and the average number of days a discharge was delayed at the end of each month is given in the table below.

Month	Number of Delayed Discharges	Average Number of Days Discharge was Delayed
January 2007	9	19
February 2007	6	27
March 2007	7	31
April 2007	4	45
May 2007	1	76
June 2007	3	40
July 2007	4	46
August 2007	1	25
September 2007	1	55

Month	Number of Delayed Discharges	Average Number of Days Discharge was Delayed
October 2007	2	50
November 2007	2	60
December 2007	4	19

Source: Departmental Return, DD1.

Notes: Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

The figures given for the number of delayed discharges and the average number of days that a discharge was delayed reflects the position at the end of each month. Some patients' discharges will have been delayed for more than one month and will as a result be counted more than once in this table.

Binge Drinking

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures he is taking to tackle binge drinking in society. (AQO 2746/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recognise the real cost of alcohol misuse in general and binge drinking in particular to Northern Ireland. Addressing the issue of Binge Drinking is therefore a key priority within my Department's New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD). As part of this a Binge Drinking Advisory Group has been established to share best practice and expertise, and to advise on how we can most effectively tackle this issue.

In addition, we have commissioned the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) to continue to develop and roll out the regional public information campaign on the issue which was first launched in 2003. This activity is also supportive of and supported by locally-based campaigns developed as part of the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams Action Plans. My Department is also in the process of developing a regional action plan to tackle the associated issue of alcohol consumption among children and young people, and it is anticipated that this will be launched later in 2008.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sanctuary Cove Roadway

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to expedite

the completion date for the Sanctuary Cove roadway in Kircubbin.
(AQW 5197/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised that while the roadways within Sanctuary Cove have been largely completed, it would not be appropriate to undertake final surfacing until the sewerage system within the development has been brought up to an acceptable standard for adoption by Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Both the roadways and the sewerage system within the development have not yet been adopted and remain the responsibility of the developer.

NIW has advised me that it has consulted extensively with the developer about the requirements to bring the sewerage system up to an adoptable standard, but has been awaiting information from the developer for some time to enable the process for formal adoption to proceed.

Disability Discrimination

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the work carried out on public transport facilities as part of Phase 1 of work to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and (ii) the costs associated with this work.
(AQW 5219/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Work to upgrade railway stations and halts on the railways network in accordance with Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is being taken forward in conjunction with Translink's New Rail Vision project. The work includes the following:

- Upgrading platform lighting
- Installation of tactile paving at platform edges
- Resurfacing Platforms
- Adding or adjusting ramps where necessary
- Installation of lifts at manned stations
- The introduction of wheel chair height ticket counters
- The improvement of disabled toilets facilities
- New platform shelters which include a wheelchair space
- Updating station signage
- General tidy up at most locations

Phase 1 of the work covers stations on the Bangor and Cross-Border lines, and will be completed in June 2008. The cost of the Phase 1 contract is in the region of £8 million. Phase 2, covering stations and halts on the rest of the network, should be completed by the end of August 2008; the contract cost for Phase 2 will be over £7million.

Gritted Roads

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of times main roads in each district council area have not been gritted in spite of weather data predicting freezing conditions in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; (iii) 2007; and (iv) 2008.
(AQW 5244/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that there has only been one occasion during the period mentioned, when engineers had sufficient prior warning of icy conditions on roads, but the roads were not salted. This incident occurred in the Moyle Council area in 2007.

As you may know, Roads Service engineers use state of the art technology to assist with the decision making process including ice sensors linked to 20 weather stations across the North, installed in conjunction with the Met Office, and thermal mapping of all roads on the salted network. The Met Office uses information from the stations, along with their own data, to provide forecasts, which are transmitted to engineers, who then make their decisions on whether or not to commence a salting operation in their area.

I should also explain that there can be occasions when roads are, quite rightly, not gritted despite sub zero temperatures being forecast. This is because decisions to treat the network are based on the weather forecast and a range of other information. It is not unusual for a duty engineer to take a decision that gritting is not necessary in conditions when temperatures fall below freezing, provided that no frost or ice is predicted to form on roads, because the roads and atmosphere are both dry. Such a decision would not be made without feedback information from scouting staff on the ground at known cold spots. In addition, circumstances can change very suddenly, without being predicted by the forecasters. A frost can occur without sufficient warning. It may have been predicted by the Met Office but not until it is too late for action to be taken. Roads Service always tries to issue warnings to the media so that the public can be made aware of such occasions.

Despite my Department's best efforts, it is the case that frost can form where it is not expected. Unfortunately, it is not possible to guarantee ice-free roads. As explained in Roads Service's Winter Service Leaflet:

- forecasting is not 100% reliable;
- it can take 3 hours or so to salt a route, so a journey may start or end on an untreated section of road;
- rain can wash away the salt before it takes effect.

It is for these reasons that motorists are asked to "drive with care" during wintry conditions.

Gritted Roads

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he will take to ensure that (i) main roads are gritted when necessary; and (ii) there is not a repeat of the situation that occurred on 8 March 2007, which resulted the main roads in the Moyle area not being gritted. (AQW 5246/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service has arrangements in place to salt through routes, in wintry conditions, by spreading salt at the most effective times. These arrangements have been operating effectively for many years with only minor changes being made from time to time.

However, following the tragic events of 8 March 2007, Roads Service immediately carried out a formal internal investigation. The purpose of the investigation was to examine the circumstances surrounding the failure to carry out salting in the Moyle area on that particular morning and to consider whether the procedures in place for Winter Service call outs were adequate.

The investigation concluded that the controls surrounding Roads Service's Winter Service operations had a good record of success and were generally effective, but recommended that additional safeguards be put in place to assure Duty Engineers that their instructions had been carried out. Accordingly, Roads Service's Winter Service Policy and Procedures Guide was amended before the start of the 2007/08 Winter Service season and the new arrangements have operated successfully since then.

Spatial Planning

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress made to date, in relation to the development of a collaborative framework for joined-up spatial planning across the island of Ireland, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 703/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The benefit of a collaborative approach to spatial planning across the island of Ireland was identified in the June 2006 Report from the International Centre for Local and Regional Development. Since then, officials from the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government have engaged in developing a framework for collaborative action between the two spatial planning strategies on the island. I will shortly be seeking views of the Regional Development Committee and, as spatial planning raises issues across

Departments, I will then be bringing forward a draft Framework to the Executive.

Park-and-Ride Facilities

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his long-term plans for the development of park-and-ride facilities in the Greater Belfast area. (AQO 2717/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (2015) contains my Department's plans for introducing integrated transport systems for the greater Belfast area. The aim is to encourage people travelling into Belfast to use the bus for the final leg of their journey, or to use rail for the most substantial part of their journey, thus relieving the pressure on congested routes into the City.

The Plan proposes local Park-and-Ride sites for each of the six main transport corridors into Belfast. These will be serviced by bus, rail or rapid transit and compliment a number of strategic sites which make use of existing bus services and/or train services along the rail corridors.

In total the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan proposes to provide over 6000 Park-and-Ride spaces for the greater Belfast area by 2015. This includes 1008 railway Park-and-Ride facilities at Ballymartin, Holywood, Carrickfergus, Trooperslane, Greenisland, Jordanstown and Whiteabbey.

Presently, there are two bus based Park-and-Ride sites established at Sprucefield and Blacks Road and my Department's Roads Service is planning two further local bus based sites at Cairnshill with 750 spaces and at Ballyhenry Road, close to the Sandyknowes roundabout with 92 spaces, subject to planning approval.

A1 Road Intersects

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of intersects with local roads that remain on the A1 from the border at Newry to the Lisburn-Sprucefield junction. (AQO 2723/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The A1 Belfast to Dublin Road extends from its junction with the M1 Motorway at Sprucefield to the border. Along this length there are numerous junctions, or intersections with the particularly dense network of local roads. These junctions range from simple "T" junctions to flyover type, junctions. In total there are 78 such "T" junctions, 5 flyover type junctions and 7 roundabouts.

The number of junctions/intersections will, of course reduce when the improvement works, currently being undertaken as part of Package 2 of Roads Service's Public Private Partnership programme, which I announced last December, are completed.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) how he plans to; and (ii) the timeframe in which he will, review the Regional Development Strategy. (AQO 2753/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A 5 Year focused assessment of the Regional Development Strategy has been completed and has been 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 has also been discussed with the Regional Development Committee. I will subsequently be discussing this more fundamental review with Executive colleagues and will then inform the Assembly.

Public Transport Costs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the impact of the increase in fuel prices on public transport costs. (AQO 2677/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Fuel prices have risen sharply over the last year and may increase further. Translink take steps where possible to mitigate the short term impacts of these increases in its costs. However, inevitably they will have to be passed on to the customer and fares will go up as a result.

On average, fares for 2008/09 have gone up by between 3 and 5% compared to last year.

Traffic Congestion in South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for tackling traffic congestion in South Belfast. (AQO 2685/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) is proposing a programme of up to 14 Quality Bus Corridors (QBC's) focused on Belfast, which will build upon those implemented to date. These will include 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 800m of bus lane on the Ormeau Road is planned for implementation shortly 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.

Traffic levels are however continuing to grow and as such, improved bus speeds associated with QBC's 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 which my Department is progressing through its Travelwise initiative. 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 & 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 are currently under construction, include 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.

Light Rail System

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress he has made to develop a light rail system in Belfast. (AQO 2714/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit system for Belfast has been concluded. The study looked at both bus based and light rail systems. I am publishing the study tomorrow so that interested parties can comment before I make my final decision. I will be particularly interested in the comments of the Regional Development Committee.

Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast Inter-City Rail Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in acquiring land from the Ministry of Defence for a passing loop for the Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast inter-city rail service. (AQO 2738/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following a meeting with Ministry Of Defence officials last year, Translink have registered a formal interest in purchasing a strip of land at Ballykelly. Translink are currently undertaking a timetable modelling exercise to identify the requirement and best location for passing facilities on the Coleraine to Derry line. The exercise is expected to be complete in two to three months after which Translink will decide what land is required. If it is decided that the MOD land at Ballykelly is the best location for the passing loop, the process to buy the land will commence.

Potholes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of potholes in roads recorded in 2006 and 2007; and (ii) the amount spent in repairing potholes in those years, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQO 2664/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Departments Roads Service does not hold the information in the format requested. However, Roads Service does maintain a record on the number of defects detected during routine safety

inspections. This includes potholes. The table below sets out the total number of defects recorded in each Roads Service Division and the associated expenditure in repairing the defects during the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years.

	2005-2006		2006-2007	
	No Defects Repaired ¹	Expenditure ² £k	No Defects Repaired ¹	Expenditure ² £k
Roads Service				
Northern Division	49209	4399	45944	4259
Southern Division	48500	4782	48621	4953
Eastern Division	53181	4733	63669	4985
Western Division	50916	5166	52753	5309

1. Defects attracting an R1 (1 calendar day), R2 (5-working days) or R3 (4-weeks) response

Recorded expenditure in relation to carriageway and footway patching repairs (includes all patching repairs)

Rapid Transit Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what procurement options are being considered for the proposed rapid transit scheme for Greater Belfast. (AQO 2710/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit system for Belfast has been concluded. The study looked at a range of procurement options including various PPP/PFI solutions. It also identified contributions which could be provided by private developers. I am publishing the study tomorrow so that interested parties can comment before I make my final decision.

Free Travel for Over 60s

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm when he expects the extension of free travel to people over 60 to be completed. (AQO 2747/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I intend that the new scheme will commence this October, with the application process and advertising beginning during the summer.

Speed Restrictions

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria used by Translink in applying speed reductions in severe weather; and to

detail how quickly these reductions can be imposed in deteriorating weather conditions. (AQO 2670/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Decisions as to speed restrictions due to severe weather conditions are taken by the Track Infrastructure Engineer and Head of Operations for rail and by the Bus Safety Manager for bus. These are based on advanced meteorological information and can be implemented immediately.

Potholes

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the circumstances in which Roads Service is liable for damage to vehicles caused by potholes. (AQO 2743/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Roads Service compensation claims are settled by Central Claims Unit, the Department for Regional Development in-house legal unit, if there is a failure to properly conduct inspection and repair procedures in accordance with Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. Current maintenance procedures are set out in the 3 April 2006 Road Maintenance Standards for Safety.

Flooding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how his department plans to improve infrastructure in Carrickfergus to alleviate flooding. (AQO 2735/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: During the past year, occasional flooding has occurred in the Marshallstown Road/Oakfield Drive area of Carrickfergus and investigations have identified that the unlawful interference with a stream may have been the primary cause of the flooding. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency is taking the lead in resolving this problem. My Department's Roads Service has investigated the drainage infrastructure in the area and has plans to increase the capacity of a culvert crossing the Marshallstown Road.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has completed a Drainage Area Study for the Carrickfergus catchment area, which identified deficiencies within the sewerage system. A programme of sewer network improvements has been included in NIW's Capital Investment Programme. The improvements include structural and hydraulic upgrading work and the rationalisation of sewage pumping stations. This work will reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding, meet increasingly stringent

environmental regulations and ensure that the capacity of the sewerage system is adequate to cater for future development in the area.

NIW is also proposing to introduce measures to reduce the risk of flooding in the Joymount area of Carrickfergus. It plans to commence work during 2008/09 to refurbish Shaftsbury Sewage Pumping Station and upgrade an existing storm sewer at an estimated cost of £500,000.

Discussions are ongoing between NIW and DARD, Rivers Agency to take this work forward in conjunction with DARD Rivers Agency's proposals to upgrade the Sullatober culvert.

Culverts

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his policy on the designation of culverts; and to explain the circumstances under which taxpayers would be liable for maintenance of undesignated culverts. (AQO 2780/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should explain that there is no formal "designation of culverts" under public roads and members of the public are not responsible for the maintenance of such road culverts.

My Department's Roads Service carries out routine safety inspections on all roads structures (including culverts, bridges, retaining walls, gantries, sea defences and other structures), to identify superficial or readily apparent defects.

Maintenance responsibility to ensure free flow of watercourses which are designated under the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 rests with DARD Rivers Agency. In the case of watercourses which are undesignated the maintenance responsibility rests with the relevant riparian landowners.

If the stream or river flowing through the defective culvert/bridge is a "designated waterway", then Roads Service would generally consult with DARD Rivers Agency to agree the extent and split of funding of any repair works deemed necessary.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Private Landlords: Funding

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money her department has paid to private landlords since April

2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency.
(AQW 5175/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

This information is not available in the format requested, as it is held by either by Council area or by Housing Executive District Office area. In addition the figures for Housing Benefit for the financial year 2007/08 have not yet been finalised. This will become available in the next few weeks, and I will arrange for this information to be forwarded.

Hostel Beds

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of hostel beds in the North Belfast constituency; and to provide a breakdown of the length of time people have stayed in hostels before securing social housing. (AQW 5176/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are some 600 bed spaces in North Belfast for use as temporary accommodation.

The length of time households spend in temporary accommodation is dependent on their areas of choice for permanent housing, especially where those areas are of exceptionally high demand. However the majority of homeless applicants are housed relatively quickly.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Social Security employees currently in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 5231/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested cannot be provided, as the Disability Living Allowance claim form does not ask about the employment status of customers.

Social Security Employees

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Social Security employees who were, or currently are, the subject of a fraud investigation. (AQW 5232/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of employees in the Social Security Agency who were, or currently are, the subject of a fraud investigation in each of the last three financial years are detailed in the table below.

Year	No of employees
2005/2006	20

Year	No of employees
2006/2007	23
2007/2008	15*
Total	58

* 6 cases are still under investigation.

Jobseekers Allowance

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4741/08, to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of people who have been in receipt of job seekers allowance for a period in excess of 12 months, broken down by (i) parliamentary constituency; and (ii) District Council area. (AQW 5245/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is outlined in the attached tables.

TABLE 1: JOBBEERS ALLOWANCE CLAIMANTS (FOR A PERIOD OF 12 MONTHS OR OVER) BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

Parliamentary Constituency	JSA Claimants Feb-06	JSA Claimants Feb-07	JSA Claimants Feb-08
Belfast East	196	207	168
Belfast North	800	705	553
Belfast South	291	238	305
Belfast West	1152	1055	960
East Antrim	271	233	177
East Londonderry	465	356	298
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	439	388	264
Foyle	1178	1169	997
Lagan Valley	179	186	128
Mid Ulster	187	175	102
Newry and Armagh	455	397	318
North Antrim	329	362	265
North Down	207	222	165
South Antrim	238	230	210
South Down	376	303	228
Strangford	305	281	173
Upper Bann	236	257	200
West Tyrone	618	586	475
Unallocated Postcode*	35	38	58
Total	7957	7388	6044

In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to electoral wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward or Council using this method and some cannot be allocated at all.

Figures have been derived from 100% un-validated Jobseekers Allowance Computer Scan at February 2006, 2007 and 2008.

TABLE 2: JOBSEEKERS ALLOWANCE CLAIMANTS (FOR A PERIOD OF 12 MONTHS OR OVER) BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

District Council	JSA Claimants Feb-06	JSA Claimants Feb-07	JSA Claimants Feb-08
Antrim	117	114	108
Ards	262	236	151
Armagh	145	133	125
Ballymena	179	197	129
Ballymoney	58	74	65
Banbridge	87	75	49
Belfast	2088	1902	1707
Carrickfergus	113	93	71
Castlereagh	85	86	74
Coleraine	279	185	154
Cookstown	80	74	45
Craigavon	187	220	171
Derry	1178	1169	997
Down	268	231	160
Dungannon	121	92	60
Fermanagh	348	322	220
Larne	101	94	64
Limavady	186	171	144
Lisburn	382	352	287
Magherafelt	77	75	41
Moyle	92	91	71
Newry & Mourne	427	349	266
Newtownabbey	267	234	209
North Down	177	195	143
Omagh	228	199	158
Strabane	390	387	317
Unallocated postcode*	35	38	58
Total	7957	7388	6044

In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to electoral wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward or Council using this method and some cannot be allocated at all.

Figures have been derived from 100% un-validated Jobseekers Allowance Computer Scan at February 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Co-Ownership Housing Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development, following the suspension of the Co-ownership Housing Scheme, to detail her plans to implement an interim solution to prevent further exacerbation of the housing crisis. (AQW 5272/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Co-ownership Housing Scheme has not been suspended. In line with the pledge given in the Programme for Government, at least 500 applicants will be supported this year. I am significantly increasing the social house building programme over the next 3 years. I will also continue to explore a range of approaches to the delivery of more affordable housing.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties allocated in the Whitehead area in the last 12 months; and the number of these properties that were bungalows. (AQW 5284/08)

The Minister for Social Development: During the twelve month period to 31st December 2007 allocations were made to 21 housing applicants within Whitehead. 15 of the properties allocated were bungalows.

Housing Benefit Claimants

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Benefit claimants resident in each district council area who are (i) Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants; (ii) Housing Association tenants; and (iii) private rental tenants. (AQW 5299/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below provides the total number of Housing Benefit claimants by NIHE district office area detailing the number of NIHE tenants; Housing Association tenants; private rental tenants; and rates only claimants. It has not been possible to give the

requested details for the exact geographic area of every district council as the NIHE does not have the information in this format. However, in the majority of cases the administrative areas covered by NIHE district offices correspond to district council areas.

TABLE 1
HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

	NIHE	Housing Association	Private rental	Rates only
Belfast West	4543	2733	2616	69
Belfast East	2551	1808	1720	65
Belfast South	2886	1140	1635	44
Belfast North	4858	2118	2539	42
*Belfast Shankill	2714	0	0	0
Bangor	1749	484	1327	87
Ards	2707	418	1085	101
Castlereagh	2254	298	620	81
Lisburn	2849	509	728	110
Dairyfarm	1626	856	230	2
Downpatrick	1819	356	1765	135
Banbridge	1262	201	810	126
Newry	2544	520	2675	242
Armagh	1390	226	1204	153
Brownlow	1951	363	1597	127
Portadown	1126	353	1089	59
Dungannon	1441	248	1147	199
Fermanagh	1648	365	1107	188
Ballymena	1960	359	1160	183
Antrim	1633	161	719	93
Newtownabbey1	1498	184	638	29
Newtownabbey2	1529	218	688	60
Carrickfergus	1311	339	637	30
Larne	1002	231	804	59
Moyle	664	116	492	52
Ballymoney	1134	101	613	70
Coleraine	2371	476	1343	63
Waterloo Place	1947	765	1936	10
Waterside	1809	413	1928	69
Collon Tce	2098	1107	1010	18
Limavady	1197	212	787	70
Magherafelt	998	135	664	189
Strabane	1889	356	1303	96

	NIHE	Housing Association	Private rental	Rates only
Omagh	1471	284	1523	202
Cookstown	840	99	729	130
Total	67269	18552	40868	3253

* The Housing Association, private rental and rates only claimants for the Belfast Shankill area are included within the Belfast West totals. These claimants fall within this administrative catchment area for the purposes of private Housing Benefit assessments.

Empty Homes in the New Lodge Area

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action her department is taking to address the problem of empty homes in the Long-Streets area of New Lodge, North Belfast. (AQW 5301/08)

The Minister for Social Development: An economic appraisal has been prepared to consider the options for dealing with unfit housing in this area. There are currently 13 long term voids in this area, 11 of which lie within the area for phase one of the proposals. The other two lie within the area which will form the second phase of the proposals.

Housing Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of staff employed by the Housing Executive for each of the years 2005, 2006 and 2007. (AQW 5345/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of staff employed by the Housing Executive for the years in question was as follows:

2005	3397
2006	3416
2007	3409

Housing Association Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Association applications in the Ards borough, broken down by electoral ward. (AQW 5346/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have interpreted this as referring to new housing schemes within the Social Housing Development Programme, and the number of schemes proposed for the coming five year period. The information is not readily available in the format requested, however the table

below details those schemes included in the Programme for 2008/09- 2012/13 for the whole of the Ards Borough Council area.

2008/09			
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Need Group
BIH	Regent Street, Newtownards	45	General Needs
Clanmil	46 Inisharoan Court, Newtownards	1	General Needs
Connswater	73 Bangor Road, Newtownards	8	Singles/ Couples
Connswater	2-4 Londonderry Avenue, Comber	12	General Needs
Connswater	15/19 Ballygowan Road, Comber	39	General Needs
Connswater	31-35 Donaghadee Road, Newtownards	42	General Needs
Connswater	57 Rosevale Avenue, Newtownards	15	General Needs
Connswater	41 Movilla Street, Newtownards	12	General Needs
Habinteg	Meeting House Lane, Newtownards	12	Elderly (CAT1)
Habinteg	31 The Brae, Ballygowan	16	General Needs
Rural	Main Street, Kircubbin	7	General Needs
Trinity	Church Street, Newtownards	20	Elderly (CAT1)
Trinity	38 Belfast Road, Comber	14	Elderly (CAT1)

2009/10			
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Need Group
Fold	Council Site, Dunsy Way, Comber	41	General Needs
Fold	Upper North Street, Ards	26	General Needs
Oaklee	Site at Dakota Avenue, Newtownards	32	General Needs
Trinity	Beverly Avenue, Newtownards	38	General Needs
Transfer Scheme	51 Newtownards Road, Comber	6	General Needs

2010/11			
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Need Group
BIH	2 North Street, Greyabbey	6	General Needs
BIH	74A Springfield Road, Portavogie	12	General Needs
Connswater	Brownlow Street, Comber	12	General Needs
Fold	61 Donaghadee Road, Newtownards	21	General Needs
Transfer Scheme	Glenbrook Road, Newtownards	20	General Needs

2011/12			
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Need Group
Fold	West Street, Newtownards	20	General Needs
Supported	Downpatrick Single Homeless	22	Homeless
Ulidia	Downpatrick Street, Crossgar	30	General Needs

2012/13			
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Need Group
Marker	Newtownards Marker	140	General Needs

Total Cost Indicator

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why the Total Cost Indicator has been reduced from 30% to 12% for housing associations and funding organisations. (AQW 5348/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Total Cost Indicators (TCI) are the method by which we establish an all-inclusive forecast of outturn costs for the construction of social dwellings. The TCI is made up of the acquisition or land cost, the works cost and on-costs for fees etc. TCIs are regularly reviewed to take account of movements in such costs. The last review identified an average reduction of 1.4% in TCI and this will be reflected in the revisions to the Housing Association Guide which are currently under consideration.

Portadown Integrated Development Fund

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for the last financial year, the amount of money spent by Portadown 2000 on the implementation of the Portadown Integrated Development Fund on (i) staff costs; (ii) overheads; (iii) consultancy fees; and (iv) projects. (AQW 5351/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Integrated Development Funding was allocated to Portadown 2000 via my Department to assist with the delivery of the Portadown Development Framework. For the financial year 07/08 the following money has been drawn down from the Integrated Development Fund in relation to Portadown 2000:

- (i) Staff costs - £89,104.64
- (ii) Overheads - £10,832.14
- (iii) Consultancy fees -£85,194.90
- (iv) Projects – Nil.

A bid for one major project developed in the context of the Portadown Development Framework, the Portadown Public Realm Scheme, was made against the Integrated Development Fund. The bid of £3.1m was approved by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and spend should be realised in this financial year.

Omagh Town Centre: Masterplan

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to (i) provide a progress report on the Masterplan for Omagh town centre; (ii) detail the number of 'pipeline' schemes she is aware of; and (iii) detail any contacts with developers who have regeneration proposals in the 'pipeline'. (AQW 5352/08)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) The Omagh Masterplan is due for completion in June of this year. (ii) DSD officials have been approached directly in respect of 4 prospective "pipeline" schemes in or close to Omagh Town Centre, but are aware of other potential development opportunities where no direct contact has yet been made. (iii) Contacts have been made with two private property developers, a Planning Consultant representing a third, and representatives of Omagh Enterprise Company.

Queens Parade Project

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the progress made by her department in addressing the car parking issue for the new Queens Parade project in Bangor. (AQW 5395/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Following a detailed consideration of alternative schemes for the site, a number of options exist. The quantum of parking required will ultimately be determined by the final selected development scheme and the Roads Service will apply normal town centre parking standards during their input to the determination of the planning application.

My Department in conjunction with DRD Roads Service is seeking to ensure that the development of the Queen's Parade site incorporates sufficient car parking to service the final agreed scheme and to contribute to the overall parking strategy for the wider town centre.

Alcohol Purchase

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to discuss the issue of raising the age to 21 for the legal purchase of alcohol with other Ministerial colleagues, particularly the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQW 5427/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I will look at the arguments around limiting the right to buy alcohol to those aged 21 or over. My officials liaise regularly with colleagues in DHSSPS and other departments on a range of alcohol and liquor licensing issues and I have asked the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children & Young People to note a motion, agreed by all parties on 1 April, calling on the Sub-Committee "to bring urgently before this Assembly, proposals to combat underage drinking." I will take the Sub-Committee's response, and the views of Social Development Committee and Executive colleagues, into account in reaching decisions.

International Development Fund

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to list (i) the development projects being delivered from the International Development Fund by Portadown 2000; and (ii) their timescale for completion. (AQW 5433/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Integrated Development Funding was allocated to Portadown 2000 via my Department to assist with the delivery of the Portadown Development Framework.

- (i) A bid for one major project developed in the context of the Portadown Development Framework, the Portadown Public Realm Scheme, has so far been made against the Integrated Development Fund. The bid of £3.1m

was approved by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

- (ii) The timescale for completion of the project is 3 years commencing in the 2008 / 2009 financial year with completion by 2010/2011.

Co-Ownership Housing Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development if money is available for new co-ownership applications this financial year. (AQW 5445/08)

The Minister for Social Development: £15m has been allocated to Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association this year and co-ownership will be available to at least 500 applicants in the year ahead. This is in line with the targets set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Co-Ownership Housing Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the consultations that took place with key stakeholders prior to the withdrawal of the Co-Ownership Housing Scheme. (AQW 5470/08)

The Minister for Social Development: During the month of March 2008 several meetings were held between representatives of the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association and Departmental officials to discuss funding issues. The co-ownership scheme has not been withdrawn. The Association is starting the current year with a grant of £15m - almost 4 times what its opening grant was last year. The Association will use this grant, and external finance, to help another 500 or so people onto the first rung of the housing ladder. Unfortunately, there are already more than enough applications in the pipe line to use up this year's overall funding. Clearly, the Association has tried to help as many people as it can.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4679/08, to detail the number of staff working in her department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5590/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development employs one Principal Information Officer, two Senior Information Officers, one Information Officer and one Assistant Information Officer.

Job Losses

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development if there are to be job losses in the Armagh city housing executive district office due to cutbacks in the maintenance department. (AQO 2809/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an operational matter for the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive like all Government Departments is required to make efficiency savings. The Armagh City office and all District Offices will have to contribute to these efficiencies.

Rent Guarantee Scheme

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to widen the remit of the private rental sector and the rent guarantee scheme. (AQO 2808/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The private rented sector is playing an increasingly important role in the housing arena and it complements the social rented sector. I see it as a tenure of choice for individuals rather than last choice. The sector currently represents almost 10% of the total housing stock in Northern Ireland. The evaluation of the rent guarantee scheme which is being piloted in Derry and North Belfast was favourable. Before this type of scheme is extended to other areas, it will be considered along with other initiatives for the sector.

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of people currently on waiting lists for social housing in the South Belfast constituency; and (ii) her plans to meet this need. (AQO 2684/08)

The Minister for Social Development: It is open to anyone to register on the waiting list but the selection scheme establishes the relative priority of those who do register. At 31 December 2007, 2128 persons had put their name on the waiting list for South Belfast and 1146 of these had 30 or more points.

Taken together, projects started in 2007/08 along with those already programmed for the next five financial years will provide for some 692 new dwellings in the area. The projected need over the period, after taking into account the estimated number of relets, is 767.

A number of large schemes will be undertaken in South Belfast; for example 50 homes were started at Annadale in the last financial year, 40 are programmed for Roden Street, 20 at Bladon Drive,

50 at Tates Avenue and a further 50 on the site of the former North Rugby Club.

Projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount spent on projects carried out by her department in relation to Ballykeel, Ballymena, from 2002. (AQO 2703/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 2002, in addition to £2.37 million of expenditure by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on planned improvement schemes, the Department for Social Development has spent a further £2.41 million on projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena. Of this amount, £968,344.42 was provided to 14 projects under Peace II and a further 12 projects have received £1,442,348.65 from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

Homelessness

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the co-ordination that exists between local councils and the Housing Executive in dealing with homelessness. (AQO 2683/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness in Northern Ireland.

An information-sharing protocol has been developed which enables the Housing Executive to request information from district councils regarding individuals who have been involved in anti-social behaviour which may have a bearing on their eligibility for assistance under the homelessness legislation.

The Housing Executive is currently liaising with district councils and health and social care trusts in planning for major emergencies that could involve large scale displacement of households. It should also be noted that district councils have an opportunity to contribute to decision-making on housing matters, including homelessness, through the Northern Ireland Housing Council and Housing Council representation on the Housing Executive Board.

Employment Support Allowance

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the training programmes that have been put in place for staff involved in interviewing people with mental health problems, given that the proposed Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is due to take effect from October 2008. (AQO 2796/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In order to support the introduction of the new Employment and Support Allowance the Social Security Agency will deliver a comprehensive training programme to provide staff with the necessary skills and confidence to work with any customer group, including customers with mental health problems, both face to face and by telephone. A two-day training programme will be delivered to all staff who will deal with Employment and Support Allowance customers and in addition to customer service skills, the programme will include a session on health and disability. The key messages around health and disability will encompass an introduction to Disability including interviewing people with mental health issues, Disability Etiquette, experiencing Disability and Disability Discrimination Act and Health Conditions.

The new Work Capability Assessment, which is more robust, accurate and fairer, will replace the current Personal Capability Assessment. As there are revised mental health descriptors in the Work Capability Assessment, training will also be provided for doctors on the assessment of customers and completion of reports for these revised descriptors.

North/South Co-Operation

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action she is taking to promote North/South co-operation. (AQO 2803/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I place great importance on working with the Irish Government where there are opportunities to cooperate and share lessons and experiences. At a representational level I meet regularly with Irish Government Ministers through the work being taken forward under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council. I am also in frequent contact with my Irish Government counterparts across the full range of issues for which I, and they, have responsibility.

Pre-Paid Metering

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Association tenants using pre-paid metering for their heating requirements. (AQO 2682/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is a private matter for arrangement between the tenant and the supplier. Housing Associations therefore do not have a record of the number of their tenants who use meters.

Urban Regeneration

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the rate of progress in urban regeneration. (AQO 2793/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department's Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group has, among other things, responsibility for the Northern Ireland administration's overall strategy for tackling social, economic and physical regeneration of Northern Ireland's cities, towns and urban areas.

The priorities set out in the Programme for Government for Urban Regeneration include implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy; delivering the regeneration of former military sites; a range of major developments in Belfast, such as the North East Quarter, St Anne's Square, Obel and Lanyon Towers; Public Realm work in town and city centres; and Comprehensive Development Schemes across Northern Ireland.

Although a tight Budget settlement has meant that I cannot undertake all the work that I would like to, I am satisfied that my Department will meet its objectives in leading and driving forward the social, economic and physical regeneration of our urban areas.

I am pleased, in particular, with the significant progress that is being made in the implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. Early last month I announced the next steps in tackling deprivation in Northern Ireland's 36 most disadvantaged communities. I have committed some £60million over the next three years to tackle multiple deprivation - focusing on local needs identified by the communities themselves. My overriding objective for Neighbourhood Renewal is to ensure that we concentrate scarce resources where they will have maximum impact on the ground.

Urban regeneration will provide new jobs and deliver new services. It will provide sustainable living for communities - replacing urban blight with a mix of housing, business, retail, education and leisure facilities. Our cities and towns will increasingly provide a better and safer environment for those who live and work there, and for the increasing numbers of tourists and visitors.

In the coming years I will do what I can to invest in an infrastructure that will unlock the huge potential for private sector investment across Northern Ireland's cities and towns. Central to this is my aim to see Belfast in the premier league of European regional cities.

The opening of Victoria Square last month is a prime example of what public private partnerships can achieve - enabling us to transform the fortunes of our towns and cities. Our urban areas are once again

becoming the engine of economic and social progress in Northern Ireland.

Mortgage Rescue Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action she has taken to inform home-owners of the risks associated with privately run mortgage rescue schemes. (AQO 2681/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have become increasingly concerned at the growing number of companies offering what the member has described as 'privately run mortgage rescue schemes'. That is why I recently announced plans to bring forward a Government sponsored not for profit mortgage rescue scheme to support those who through no fault of their own find themselves in real danger of having their homes repossessed. This may reduce the private, often unregulated, companies operating in the market place. In the meantime I would urge people who are having problems with their mortgage repayments to consult their lender and to get independent financial advice immediately. These two simple steps will help reduce the likelihood of people losing their homes.

Legahory Travellers' Site

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the future of the Legahory Travellers' site at Craigavon, following her meeting with residents and political representatives on 6 March 2008. (AQO 2688/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Given the difficulties in securing a permanent Travellers Transit Site, the Housing Executive is making a planning application for the provision of mains electricity at the Legahory Emergency Halting Site and to extend its use beyond February 2009. This is a precautionary measure and the site will close on the opening of a permanent Transit site in Craigavon.

Social Housing

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the models under consideration in relation to the introduction of a developer contribution to boost the supply of social and affordable housing. (AQO 2798/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have already visited other jurisdictions to see what models they use to deliver developer contributions to social and affordable housing.

In Great Britain, the delivery mechanism is through Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and in Ireland it is Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. Both schemes work well in their respective jurisdictions and the model we propose to bring forward will build on good practice from both. I am working closely with my Ministerial colleagues on this issue and we will publish detailed proposals in the coming weeks.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of recent proposals to increase to 21 the legal age at which alcohol can be consumed. (AQO 2818/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am aware that 21 is the legal age for consuming alcohol in some countries, that Scotland is contemplating introducing similar provision, that the South of Ireland considered and rejected such a move and that my predecessor's liquor licensing review did not recommend raising the age limit here. It seems therefore that the arguments for and against a change may merit further study.

The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children & Young People has been asked by the Assembly "to bring urgently before this Assembly, proposals to combat underage drinking." I am presently considering all the issues arising from the Hanson Review and will take the views of the Sub-Committee, the Social Development Committee and Executive colleagues before coming to decisions on the way forward in relation to liquor licensing in general, including underage drinking.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 18 April 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what consideration is being given to ensure that new investments as part of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland are designed to maximise opportunities for cross-community sharing and integration. (AQW 3618/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The Executive's Programme for Government and Investment Strategy are intrinsically linked. In these, the Executive has committed to undertaking its programme under a series of interdependent priorities, which include promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. In addition, the Programme for Government cross-cutting themes of a Shared and Better Future and sustainability are embedded within the Investment Strategy. Individual Ministers will decide how best to reflect the agreed cross-cutting themes within their own areas of responsibility as part of their individual delivery plans for the Investment Strategy at departmental level, that are being published over the course of the next few weeks. Departments will work to progress the Executive's wider economic, social and employment objectives as projects under the Investment Strategy are rolled out.

Poverty

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what consideration has been given to the introduction of mechanisms to screen all new policies for their potential impact on levels of poverty. (AQW 4855/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Tackling poverty and disadvantage is highlighted as one of our priorities within Programme for Government 2008-2011 and as a theme that cuts across Departmental boundaries.

Although there are no specific mechanisms for screening new policies for their potential impact on poverty, Departments are required in line with Public Expenditure guidelines, and do so routinely, to use data and research available on poverty when screening new policies as an integral part of the appraisal process. This helps ensure that resources and efforts are targeted towards those in need and that tackling poverty and disadvantage is afforded suitable priority within Departmental public expenditure plans.

Anti-Poverty Strategy

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the progress toward; and (ii) the timeframe, for the introduction of an anti-poverty strategy and associated action plan. (AQW 4856/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In line with its statutory obligation under Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Executive Committee will soon receive proposals for the adoption of a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation here based on objective need.

The process has already commenced for proposals to be outlined to the OFMDFM Committee in advance of the Executive Committee's considerations.

When the Executive Committee has completed its considerations and assessment of existing targets, work will commence on the development of actions that could contribute to the adopted strategy's major goals and objectives.

Lisanelly Army Site

Dr Deeny asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it would consider a request to an extension of the 1 April 2008 deadline from the Ministry of Defence for the purchase of the former Lisanelly Army site. (AQW 4872/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The First Minister and deputy First Minister are presently in discussions with the Chancellor and Chief Secretary to the Treasury in order to progress this matter urgently and are aware that there is a deadline for the potential purchase of Lisanelly and other sites.

If a favourable response from the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is not received, an extension to the deadline will be sought from the Ministry of Defence.

Victims' Commissioners

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the powers currently available to the 4 Victims' Commissioners; and to provide a timescale within which the Commissioners will have the power to investigate and determine issues. (AQW 4890/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A draft bill was introduced to the Assembly on 31 March 2008 which will amend the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to make provision for a Commission for Victims and Survivors. The draft bill is being taken through the Assembly under the accelerated passage procedure and therefore is subject to approval by the Assembly. It is hoped that the Commission will be established and be operational within a short period of time.

In the interim, the Commissioners designate have been working with OFMDFM officials on establishing an office for the Commission and preparation of a work programme.

National Stadium

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its plans for the Maze site should the National Stadium not go ahead. (AQW 4899/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The only proposed plan being progressed for the regeneration of the former prison and army base is that which is based upon the development of a multi-sports stadium and an International Centre for Conflict Transformation as recommended in the unanimous multi-party consultation panel report and the Maze/Long Kesh Masterplan supported by all the main political parties.

As you may be aware the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is currently considering the value for money business case for the proposed programme and the assessment of affordability based on negotiations with the private sector for the appointment of a potential development partner.

Ethnic Minority Groups

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the

number of voluntary ethnic minority groups that are currently receiving funding from the Executive; and (ii) the amount of funding allocated to these groups. (AQW 4928/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Under the current funding scheme for Minority Ethnic Communities (2005-2008) the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has provided development and project funding of almost £1.8m to 19 different organisations which either represent or provide services to minority ethnic people.

This funding has supported the work of community and voluntary groups in promoting good relations, community cohesion and integration between people from different racial groups and communities.

As part of our ongoing work to combat racism, we have just completed the application process for a new one year (2008-09) funding scheme for minority ethnic communities. We will make an announcement in the near future about the organisations that will receive funding and amounts allocated.

Victims' Commissioners

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the representations it has had from victims' organisations after the appointment of the Victims' Commissioners. (AQW 4930/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The decision to establish a Victims and Survivors Commission, subject to amending legislation which is currently before the Assembly, was announced on 28 January 2008. Since then we have received several representations from Victims Organisations, four of which referred directly to the Victims Commission designate.

Poverty Reduction

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the actions it is taking to significantly reduce income poverty. (AQW 5041/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Employment with a reasonable wage is generally considered the best route out of poverty. That is why 'Growing a dynamic and innovative economy' is therefore central to reducing income poverty and our top priority within Programme for Government 2008-2011. It is supported by targets and actions to tackle economic in-activity and build the skills' level of the workforce through a wide variety of measures.

These measures will have a particular focus on supporting those most at risk of income poverty.

Reform of tax and benefits, and modernisation of benefit services will continue to provide improved financial security for those who are temporarily or permanently unable to work. The recent announcement in the budget, which affects tax and benefits here, should have an impact on income poverty for a percentage of those in relative income poverty.

In line with its statutory obligation under Section 16 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, the Executive Committee will soon consider proposals for the adoption of a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation here based on objective need.

The process has already commenced with proposals soon to be outlined to the OFMDFM Committee in advance of the Executive Committee's considerations.

When the Executive Committee has completed its considerations, we will focus on the delivery of actions that will contribute most to the agreed strategy's major goals and objectives.

River Blackwater at Annaghroe

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it was agreed with the Taoiseach that two new bridges should be constructed across the River Blackwater at Annaghroe and Knockginny, and on what information this decision was based. (AQW 5128/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A number of cross-border roads were closed for security reasons. Subsequently, in recognition of the importance of cross-border road links the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Taoiseach agreed that there was no longer a security justification for the last 2 such roads (involving the Annaghroe and Knocknaginny cross-border bridges over the River Blackwater between Glaslough and Caledon) remaining closed. At the North South Ministerial Council meeting in the Transport Sector held on 14 September 2007, Ministers endorsed

progress made on the decision to re-open these roads. The Irish Government has given a commitment to fund the replacement of the bridges and the approach roads in County Monaghan while our Roads Agency has agreed to improve the approach roads here.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the protocols that are followed in informing MLAs that the First Minister, deputy First Minister or the junior Ministers will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 5141/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The protocol is that MLAs should be notified of official visits by members of the Executive or Junior Ministers to their constituencies not less than 24 hours in advance of the visit. Notification of such visits should include detail on the reason, location and timing of the visit, with a contact number through which MLAs may seek further details.

These protocols were recently agreed by the Executive and are now being implemented by all Ministerial Private Offices. They were communicated to the Speaker of the Assembly on 12 February 2008 and a copy of this letter has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Committee of the Regions

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the attendance level of each Northern Ireland member of the Committee of the Regions of the European Union at both Plenary and other Commission meetings, since their appointments. (AQW 5259/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The table below details the attendance level of Northern Ireland members of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) since the Committee's current mandate began on 16 February 2006.

CoR member	Type of Membership	CoR Commission	Plenary Sessions		Commission Meetings	
			Number Attended	Number open to each Member*	Number Attended	Total Number
Minister Edwin Poots, MLA	Full Member	Sustainable Development	5	11	4	11
Minister Conor Murphy, MP MLA**	Full Member	Territorial Cohesion	1	11	0	11
CLlr Lord Maurice Morrow MLA	Alternate Member	Economic and Social Policy	1	6	1	11

CoR member	Type of Membership	CoR Commission	Plenary Sessions		Commission Meetings	
			Number Attended	Number open to each Member*	Number Attended	Total Number
Cllr Bernice Swift	Alternate Member	Education and Culture	0	10	0	10

* Alternates, may only attend a CoR Plenary session if their full member is not attending.

** Minister Murphy resigned with effect from 13 March 2008 and a replacement nominee has been identified to replace him on the Committee and this process is underway.

Freedom of Information

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether Freedom of Information legislation overrides confidentiality agreements drawn up between employers and employees at the termination of a contract.

(AQW 5492/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Code of Practice on the discharge of public authorities' functions, issued under section 45 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 by the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs in November 2004, provides guidance to public authorities on 'desirable practice' in discharging their functions under Part I of the Act.

Part 5 of the Code aims to promote consideration by public authorities of the implications for Freedom of Information before agreeing to confidentiality provisions in contracts. While the Code states that all parties to a contract should be aware of the limits of enforceability of confidentiality clauses, it also recognises that there will be circumstances in which the preservation of confidentiality between public authorities and contractors is appropriate, and must be maintained, in the public interest. Therefore, every case would have to be judged on its merits.

The Code does not have statutory force. However, failure to comply with its provisions may lead to a breach of the Act, and ultimately enforcement action being taken by the Information Commissioner.

Employment and Equality Legislation

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that companies registered in the Republic of Ireland with employees based in Northern Ireland must abide by fair employment and equality legislation.

(AQW 5495/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The various pieces of anti-discrimination legislation all contain similar provisions setting out the

circumstances in which employment is to be regarded as being at an establishment in Northern Ireland.

We can confirm that all companies with employees working wholly or partly in Northern Ireland are required to abide by fair employment and equality legislation here.

Planning Appeals

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it has taken to recruit additional planning appeals Commissioners to tackle the backlog of planning appeals.

(AQW 5598/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) exercises its functions independently of OFMDFM but the Department is responsible for providing the resources needed for the Commission to discharge its responsibilities. Appointments to the Commission are made by us.

The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will enable the Chief Commissioner to fund a significant number of additional Commissioners to deploy against the backlog of planning appeals cases. An increase in the complement of permanent and part-time fee-paid Panel Commissioners has been agreed and officials are currently working with the Chief Commissioner to implement a strategy for use of the additional funding.

Arrangements are currently under way to deliver a competition with a view to recruiting up to 10 new fee-paid part-time Panel Commissioners. This will of course be subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Plans are also in place to recruit additional permanent Commissioners later in the year.

Three new internal appointments at Principal and Senior Commissioner level will shortly be made to the Commission to deploy against an increasingly complex workload and to provide the management and support necessary to maximise the effectiveness of the new Commissioners.

Legal Advice to the First Minister

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4561/08, to provide a copy of (a) the further request for advice sought by the First Minister; and (b) the advice provided to the First Minister; and, if unable to provide a copy of this advice, to detail the reasons why this can not be made available.

(AQW 5767/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We are unable to provide copies of the material you have requested as the contents of both are covered by legal professional privilege. We can confirm, however, that our answers to AQW 1825/08 and AQW 4561/08 accurately reflect the legal advice received by the First Minister.

Executive Office in Brussels

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what use has been made of the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels.

(AQO 2869/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) is at the heart of this administration's engagement with the European Union Institutions.

The Office is a resource that is available to this Assembly and its Committees and to Northern Ireland's civic society, local government, universities and other groups seeking to engage in Europe.

As well as providing space in Brussels for visitors, staff in the Brussels Office are often asked to speak to visiting groups and organisations from other countries. This provides the opportunity to raise Northern Ireland's positive profile throughout Europe.

Our Brussels staff work with all Northern Ireland's representatives in Brussels, including Members of the European Parliament, the representatives of the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee and with the Northern Ireland Civil Servants working for the European Commission.

Ministers and officials from our Department and from other Departments have made frequent use of the resources available in the Brussels Office since the restoration of devolution.

These visits have ranged from operational meetings between officials right through to us meeting with European Commission President Barroso to discuss the Northern Ireland Task Force.

Indeed, the Office has played a key role in liaison between this administration, the European Commission and the British and Irish Permanent Representatives as the work of the Task Force has progressed.

As you may be aware, we joined Commissioner Hübner this morning as she launched a report setting out how Northern Ireland can best engage with the European Union. We send our thanks to Commissioner Hübner for travelling to Belfast for the launch and for the ongoing long term support of the Commission as the work of the Task Force continues.

One of the reasons the Office was established was to ensure that Departments remain up to date with and influence policy developments at the EU level.

With the European Commission, through the Task Force, committed to helping us to grow a dynamic and innovative economy, we are sure that our Office in Brussels will continue to play a vital role in our work in Europe.

Gender Inequality

Mrs Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the specific measures it is bringing forward to address gender inequality.

(AQO 2857/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Being disadvantaged because of gender, whether in the home, in education, in the labour market or elsewhere, is unacceptable. We are committed to policies that address and tackle such inequalities wherever they occur.

The Programme for Government commits our Department to the implementation of the cross-departmental Gender Equality Strategy and to introduce measures towards the total elimination of the gender pay gap.

The Gender Equality Strategy is implemented across government through the mainstreaming of gender considerations into all policies and strategies and, where appropriate, by specific gender action measures, to address identified gender inequalities.

Our officials are currently analysing gender equality action plans from all departments which will form the basis of cross-departmental plans for the period 2007-2011. We aim to bring these to the Executive, together with a report on the action measures required across a range of themes including poverty, violence, employment, work-life balance, decision making, access to services and data research to address gender equality, in advance of the Summer recess 2008 and following consultation with our Departmental Committee.

Good Relations Strategy

Mr Molloy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on the Good Relations Strategy to promote cohesion, sharing and integration. (AQO 2907/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As we have stated on previous occasions, we are totally committed to the cross-cutting theme of a shared and better future for all: equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations are the watchwords for all our policies and programmes across government. We have committed an additional £7.5m direct expenditure over the next three years – 2008/2011, with a total investment of approximately £29m on good relations and good race relations.

We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals for a 'Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration for a shared and better future,' which we signalled in the Programme for Government. As the Member is aware, our officials briefed the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the current stage of development of the Programme last week. This programme will tackle issues affecting both the established communities as well as new arrivals. It will build on some of the excellent work which is already being done, particularly by district councils and community organisations, to address the challenges which local communities are facing. Action to tackle sectarianism, racism and intolerance will be at the core of these proposals.

The emphasis of the programme will be support for local people to deal with local issues through their local solutions.

Bamford Review

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the actions it will take over the next 12 months to deliver on the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities. (AQO 2866/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Our Programme for Government commits us to achieve a measurable improvement in the lives of people with disabilities by 2012. To that end our Department is finalising the report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability which was set up to examine the barriers to participation experienced by people with disabilities, including those with a mental health or learning disability, that contribute to their relative poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. That report will include

recommendations aimed at removing such barriers faced by people with disabilities.

The report will also take account of the recommendations of the Bamford review and the Executive's response to these which is being co-ordinated by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We will consult with our Departmental Committee on the Promoting Social Inclusion (Disability) report and in due course ask the Executive to consider its recommendations.

Furthermore, our Department continues to bring forward legislation to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities including those with a learning disability. This legislation implements provisions of the Disability Discrimination Order introduced by OFMDFM in 2006. It covers areas such as functions of public authorities, private clubs, premises and transport.

Rural Post Offices

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the action it has taken to date to challenge the proposal to close more than thirty rural Post Offices. (AQO 2834/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The recent announcement by Post Office Ltd reflects the UK Government's network change strategy which sets out a range of measures it believes are needed to modernise and reshape the network to place it on a more stable, long-term financial footing.

The Member will be aware that this is a reserved matter but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensured that the views of Northern Ireland departments were conveyed to the UK Government as the strategy was being developed.

We welcome the UK Government's commitment to continue to support the network, that significant sums will be available to Post Office Ltd to maintain a viable network and that there was a recognition of the social role that Post Offices play in local communities.

It is very regrettable therefore that the Post Office has now had to propose the closure of 42 Post Offices, both urban and rural. While we must acknowledge the social, technological and financial issues underlying these proposals, they are undoubtedly of concern to those communities which will be affected by the removal of this service.

We are writing to the Secretary of State, with responsibility for post office matters, seeking an extension to the consultation period. Our colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, has also written to the Post Office seeking a meeting to discuss the impact of the closures on rural areas.

We would also urge all Members of this Assembly to carefully consider these proposals with the communities they represent, and make their views known to the Post Office directly.

Union Flag

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consultation it has had with the UK Government on the terms of a green paper which includes proposals to allow schools, hospitals and council buildings to fly the union flag all year round. (AQO 2922/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A green paper entitled *The Governance of Britain* was published by the UK Government on 3 July 2007. In the green paper the Government said it would consult on proposals to alter the guidance on flying the Union Flag from UK Government buildings in England, Scotland and Wales.

The UK Government announced that it had no plans to change the current legislation governing flag flying here and as a result the consultation exercise arising from the green paper did not include Northern Ireland.

Racial Equality Strategy

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on the progress of the current action plan for the Racial Equality Strategy. (AQO 2867/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We would refer the Member to our previous answer to her question AQO 2615/08, published in the Written Answers Booklet on Friday 4 April 2008, where we clearly set out the position.

Byron Report

Mr McLaughlin asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the recently published Byron Report will be taken forward. (AQO 2917/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We welcome Dr Byron's report of her review which examined the risks to children of potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games.

She has recommended the establishment of a UK Council on Child Internet Safety chaired by the Home Office and DCSF with two core elements:

- Better regulation of the industry; and
- Better information and education.

Keeping children and young people safe is a priority for us all and this is a wide ranging report which has implications for a number of departments.

We have therefore asked officials in the Children and Young People's Unit to work with those departments to examine Dr Byron's recommendations in detail and produce a paper on the way forward for discussion at the next meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People.

Child Poverty

Mrs M Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its delivery plan to eradicate child poverty. (AQO 2831/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is totally unacceptable that around 100,000 children here live in poverty and the Executive is determined to tackle this issue as a priority. Our Programme for Government therefore commits specifically to:

- Work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010; and
- Work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

There are a number of policies which currently aim to lift children out of poverty. These include tax and benefit policies set by the UK Government, and Programmes such as Early Years, New Deal and Sure Start which are the responsibility of Northern Ireland Departments, but we need to do more if we are to achieve these targets. Consequently, the Executive will soon adopt its own Strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion based on objective need. In so doing it will take account of the findings and recommendations coming out of the current enquiry by the OFMDFM Committee.

We will also take account of findings from our own departmental work on tackling disadvantage and barriers experienced by lone parents and people with disabilities, which is nearing completion.

Bamford Review

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the support it is giving to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities. (AQO 2864/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Our Programme for Government commits us to achieve a measurable improvement in the lives of people with disabilities by 2012. To that end our Department is finalising the report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability including recommendations to remove barriers faced by people with disabilities. This report will take account of the recommendations of the Bamford review and the Executive's response to these. We will consult with our Departmental Committee on the Promoting Social Inclusion (Disability) report and in due course ask the Executive to consider its recommendations.

Furthermore, our Department continues to bring forward legislation to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities including those with a learning disability. This legislation implements provisions of the Disability Discrimination Order introduced by OFMDFM in 2006. It covers areas such as functions of public authorities, private clubs, premises and transport.

Bamford Review

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the support it is giving to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities. (AQO 2863/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our Programme for Government commits us to achieve a measurable improvement in the lives of people with disabilities by 2012. To that end our Department is finalising the report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability including recommendations to remove barriers faced by people with disabilities. This report will take account of the recommendations of the Bamford review and the Executive's response to these. We will consult with our Departmental Committee on the Promoting Social Inclusion (Disability) report and in due course ask the Executive to consider its recommendations.

Furthermore, our Department continues to bring forward legislation to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities including those with a learning disability. This legislation implements provisions of the Disability Discrimination Order introduced by OFMDFM in 2006. It covers areas such as functions of public authorities, private clubs, premises and transport.

Civic Forum

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessments have been

made on the role and function of the Civic Forum.

(AQO 2830/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The arrangements for the Civic Forum, approved by the Assembly on 16 February 1999, provided for a formal review of all matters relating to the structure and effective operation of the Civic Forum. However, the suspension of the devolved institutions in October 2002 meant that the review, which had commenced in the Spring of 2002, was not completed.

Following the restoration of devolution in May 2007, the Executive decided to commission a fresh review to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current structure, operation and membership of the Forum and to make recommendations on the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters. The Terms of Reference for the review have been placed in the Library.

Climate Change

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an assessment of the contribution Government departments are making to help reduce climate change. (AQO 2898/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Lead responsibility for Climate Change policy lies with the Department of the Environment. OFMDFM will monitor and report on progress as part of its strategic responsibility for sustainable development.

Within the Sustainability Strategy, departments have individually identified key actions which will contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and each is responsible for the delivery of these. OFMDFM will use the Implementation Plan and a number of Key Indicators as the primary mechanisms to monitor and report progress against targets, as part of its strategic responsibility for sustainable development.

Child Poverty

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the impact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget Announcement will have on tackling child poverty and the targets set by OFMDFM. (AQO 2892/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget announcement marks further progress towards the achievement of child poverty targets through significant investment. Measures announced in the budget which will undoubtedly play an important role include:

- Increasing the first child rate of Child Benefit to £20 per week by April 2009;
- disregarding Child Benefit in calculating income for Housing Benefit, which improves the work incentive and boosts income for the lowest paid families;
- increasing the child element of the Child Tax Credit by £50 per year above indexation from April 2009.

At the time of the Budget announcement, Government estimated that some 250,000 children will, as a consequence, be lifted out of poverty across the United Kingdom. Estimates for different regions are not available but it would be reasonable to assume however that Northern Ireland will benefit proportionately.

Equality Impact Assessment

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on its recent Equality Impact Assessment on the Programme for Government, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and Budget. (AQO 2920/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: At the end of January 2008, the Executive launched its draft Equality Impact Assessment carried out at a strategic level on the Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy for a twelve week consultation period.

Officials from OFMDFM, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Strategic Investment Board have held five public consultation events to ensure that the public and interested groups had an opportunity to feed key messages into the consultation process. These consultation meetings were widely advertised in the local press and officials contacted local Councils, Health Trusts and Boards, Education and Library Boards and representatives from Section 75 groups in advance to make them aware of the publication of the draft EQIA and the public consultation events.

In addition to these public meetings, officials have arranged consultation meetings with interested organisations such as the Equality Coalition and Disability Action. They have also offered to meet with other organisations on request.

The consultation process on the draft assessment is still current and in addition to participating in consultation meetings, members of the public and organisations can submit written consultation responses until the closing date of 23rd April 2008.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tree-Felling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm if the Forest Service and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are utilising private sector resources to train employees in tree-felling; and to detail the amount spent on such resources.

(AQW 5170/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, (CAFRE), is responsible for the organisation of training for Forest Service staff. CAFRE has two staff members to deliver this training. However, due to sick absences of these staff and to enable CAFRE to meet its commitments to Forest Service, CAFRE has procured a private company for the provision of Chainsaw Training Refresher Courses. The value of this tender is £165 per day.

Training of Forest Service staff in tree-felling is due to commence this month.

Fisheries Council

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail where she sat during the 2007 European Union Fisheries Council; and to confirm that she negotiated directly with European Union representatives from countries other than the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 5250/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I attended all the plenary sessions at the Council with my fellow fisheries Ministers and negotiated directly at bilaterals with the Commission and the Presidency.

Fisheries Fund

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a timescale within which (i) the new European Fisheries Fund will go live; (ii) applications can be submitted; and (iii) applications will be processed. (AQW 5251/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- It is anticipated that European Commission will approve the Operational Programme for the EFF in July 2008.

- (ii) We plan to have the Fund open to applications within 3 months of receiving approval.
- (iii) My Department will be working with the Fishing Industry over the summer to help applicants formulate proposals. It is likely that the first applications will be processed and approved by the selection panel before the end of the year.

Fishing Fleet

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons why she has not responded to the proposals submitted by the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation, in relation to assistance for the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. (AQW 5252/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have written to Alan McCulla, Chief Executive of ANIFPO to explain that I wanted to consider fully all the implications of what ANIFPO had proposed and the various requests which have been made by or on behalf of the industry. I offered to meet with him to discuss these matters further but unfortunately that did not prove possible to arrange. ANIFPO representatives participated in a meeting with my officials on 28 March at which the ANIFPO and other proposals were discussed.

Fishery Harbours Authority

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons why there have been above inflation increases for charges imposed at (i) Ardglass; (ii) Kilkeel; and (iii) Portavogie, by the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbours Authority over the last 3 years. (AQW 5253/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The NI Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA) sets uniform dues and charges for vessels at the three local fishing harbours. Over the past three years landing dues which is the largest component of the charge paid by active vessels have not increased, remaining at 2.75% of the value of fish landed.

There have been increases in berthing dues and other charges. For example, for 15m vessels, annual berthing charges rose by £2 (1.83%) in 2006, by £3 (2.7%) in 2007 and by £16 (14%) in 2008.

The level of those charges were considered carefully following a benchmarking exercise by NIFHA which compared its charges with those of other fishery harbours in England, Scotland and Ireland. Charges at Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie remain competitive compared to other Irish Sea ports.

Increases have been necessary to ensure that NIFHA can deliver a good level of service to the local fishing fleet at all three harbours. Even with these increases the Authority is unlikely to fully cover its operating costs in 2008.

Dog Fish Quotas

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons why the quotas for catches of dog fish were so low after the Brussels meeting in December 2007. (AQW 5273/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Assessments by the ICES Working Group on Elasmobranch Fishes indicate a decline in spurdog abundance which has resulted in the conclusion that the stock is depleted and may be in danger of collapse.

Until recently there was no individual Member State spurdog quota for the sea area that includes the Irish Sea last year and all countries fished off an EU quota. The EU quota was reduced by 41% for 2008 with member states given an individual allocation for the first time and a bycatch limit of 5% was introduced. In Britain the allocation in 2008 is 739 tonnes compared to provisional landings in 2007 of 678 tonnes.

The bycatch limit is aimed at preventing spurdog becoming a target fishery. A bycatch limit results in spurdog being discarded at sea but this is regarded as a worthwhile conservation measure because spurdog have a good discard survival rate because of their robust physiology.

Spurdogs are slow growing, long lived species that reproduce at low levels compared to the main commercial fish species. They are therefore very susceptible to fishing pressure as they cannot recover quickly.

Dog Fish Quotas

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to increase the quotas for dog fish in the Irish Sea. (AQW 5274/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Dogfish is a relatively minor fish stock for our fleet with provisional figures showing 82.4 tonnes landed in 2007 worth around £58,000. I will try to maintain all our quota opportunities and secure increases where there is good scientific evidence to support our arguments. However, most effort will necessarily be directed to our most economically important stocks such as Nephrops, haddock and herring. I am aware that the industry finds the bycatch limit for dogfish of 5% of landings restrictive

and I have asked by officials to explore with the Commission the scope on alternative approach to the application of such conservation measures which would provide more flexibility for fishermen.

Fishing Fleet

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to provide financial assistance to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, similar to that allocated by the Spanish Government to its fishing fleet. (AQW 5275/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The EU Commission's Regulation on "de minimis aid" which was adopted in July last year allows Member States to pay up to € 30 000 per three-year period, per beneficiary. De minimis aid is aid deemed not to distort competition. The Spanish Government has opted to pay such aid reportedly to maintain industry competitiveness.

I acknowledge that the catching sector is experiencing difficulty with high fuel prices and I applaud the initiatives being taken by the industry to reduce fuel costs. It is my view that a longer-term, strategic plan is needed to deal with the problems of spiralling fuel costs and low fish prices. I want to begin a dialogue about this with the industry - so that we can develop jointly a strategic plan for a profitable and sustainable fishing industry. In doing so we should together consider the scope for utilising the 36 million Euro of public investment that will be available under the European Fisheries Fund.

I have listened carefully to proposals made by and on behalf of the fishing industry. I will make a full statement to the Assembly in the near future when I have completed my consideration of the various representations which have been made to me.

Fishing Fleet

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the discussions she has had with (i) fishing organisations; and (ii) the European Union, in relation to the financial assistance that can be given to the local fishing fleet. (AQW 5276/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I had a lengthy discussion with representatives from the North of Ireland Trawlers' Trading Company on fuel costs and other issues on 11 February. At my request officials met representatives of the local industry on 28 March to discuss their request for financial assistance.

I met with Commissioner Borg on 1st April to impress on him the key challenges that faced our fishing fleet. Our agenda covered key stocks, the impact of effort restrictions, rising fuel costs and the subsidies offered by other European Countries.

Northern Ireland Produce

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action her department is taking to better promote the origin and quality of Northern Ireland produce. (AQW 5291/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are very strict EU rules restricting the extent to which Government can support publicity campaigns which promote domestically produced goods in preference to similar goods from other parts of the EU. Consequently public funds cannot be used to endorse food produced on the basis of its origin except under the EU approved NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP).

The NIRFP aims to promote quality regional food and increase its consumption within the North, the South and Britain. Under the Programme financial assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communication between all sectors of the food industry. In the last year activities funded under this Programme have included the new Food Pavilion at the Balmoral Show, the NI Food and Drink Awards, National Sausage Week, and a recipe book supported by a number of local producer groups. Applicants for the 2008/09 funding year will be advised, during April if their applications have been successful.

As an NDPB of my Department, the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) undertakes a range of marketing activities aimed at promoting locally produced Farm Quality Assured beef and lamb, at home and abroad.

You will also be aware of the EU Protected Food Names Scheme which the Department administers. This Scheme aims to promote the regional distinctiveness of food within Europe.

Additionally, a voluntary pilot scheme is currently being developed with key stakeholders, involving origin labelling of beef in a number of local restaurants. This pilot will be evaluated and will provide for the first time valuable information on consumer attitudes and preferences about origin labelling of beef in the food service sector.

Fishing Vessels: Registered in Northern Ireland

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of fishing vessels registered in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how this figure has changed over the last 10 years.
(AQW 5292/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Vessels Registered in the North of Ireland 1998 to 2008:

Year	Under 10m	Over 10m	Total
1998	161	190	351
1999	164	182	346
2000	167	179	346
2001	167	179	346
2002	167	152	319
2003	173	145	318
2004	185	128	313
2005	195	133	328
2006	194	132	326
2007	183	138	321
2008	183	138	321

Fishing Industry

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an estimate of the number of people employed within the fishing industry; and to detail how this number has changed over the last 10 years.
(AQW 5294/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Estimated number of people employed in the fishing industry:

Year	Part time	Full time	Total
1997	1879	403	2282
1998	1932	372	2304
1999	1878	374	2252
2000	1674	351	2025
2001	1530	305	1835
2002	1469	294	1763
2003	1325	228	1553

Year	Part time	Full time	Total
2004	1433	227	1660
2005	1401	268	1669
2006	1319	282	1601

The estimated number of people employed in the fishing industry in 2007 is not yet available.

Bulk Buying Fuel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the fishing industry's initiative to reduce costs by bulk buying fuel, to detail the steps she is taking to assist the industry.
(AQW 5350/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The EU Commission's Regulation on "de minimis aid" which was adopted in July last year allows Member States to pay up to € 30 000 per three-year period, per beneficiary. De minimis aid is aid deemed not to distort competition. The Spanish Government has opted to pay such aid reportedly to maintain industry competitiveness.

I acknowledge that the catching sector is experiencing difficulty with high fuel prices and I applaud the initiatives being taken by the industry to reduce fuel costs. It is my view that a longer-term, strategic plan is needed to deal with the problems of spiralling fuel costs and low fish prices. I want to begin a dialogue about this with the industry - so that we can develop jointly a strategic plan for a profitable and sustainable fishing industry. In doing so we should together consider the scope for utilising the 36 million Euro of public investment that will be available under the European Fisheries Fund.

I have listened carefully to proposals made by and on behalf of the fishing industry. I will make a full statement to the Assembly in the near future when I have completed my consideration of the various representations which have been made to me.

Forest Parks

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to increase community involvement in forest parks.
(AQW 5355/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Forest Service already engages with a number of community organisations to facilitate public access and enjoyment of DARD's forests. For example, walking and cycling trails were developed at

Learmount Forest through a project led by Learmount Community Development Group Limited and recently a memorandum of understanding was signed between Fermanagh District Council and Forest Service on the expansion of the Marble Arch Caves Geopark to include forestry lands in Fermanagh.

The Forestry Strategy (DARD 2006) indicates that state forests will be primarily used for timber production and quiet enjoyment of people, however, in the context of providing better value from the forest estate, opportunities to enter into partnership agreements with other bodies, including community interests, will be considered, in order to develop specific activities within certain forests. In order to facilitate this, Forest Service intends to publish a strategy for the social use of its forests that will set out a framework for such activity.

In the context of preparing forest management plans for state forests, Forest Service consults a wide variety of stakeholders, including community groups and individuals. Consultation provides stakeholders with information about the proposed management plans, the likely effects of these plans on the forest and takes account of their resulting views when developing a final plan.

Farm Machinery Thefts

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the discussions she has had with her counterparts in other regions of the United Kingdom in relation to the increasing number of farm machinery thefts. (AQW 5357/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have not discussed the subject of farm machinery thefts with my counterparts. This is primarily a matter for the Police Service for NI (the Department is aware that the PSNI meet with groups of farmers in particular 'hot spot areas' to provide advice on protecting farm machinery assets).

Grain Shortage

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to address the national grain shortage. (AQW 5359/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you may already know action has been taken at European Union (EU) level to address the grain shortage by fixing the set aside rate at zero to release more land into cereals production. In addition to this early predictions are that the amount of cereals planted has also risen for this harvest year. While the current market conditions continue the growing of

cereals should remain attractive and this may help to stabilise the grain market.

In relation to the current grain shortage and the challenges it poses for the intensive sector I personally have engaged in a number of initiatives in recent months to address the issue.

I met with Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey with a view to developing and expanding local food sourcing initiatives in the Education and Health services. I have also discussed with my colleagues the question of increased public procurement of local produce.

I wrote to every supermarket in the North of Ireland 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. This hopefully provides an opportunity for increased returns to work back through the supply chain to the farmgate price.

Specifically in terms of support for the pigs sector, following a meeting with pig sector representatives, including the Ulster Farmer's Union, I wrote to the Defra Secretary of State to urge support for the re-introduction of export refunds for the pig sector. I have also written to Mary Coughlan TD on this issue. Under pressure from Member States export refunds were introduced.

My Department continues to support the intensive production sector in every way it can. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute supports the sector through research and development work, which provides an important science and expertise base to support industry development.

I will certainly consider any suggestions my colleagues have to offer which might ease the current situation.

Grain Shortage

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the contact she has had with her counterparts in other regions of the United Kingdom in relation to addressing the national grain shortage. (AQW 5360/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have not contacted my British counterparts specifically on the issue of grain shortage. I have however referred to the issue when I wrote to the Defra Secretary of State and Mary Coughlan TD to gather support for the re-introduction of export refunds for the pig sector.

I have also discussed the problems caused by the grain shortage with the Assembly on 3 March 2008

in relation to the No Day Named Motion on Grain Scarcity.

I will be meeting with Jim Nicholson MEP in the next few weeks to discuss the issue of rising feed costs and the implications of the grain shortage will be raised in that context.

The issue shall receive further consideration at the next Devolved Agriculture Ministers meeting later this year.

Official Visits

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of occasions she has met with her counterparts in Scotland and Wales to discuss issues relevant to the 3 devolved institutions. (AQW 5361/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date, I have participated in nine meetings with either or both my Ministerial counterparts in Scotland and Wales.

Irish Cattle Breeds

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to ensure the continued existence of endangered traditional Irish cattle breeds. (AQW 5381/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Irish Moiled Cattle option was introduced to DARD's agri-environment schemes in 2005, to encourage an increase in the population of breeding Irish Moiled female cattle by 50 per cent by 2016. The proposed NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) will continue to support this aim.

Currently, 8 Countryside Management Scheme participants receive support under this option, for a total of 107 animals.

Potential also exists under the Special Environment Projects option in NICMS to support proposals to graze with other traditional breeds where environmental benefit can be shown.

Pig Farming

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the actions she is taking to secure the long term future of pig farmers. (AQW 5385/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am very aware of the difficulties being faced by pig farmers and share their concerns. Expanding

demand for grain from a growing world population and for biofuels coupled with lower cereals production, has caused a reduction in stock levels and a rapid and significant rise in cereals prices. The losses in the pig sector are a direct consequence of these price rises and pigmeat production and prices have yet to respond to these increased input costs. The only long-term, sustainable solution to higher input costs is for European pigmeat production to fall leading to an EU-wide adjustment in pigmeat prices.

I am committed to the future of a sustainable pig industry here. I lobbied successfully for the re-introduction of export refunds for pigmeat to assist in restoring some balance and stability to the sector. I engaged with the retail sector and am aware that there has been a recent rise in some prices which hopefully will provide an opportunity for increased returns to work back through the supply chain to the farmgate price. I continue to work with colleagues to obtain increased public procurement of local produce and with farming representatives to see how together we can progress through the current difficulties.

DARD is putting in substantial resource at farm level to aid compliance with environmental restrictions and support is provided to producers under Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control legislation. There is a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors. Meat technologists provide a wide range of technical support to the processing sector and Supply Chain Development Branch helps groups to work together and with industry partners to improve returns. Through AFBI, DARD continues to support the sector via research and development, providing an important science and expertise base. I am not in a position to provide significant direct financial support without Commission approval however EU funding will be available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets and to encourage better co-operation and communications between all sectors of the food industry.

I have concerns about encouraging producers to get into increasing debt using borrowed money at a reduced rate in order to subsidise continued production such as the de minimis subsidised loan scheme currently being operated in France. A meaningful state aid scheme cannot, however, be achieved within the short timeframe that would 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.

Whilst I cannot provide any additional funding, my Department will continue to assist in whatever way it can to help producers develop new production systems with a view to satisfying the demands of, or need

for, new market opportunities and I personally will continue to lend my support in whatever way I can.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4534/08, to detail the number of staff working in her department's press office, broken down by grade.
(AQW 5386/08)

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.

The grading of the Press Officers is as follows:-

- 1 x Principal Press Officer, 2 x Senior Information Officers,
- 1 x Information Officer and 1 x Assistant Information Officer.

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain why light dues are forced upon the Northern Ireland fishing industry while other parts of Europe are exempt.
(AQW 5461/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Responsibility for the provision of navigational aids at sea and the collection of light dues is not a devolved matter but continues to live with the Department of Transport in London. Aids to navigation for shipping throughout Britain and Ireland are provided by the 3 General Lighthouse Authorities (GLAs). They are Trinity House, The Northern Lighthouse Board and the Commissioners of Irish Lights.

Light dues totalled £70.1m in 2006/07 with approximately £0.46m coming from UK fishing vessels over 10m in length. Vessels under 10m are exempt. The North's vessels contribute around £50,000 per year in light dues. At current rates a 15m vessel would pay £290 per year and a 24m vessel £470 per year.

In 2004 a study of the impact of paying light dues by all British shipping, including fishing, was carried out for the Department of Transport (DTR). This concluded that paying light dues did not place British shipping at a disadvantage compared to other countries such as France and Germany where aids to navigation are paid for through general taxation.

The DTR have since reaffirmed their policy that the user should pay but have stated that they are determined to minimise the cost burden on the industry. Dues have been reduced since 2002.

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the Fishing Industry has to pay for maintenance of the Satellite Monitoring equipment.
(AQW 5462/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Vessel Monitoring Systems fitted in all fishing vessels over 15m were provided with the assistance of a 100% grant for government which included a 3 year warranty.

There are currently 105 vessels with VMS terminals and the majority of these were fitted in early 2005. Some terminals have now the end of the original warranty and the company that supplies this equipment is contacting vessel owners to offer them a warranty extension for 2 years (which provides free replacement terminals and servicing) at a cost of £21 per month.

It is not compulsory to take up this offer but without a warranty there is a risk that fishermen could face expensive charges for servicing or replacement of the equipment and the possibility of having to remain in port until the terminal is functioning to the satisfaction of the Department.

I have asked my officials to examine the scope for meeting some of the costs associated with the operation of the satellite vessel monitoring system here.

Fishing Industry: Fleets

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm (i) that any grant given in relation to the fuel crisis will be based on the traditional returns made by the vessel agents to the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority; (ii) that other charges (e.g Slipping, Ice etc) will remain; and (iii) in the 12 months following the grant the department will work with the fishing industry to implement a plan using the European Fisheries Fund to address the fuel crisis in the long term.
(AQW 5487/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The EU Commission's Regulation on "de minimis aid" which was adopted in July last year allows Member States to pay up to €30,000 per three-year period, per beneficiary. De minimis aid is aid deemed not to distort competition. The Spanish

Government has opted to pay such aid reportedly to maintain industry competitiveness.

I acknowledge that the catching sector is experiencing difficulty with high fuel prices and I applaud the initiatives being taken by the industry to reduce fuel costs. It is my view that a longer-term, strategic plan is needed to deal with the problems of spiralling fuel costs and low fish prices. I want to begin a dialogue about this with the industry - so that we can develop jointly a strategic plan for a profitable and sustainable fishing industry. In doing so we should together consider the scope for utilising the 36 million Euro of public investment that will be available under the European Fisheries Fund.

I have listened carefully to proposals made by and on behalf of the fishing industry. I will make a full statement to the Assembly in the near future when I have completed my consideration of the various representations which have been made to me.

Rural Development Programme

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the announcement by the Minister for the Environment on the outworking of local government boundaries under the Review of Public Administration, to detail the impact this will have on the delivery mechanisms for the Rural Development Programme. (AQO 2925/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 20 September last I announced that the Rural Development Programme 2007-13 (RDP) would be delivered through self-formed clusters of at least three councils. Since then, progress in forming clusters and animating rural areas has been good. All councils have now joined clusters, seven in all, and local action groups will soon be in place to start developing the strategies that will allow programme funds to flow.

On 13 March, the Minister of the Environment announced the outcome of the Review of Public Administration, which will be implemented from 2011. Soon afterwards I wrote to the clusters to assure them that the seven-cluster model would remain.

The advanced stage of development of the delivery mechanisms and tight programme timetable mean that it is not possible to start afresh. To do so would lose substantial European funding to rural dwellers and the rural economy. Communities must be able to access rural development funding now, and operating this model will provide valuable experience for the councils that will deliver the RDP after 2011. Moreover, the new councils are several years away and will arrive at a time when I hope a large percentage of the RDP will already have been delivered.

Single Farm Payments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Single Farm Payments which are still outstanding for 2007/2008. (AQO 2847/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: One of my priorities since coming to office has been to ensure that farmers receive timely subsidy payments. I am pleased to say that performance in both the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances and Single Farm Payment schemes has improved compared to previous years.

By the end of March, 95% of those eligible for Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances have received their payment and 94.16% Single Farm Payment claims have been paid.

A further 173 Single Farm Payment claims were assessed as ineligible. This leaves 5.4 % cases outstanding for 2007 and means that 2,100 claims have still to be finalised. I know many farmers are dependent on these payments and my staff are making every effort to complete these as soon as possible.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress on Single Farm Payments and Less Favoured Areas payments. (AQO 2931/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: One of my priorities since coming to office has been to ensure that farmers receive timely subsidy payments. I am pleased to say that performance in both the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances and Single Farm Payment schemes has improved compared to previous years.

By the end of March, 95% of those eligible for Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances have received their payment and 94.16% Single Farm Payment claims have been paid.

A further 173 Single Farm Payment claims were assessed as ineligible. This leaves 5.4 % cases outstanding for 2007 and means that 2,100 claims have still to be finalised. I know many farmers are dependent on these payments and my staff are making every effort to complete these as soon as possible.

Biofuels

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total amount of

agricultural land which has been converted to growing biofuels in the last five years. (AQO 2923/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you will be aware, our agriculture is predominantly grass based, with only 3 per cent devoted to cereal and oilseed crops in 2006. However, areas of both cropping and oilseed rape have been considerably higher in the past than at present.

We have no historical data going back over the last 5 years. However, the last two Farm Census Surveys indicate that 470 hectares of oilseed rape was planted in June 2006 and this dropped slightly to 398 hectares in June 2007. A very small proportion of this crop will be used for the production of bio-fuel and used mainly to power on-farm vehicles.

Current market conditions are more attractive to the arable sector for the growing of cereal crops rather than energy crops. Therefore bio-fuel production in Northern Ireland remains a niche market for those who can easily produce good yields of oilseed rape for bio-fuel production as opposed to high value cereal crops.

In the absence of any significant change in land use patterns, the quantities of cereals and oilseeds grown in the North could not support significant biodiesel/bio-ethanol production.

Currently, the growth of crops for use as bio-fuels, is promoted by DARD under the EU Aid for Energy Crops Scheme. There are no further plans to support the growth of crops specifically for the purpose of bio-fuel production.

Organic Fruit and Vegetables

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that have been put in place to promote the production and marketing of organic fruit and vegetables. (AQO 2913/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I intend to offer increased levels of support under a new Organic Farming Scheme to assist farmers who wish to convert from conventional to organic production. The following payments are proposed on a 'per hectare' basis, and will be apportioned over five years:-

- Horticulture (including top fruit) - £670
- Arable - £570
- Other Improved Land - £470

I also propose to offer an ongoing post-conversion payment of £30 per hectare per year for certified organic land under the proposed Organic Option in the new Countryside Management Scheme.

In December 2007 I launched the Agricultural and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme providing up to 40% financial assistance towards capital costs for producers and processors involved or wishing to become involved in processing and marketing. In addition, the Agricultural and Forestry Marketing and Development Grant Scheme and the Supply Chain Development Programme, both due to be launched in 2008, will provide financial assistance to farmers and processors to enhance their marketing capability.

DARD has offered funding under the Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme towards the set up of an organic guide and web facility for producers and consumers.

Supply Chain Development advisers provide advice and skills development to individual producers and groups of producers on market led activities. CAFRE (Greenmount Campus) continues to provide education, advice and ongoing support in relation to organic farming. It also develops and tests new technologies appropriate to the local organic sector.

DARD, through funding for the Organic Action Plan Group, sponsored an organic horticulture study visit to England for local producers in March 2008, and funded items including a consumer information leaflet, educational material for schools, an organic market study and an Organic Supply Chain Conference.

Sainsbury's Supermarket

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the economic benefits to local farmers of Sainsbury's Supermarket announcement that they are going to source beef locally. (AQO 2912/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have engaged with multiple retailers in a number of meetings over the past few months, and have encouraged them to support the local agri food industry. Recently I welcomed the announcement made by Sainsbury's Supermarket to sell only locally sourced beef in Northern Ireland. Sainsbury's have committed that from the start of April, 100% of their fresh beef will be sourced, processed and packed locally. This includes all their brands of fresh beef.

The beef sourced and sold by Sainsbury's in Northern Ireland is now worth in excess of £3.85 million per annum. Sainsbury's anticipate that this commitment to local sourcing is likely to lead to an increase in sales. In addition Sainsbury's recent announcement to open two new stores, through the purchase of the Curley's group, will increase the number of outlets and volume of customers.

Two of the strands identified in taking forward the strategy developed by the Red Meat Task Force were 'engaging with core customers' and 'building strong supply chain relationships'. I believe that the recent announcement from Sainsbury's to source all their beef locally reflects the value of fully engaging with core customers and has achieved a positive outcome for our local farmers and processors.

Bluetongue

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the importation of bluetongue susceptible livestock.
(AQO 2901/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: You are aware that the Executive agreed to suspend, with effect from 1 March 2008, the importation of certain breeding and production animals. This decision was taken in light of emerging science following the importation of an animal from the Netherlands to a farm in North Antrim that turned out to be infected.

This prompted Brussels to consider further the conditions under which susceptible animals are allowed to move out of Bluetongue zones. The Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) met in Brussels on 4 and 5 March and agreed to strengthen the Bluetongue regulation. The suspension of the importation of certain breeding and production animals remains in force and will do so until this SCoFCAH decision is published and comes into effect. The publication date for this decision remains uncertain as there are translation and printing delays. However, we continue to lobby Brussels for early publication.

Further SCoFCAH discussions regarding this regulation have, and will, take place. We will continue to monitor the situation in Brussels and will liaise with Dublin and London, and with stakeholders, about the steps necessary to minimise the risk of importing Bluetongue.

Bluetongue

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how the all-Ireland strategy against the spread of Bluetongue disease will be developed as we enter the vector period.
(AQO 2930/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My officials regularly engage with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin (DAFF) on a range

of disease prevention and control matters. The increased threat of Bluetongue, which has spread across Northern Europe and into England, has also led to co-operation in this area to develop an strategic approach to reduce the risk of Bluetongue to the island of Ireland.

You are aware that the Executive agreed to suspend, with effect from 1 March 2008, the importation of certain breeding and production animals. This decision was taken in light of emerging science following the importation of an animal from the Netherlands to a farm in North Antrim that turned out to be infected. Similar action was taken by Mary Coughlan TD in the South.

Our action prompted Brussels to consider further the conditions under which susceptible animals are allowed to move out of Bluetongue zones. The Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) met in Brussels on 4 and 5 March and agreed to strengthen the Bluetongue regulation. The suspension of the importation of certain breeding and production animals remains in force and will do so until this SCoFCAH decision is published and comes into effect.

We continue to work closely with DAFF to ensure that the measures in place on the island of Ireland are proportionate to the increased risk of the vector activity. Regular formal, and informal, communication between our Departments at all levels allows this to happen. The disease risk will be kept under review and appropriate action taken as required.

Rural Development Plan

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail why she has retained the seven cluster delivery model to proceed with the Rural Development Plan.
(AQO 2842/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 20 September last I announced that the Rural Development Programme 2007-13 (RDP) would be delivered through self-formed clusters of at least three councils. Since then, progress in forming clusters and animating rural areas has been good. All councils have now joined clusters, seven in all, and local action groups will soon be in place to start developing the strategies that will allow programme funds to flow.

On 13 March, the Minister of the Environment announced the outcome of the Review of Public Administration, which will be implemented from 2011. Soon afterwards I wrote to the clusters to assure them that the seven-cluster model would remain.

The advanced stage of development of the delivery mechanisms and tight programme timetable mean that it is not possible to start afresh. To do so would lose substantial European funding to rural dwellers and the rural economy. Communities must be able to access rural development funding now, and operating this model will provide valuable experience for the councils that will deliver the RDP after 2011. Moreover, the new councils are several years away and will arrive at a time when I hope a large percentage of the RDP will already have been delivered.

Bluetongue

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to provide for a bluetongue vaccination if required.
(AQO 2908/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: EU rules do not allow for vaccination against Bluetongue in an area that is free from the disease, which is the case on the island of Ireland. In addition, there are no supplies of any approved vaccine yet available for the strain of Bluetongue currently affecting England and Northern Europe. However, it is expected that supplies of such vaccine will become available in May this year.

Defra have ordered 22.5 million doses of vaccine for use in those areas of England that are already affected by Bluetongue. Some of this order is available for Wales, if needed. Scotland is considering their position about ordering vaccine as it is expected that the disease will continue to spread northwards in Britain.

While the island of Ireland is a separate epidemiological unit and is currently free from bluetongue disease, we are considering the situation carefully with colleagues in the South and exploring the various options open to us to ensure that vaccine will be available if required.

My aim is to keep the disease out of our country and to retain our free status for as long as is possible. This will allow us to see how the vaccines that are presently being developed work in on-farm situations elsewhere. Meantime I continue to keep the veterinary risk under review and will order vaccine if that is considered necessary.

Locally Sourced Products

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her policy on the use of locally sourced products.
(AQO 2914/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DFP is the Government Department with responsibility for public sector contracts and I met recently with Peter Robinson MP MLA to discuss how we can increase the use of locally sourced products. I am keen that we explore all opportunities to use local produce as much as possible whilst adhering to EU law, which requires that all public procurement is carried out in a way that is fair and transparent.

My officials are working alongside DFP's Central Procurement Directorate to develop advice and guidance on public procurement of food through the Sustainable Procurement Action Plan.

In terms of departmental support, DARD's Regional Food Programme provides financial assistance to promote quality regional food. In addition, our Processing and Marketing Scheme provides assistance to help improve the competitiveness of the agri-food sector. CAFRE also provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors targeted at developing technical and business management skills.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Book Spending

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the amount spent on the purchase of new books in each library in the South Eastern Education and Library Board.
(AQW 5295/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) Public Library Service purchases stock centrally for all of its branch libraries. Stock is allocated on the basis of a formula dependant on the size of the library and the population served.

The actual book expenditure in SEELB Libraries in the last 5 years is as follows:

2007/08	£782,000
2006/07	£758,726
2005/06	£235,133
2004/05	£233,082
2003/04	£672,280

Arts and Culture Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure on publicly-funded arts and culture in 2007-08, broken down by constituency. (AQW 5321/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Arts

Funding in support of the arts in Northern Ireland is disbursed through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Exchequer funding awarded by the Arts Council in 2007/08 broken down by constituency is shown in the table below:

Constituency	Award
Belfast East	£225,817
Belfast North	£1,643,890
Belfast South	£18,644,841
Belfast West	£881,141
East Antrim	£27,518
East Londonderry	£119,797.35
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	£92,294
Foyle	£5,168,672.50
Lagan Valley	£306,348
Mid Ulster	£33,390
Newry and Armagh	£299,045
North Antrim	£47,210
North Down	£162,351
South Antrim	£67,080
South Down	£75,850
Strangford	£50,345.70
Upper Bann	£41,188
West Tyrone	£2,500
Total	£27,889,278.55

Museums

The Northern Ireland Museums Council have a small grant programme which provides assistance to local Museums for the care of their collections and for improving the public's access to these collections. Grants claimed to date, broken down by constituency, are detailed in the table below:

Constituency	Award
Belfast South	£15,717.56
East Antrim	£34,900.40

Constituency	Award
East Londonderry	£45,097.09
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	£17,212.42
Foyle	£7,790
Lagan Valley	£13,417
Newry and Armagh	£12,551
North Antrim	£23,791
North Down	£117,715
South Down	£12,411
West Tyrone	£6,646.32
Total	£307,248.79

DCAL also funds Northern Ireland's National Museums which incorporates the Ulster Museum in Belfast, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra, the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh, Armagh County Museum and W5 at the Odyssey. Total costs for National Museums Operations split by constituency area are as follows:

Constituency	Award
Belfast East (W5)	£2,100,000
Newry & Armagh	£186,000
North Down	£10,740,000
West Tyrone	£1,955,000
Total	£14,981,000

In addition, the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium's total expenditure in 2007/08 was £1,978,000.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

With the exception of funding to the Gaeltacht Quarter (£182k), which is specifically targeted at West Belfast, other funding for cultural and linguistic diversity is not available by constituency.

Libraries

DCAL funds the five Education and Library Boards for the delivery of the public library service. The funding allocated for the last three years was provided in AQO2854/08. A breakdown is not available by parliamentary constituency.

DCAL also allocated £290k recurrent and £27k capital grant to the Linen Hall Library (Belfast) and £26k recurrent grant to the Cardinal O'Fiaich Library and Archive (Armagh).

Protestant Working-Class Communities

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail all the projects he has funded as a result of the “Taskforce on Protestant Working Class Communities” and the United Kingdom Government’s response paper. (AQW 5364/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has funded the following projects or programmes as a result of the Taskforce:

Project/Programme	Administered by
Marginalised Youth Interventions	Northern Ireland Screen Commission
Intergenerational Film Project	Northern Ireland Screen Commission
Building Community through Media	Northern Ireland Screen Commission
Local and Family History Workshops	Ulster Historical Foundation
Sound and Vision-Exploring Cultural Identity through Music, Film & Culture	W5
Place, Identity and Art (later redeveloped as STart UP)	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Re-Imaging Communities	Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Twelfth of July Celebrations

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the assistance his department is providing to the Orange Institution to promote the Twelfth of July celebrations.[R] (AQW 5384/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: From 1 April 2008 the Community Festivals Fund of £450k is being devolved to local Government and it will be a matter for them to assess the merits of applications from event organisers, including the Orange Institution.

My Department is currently providing funding to the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland for an Education Officer. While this funding is not directly related to the promotion of the Twelfth of July celebrations, it does allow the Lodge to work extensively with the local community and the Good Relations Officers in local Councils to promote a greater understanding of the Lodge and its annual celebrations.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to replace and manage grant applications formerly undertaken by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 5392/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am committed to having a facility in place to continue to provide grant funding to support world class events in Northern Ireland to showcase the best of what Northern Ireland has to offer. Recent examples of grant funding include the Tennis Legends in February 2008 and the FIM Trials World and European Championships 2008 in April 2008.

My Department has now established a DCAL Events Unit to undertake the events functions previously undertaken by the Northern Ireland Events Company.

An event grant funding programme was launched on 28th March 2008 with public advertisements in the press on 28th March 2008 and notification on the Department’s website www.dcalni.gov.uk. Applications have been invited for funding for 2008-2009, under the following two funding streams:

- (a) Events Growth Fund (EGF); and
- (b) Major Events Fund (MEF).

All events must secure Private Sector sponsorship to be eligible for funding. The closing date and deadline for receipt of applications is Friday 2nd May 2008, no later than 5.00 pm. All applications will be assessed by the Department’s grant funding team against grant funding criterion. There have been 41 application packs issued up to 10 April 2008.

Although the NI Events Company will be dissolved, the function of promoting events in support of Northern Ireland’s image, tourism and economic development will continue. My Department is actively seeking to facilitate the transition to a new arrangement for delivering the events function. DCAL will on an interim basis, take on the management of the events function.

Bamford Review

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to advise what action he (i) has taken; (ii) is planning to take, to progress the implementation of the ‘inclusion’ agenda as outlined in the Bamford Report. (AQW 5415/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL continues to maintain and develop policies consistent with the Bamford Review and recognises the need to progress the ‘inclusion’ agenda contained therein.

Initiatives in Arts, Culture and Sport have been taken to implement the ‘inclusion’ agenda and these initiatives will continue to be developed and progressed.

Armagh Observatory

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the reasons for the Armagh Observatory’s financial difficulties, which threaten the existence of the Observatory. (AQW 5456/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The reasons for the funding difficulties are increased salaries and associated pension contribution costs.

The Department recognised the funding difficulties faced and provided uplifts of 27% on baseline for each of the next 3 years.

Despite this, the Director of the Observatory has indicated in his Business Plan that this is not enough and he requires a further £160k.

The Department will continue to engage with the Board of Governors of the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium in support of their efforts to maintain sustainability.

Departmental Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the bands that have successfully received funding through (i) the Ulster-Scots Agency; and (ii) the Arts Council, since May 2007. (AQW 5473/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Details of the funding awarded to bands through the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Arts Council since May 2007 are shown in the following tables:

ULSTER-SCOTS AGENCY

Name	Project	Award
Tullywhisker Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£2,100
Drumlough Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£876.87
Crilly Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£755
William Kerr Mem Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,418
Dyan Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,157.50
Curlough Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£862.50
Trillick Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,025.50
Lavin Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£400
Aughintoher Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,725
Benburb Mem Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,725

Name	Project	Award
Brunswick Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£2,250
Hamilton Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£700
Moneymore Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£1,260
Mourne Young Defenders Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Newtownbutler Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,062.50
Carricklongfield Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,763.12
Donemana Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Drumnalough Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£916.50
Drumquin Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£675
Sir George White Mem Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£2,700
Mullagh Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£2,287
Lisnaskea Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£1,600
Dunloy Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£2,137.50
Markethill Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£937.50
Syerla Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Kellswater Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£900
Ardress Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£1,672.50
Omagh True Blues Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,575
Grallagh Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,912.50
Knockloughrim Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Knockinroe Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,822.50
Salterstown Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£900
Blossomhill Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£600
Anktell Moutray Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Magheraboy Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£1,800
Upper Crossgare Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,500
Closkelt Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£900
Roden Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£2,100
Corbet Acc Band	Musical Tuition	£1,600
Kilcluney Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£825
Tamlaght O Crilly Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,200
Inver Flute Band	Musical Tuition	£915
O'Neill Pipe Band	Musical Tuition	£1,612.50
Dunloy Acc Band	Musical Compositions	£7,200
Benburb Mem Pipe Band	Ulster Scots Night	£240
Doohat Acc Band	Ulster Scots Night	£250
Dunloy Acc Band	Ulster Scots Festival	£622.50

Name	Project	Award
Mourne Young Defenders Flute Band	Ulster Scots Summer School	£1,219

ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Name	Project	Award
Ballymacall True Blues Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,300
Ballymacconnelly Sons of Conquerors	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,525
Ballymoughan Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£2,280
Blaris Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,688
Burntollet Sons of Ulster	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Carnagh Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£2,295
Coalisland Jubilee Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,688
Crumlin Young Loyalist Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,963
Cullybackey Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Curran Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Dromara Highland Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Drumconvis Young Defenders Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,795
Drumnaglough Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,775
Dyan Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,594
George A Dummigan Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,000
Gilnahirk Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,438
Gortagilly Musical Society	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Grallagh Unionist Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Hounds of Ulster	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Killycoogan Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Kilrea Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,999
Knockloughrim Accordion Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000

Name	Project	Award
Lisnaskea Silver Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Maghera Sons of William	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£2,730
Magheraboy Flute Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,723
Muckamore Cultural Music Society	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Newmills Silver Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Pride of Ardoyne	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,605
Pride of the Maine	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£3,690
Pride of The Park Flute Band Armoy	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,013
Saint Patrick's Pipe Band, Drumquin	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£4,901
St Eugene's Band Omagh	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Tullywhisker Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Tyrone Ditches Pipe Band	Lottery – Musical Instruments	£5,000
Moneymore Accordion Band	Awards for All	£2,880
Letterbreen Silver Band	Awards for All	£5,795
Armagh Old Boys Silver Band (and Social Club)	Awards for All	£8,800
Magheraboy Flute Band	Awards for All	£3,600
Bawn Silver Band	Awards for All	£5,500
Aghavilly Accordion Band	Awards for All	£500
Upper Crossgare Pipe Band	Awards for All	£5,000
Belfast Women Drummers / Chidambaram Womens Samba Band	Awards for All	£3,870
Ardboe Central Youth Band	Awards for All	£5,000
Ballycoan Pipe Band	Awards for All	£5,970

Townland Names

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5539/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department recognises the historic, cultural and linguistic value of townland names, and uses them

where applicable in its documents and correspondence.

Sports Complex in Coleraine

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any proposals in relation to the creation of a sports complex in Coleraine. (AQW 5649/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I attended meetings with representatives of Coleraine Borough Council on Monday 31st March and Friday 4th April 2008 at which the Council outlined their proposals regarding the future of Coleraine Showgrounds. One of the options presented was a new sports complex for Coleraine. It is however a matter for the Council to determine which option is best for the Coleraine Borough Council area.

Féile an Phobail Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4427/08, if he would consider funding Feile an Phobail if it can demonstrate a greater self-reliance on box office receipts and private sector sponsorship. (AQW 5680/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On a without prejudice basis, I would give consideration to a business case from an established community festival that can demonstrate, over time, a greater self-reliance on box office receipts and private sector sponsorship.

Museums

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his policy in relation to (i) the Northern Ireland Museums Council; (ii) development of a museums policy; and (iii) funding for local, independent and voluntary museums. (AQW 5681/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Review of Public Administration recommended that the functions of the Council be transferred to central and local government. The Department is considering options for implementing the RPA decision. In the meantime I have extended funding until March 2009.

In view of competing priorities my Department has no plans in the short term to develop a museums policy.

This Department is responsible for the funding of National Museums. The funding of local, independent and voluntary museums is not a matter for this Department.

Departmental Publications

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of publications he has produced in (i) Irish; (ii) Ulster Scots; and (iii) other languages. (AQW 5682/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since devolution the core branches in my Department have produced 10 formal publications in English and additional information has also been placed on the Departmental website. None of these documents have been produced in any other language; however translations will be arranged on request. To date I have not received any requests for publications in another language. These figures do not include publications produced by any of the bodies funded by my Department.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he has taken to (i) implement the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; (ii) promote the Irish language; and (iii) promote Ulster Scots. (AQW 5698/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department provides the secretariat to the Inter-departmental Charter Implementation Group responsible for over-seeing implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in Northern Ireland. In addition DCAL provides advice and guidance on the ECRML to other Public Bodies.

My Department implements those provisions relevant to DCAL through a number of programmes and services such as the Irish Language Translation Service. The services provided by my Department to meet the obligations of the Charter are identified in the UK's periodic reports to the Council of Europe, available on the Council's website at: http://www.coe.int/t/e/legal_affairs/local_and_regional_democracy/regional_or_minority_languages/2_Monitoring/Monitoring_table.asp#TopOfPage

The next report detailing steps taken by all Departments operating in Northern Ireland is due to be published later in 2008.

The most recent report (2005) acknowledges and details how the Department is promoting the Irish Language and Ulster-Scots.

Ulster Scots

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of people who (i) can communicate verbally in Ulster Scots; (ii) can communicate in writing in Ulster Scots; and (iii) communicate in Ulster Scots on a daily basis. (AQW 5713/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The last census did not include reference to the Ulster-Scots language and its speakers. As a result it is not possible to provide definitive answers to your specific questions. However I would refer you to the findings of The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (1999) which found that 2% of the population spoke Ulster-Scots: this would be around 35,000 people. The Ulster-Scots Language Society estimates that there are 100,000 speakers. In addition there are Ulster-Scots speakers in east Donegal and also up to two million Scots speakers in Scotland.

Crumlin Glen Project

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5278/08, to detail (i) the amount of funding his department provided to the Crumlin Glen Project; (ii) when this funding was provided; and (iii) to whom the funding was provided. (AQW 5840/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department paid £20,000 grant - aid from its water recreation programme towards the total cost of Antrim Borough Council's Crumlin Glen project. This grant - aid payment was made by cheque to Antrim Borough Council's Finance Branch on 25 July 2007 and cashed on 3 August 2007.

British Olympics Association

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the discussions his department has had with (i) the British Olympics Association; and (ii) other sporting bodies, to ensure that athletes from Northern Ireland are able to compete for the Great Britain team. (AQW 5857/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for ensuring Northern Ireland athletes can compete for the Great Britain team rests, in the first instance, with the relevant sports governing bodies and the British Olympic Association.

Irish Hockey Union

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to hold discussions with the Irish Hockey Union in relation to exploring the possibility of establishing a Northern Ireland hockey team to compete in the Commonwealth Games. (AQW 5858/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Representation and affiliation arrangements within any sport are determined by the respective governing bodies. The establishment of a Northern Ireland hockey team to compete in the Commonwealth Games should be addressed, in the first instance, by the Irish Hockey Union and the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council.

Olympic Elite Programme Projects

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the progress that has been made in relation to the Olympic Elite Programme projects. (AQW 5912/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Strategic Outline Business Case for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme has been approved and Sport Northern Ireland will begin work on the next stage of the competition. As part of this programme the Outline Business Case for the proposed 50m swimming pool in North Down Borough Council is under consideration.

Sports Grounds Legislation

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the reasons why the Safety of Sports Grounds legislation has not been fully implemented until now. (AQW 5940/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) and other sports bodies have sought assurances from my Department that it would not proceed to full implementation of the safe sports grounds legislation prior to the establishment of an independent oversight function.

My officials are currently working with SNI on arrangements for the establishment of the function at SNI.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will publish the forensic audit into the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQO 2887/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I understand from KPMG, the financial advisors appointed to undertake the review, that interviews with the Company's former Chief Executive and the Board members have not yet been finalised. Under the circumstances I consider it essential that these interviews are conducted and the outcome reflected in the review. For this reason I recognised that there will be a delay in completing the report.

I have undertaken to report to the Assembly on the findings of this review. When the Department receives the KPMG review report, I will wish to consider the findings and may seek legal and other advice on any sensitive matters arising. It will be crucial that careful consideration is given to handling the findings in the report to avoid any public discussion that may be prejudicial to further investigations or the potential for legal proceedings.

I have issued a written statement on the current position regarding the Northern Ireland Events Company, which has been placed in the Assembly Library on 3rd April 2008.

Olympic Centres of Excellence

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline if he is satisfied that (i) there is enough money in the budget to fund the building of 10 Olympic Centres of Excellence; and (ii) there is a geographical spread of proposed centres to ensure that all sub-regions of Northern Ireland will share in the Olympic legacy. (AQO 2838/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Elite Facilities Capital Programme is a competition being managed by Sport Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department.

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.

However there is now a provisional allocation of c£281m for sport capital projects over the 10-year period covered by the Investment Strategy Northern Ireland 2008-2018. Allocations to the particular programmes, including the Elite Facilities Capital Programme, will be informed by the priorities set out within the draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation.

Following the 2nd Elite Facilities Capital Programme Competition, which was open to all governing bodies of sport, public bodies and private organisation including consortiums, 14 projects have met the criteria as set by Sport Northern Ireland and they will be invited to proceed to the next stage.

From these 14 projects a number will be invited to proceed to the construction stage again based on criteria set by Sport Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department with funding being drawn from the allocation of c£281m available for Sports Capital projects as part of ISNI II.

While it is desirable that there will be a geographical spread in the provision of elite facilities, the projects selected for funding will be determined following a competition and in these circumstances the applications will be assessed on merit.

Road Bowls

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to explore future funding and promotion of the sport of road bowls. (AQO 2882/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the funding and promotion of road bowls rests, not with me, but with the Irish Road Bowling Association.

Library Spending

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the amount of per capita funding Belfast receives for libraries; and (ii) the amount of funding that will be spent on libraries from the additional £2 million the department received in the final budget allocation. (AQO 2856/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In 2008/09 the Belfast Education and Library Board has received an initial allocation of £4.921m recurrent expenditure which is £18.41 per capita.

The Libraries budget received £500k of the additional £2m allocated to the Department in the final allocation for the 2008/09 financial year.

Theatre Access

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to increase audiences for theatres and access to theatres for people living in rural areas. (AQO 2890/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Over the last ten years the Arts Council has invested lottery funding in the development of regional theatres and venues across Northern Ireland. These include the Burnavon Arts Centre, Cookstown, the Island Arts Centre, Lisburn, Market Place Theatre, Armagh, Flowerfield Arts Centre, Coleraine, Alley Arts Centre, Strabane, Strule Arts Centre, Omagh and Braid Arts

Centre, Ballymena. Together with the Ardowen Theatre, Enniskillen and the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine, this has created a regional network of arts venues, most of which have performance facilities.

The majority of people in rural areas live within a 20 mile radius of at least one of these venues.

The Arts Council also provides financial support for certain theatre companies to tour to these venues, thereby increasing access to the product outside urban centres.

The Arts Council also supports Audiences Northern Ireland, the audience development agency which works with organisations to develop and diversify audiences for the arts. Many of the regional theatres are members of Audiences Northern Ireland and avail of marketing and audience development consultancy and training.

Audiences Northern Ireland is currently preparing a new business plan that will target smaller community and voluntary organisations to grow audiences and remove barriers to attendance.

Irish Language Broadcasting Fund

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to secure future support and funding for an Irish Language Broadcasting Fund.

(AQO 2886/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My officials have been in recent contact with the Northern Ireland Office 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.

Sport Funding

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding, both directly and through third parties, that the Irish Football Association, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Ulster Rugby Branch have received from his department, over the last three years. (AQO 2853/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. Over the last three financial years, Sport Northern Ireland has provided a total of £12,430,351 of Exchequer funding to the Irish Football Association, the Gaelic Athletic

Association and the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union.

Northern Ireland Screen

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the projects that have been undertaken by Northern Ireland Screen in the last three years; and the amount spent on these projects.

(AQO 2825/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Over last three years the Northern Ireland Screen Commission has provided financial support for a number of feature films shot on location in Northern Ireland which include Closing the Ring, City of Ember, and The Mighty Celt. Television dramas supported include, Messiah, Fairy Tales and Desperados as well as children's programmes Bel's Boys, Lifeboat Luke and Sesame Tree. Film and Television production is funded primarily by Invest NI.

Projects funded by DCAL through the Irish Language Broadcast Fund include the feature film Kings and television programmes such as Na Dódaí, a pre school education/entertainment series and Imeall Geal, a studio based youth entertainment series, both of which have been broadcast on BBC NI. In addition, Seacht, a youth drama series and Scil, a studio based sports entertainment programme have been broadcast on TG4.

The Northern Ireland Screen Commission also supports a range of film exhibition activities including Queens Film Theatre, Belfast Film Festival, Foyle Film Festival, Cinemagic children's film festival and Northern Visions community television. It also maintains a digital film archive.

In 2006/07 and 2007/08, Northern Ireland Screen administered funding secured by DCAL from the Children and Young Peoples Fund to support the work of the three Creative Learning Centres - the Nerve Centre, the Amma Centre and Studio On. The centres provide a range of opportunities for children and young people, teachers, youth groups and youth workers in the creative use of digital technologies. In 2007/08, it also supported the Schools Film Club Pilot Project.

Northern Ireland Screen also supports the Northern Ireland Skillset Media Academy and provides financial support for the MA in Film and Television Management at the University of Ulster.

Expenditure for the key business areas in each of the last three years is as follows:

Key Area	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08*
Production and Development	£3,700,000	£4,200,000	£3,987,000

Key Area	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08*
Education and Heritage	£156,000	£1,300,000	£1,094,000
Exhibition	£422,000	£441,000	£497,000
Irish Language Broadcast Fund	£2,800,000	£2,994,000	£2,889,000
Other Development Projects (skills development)	£97,000	£409,000	£611,000

* 2007/08 figures are provisional as year end expenditure is not yet available.

Figures rounded to nearest £000.

Library Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount allocated to each Education and Library Board for library services in each of the last three years. (AQO 2854/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The attached table sets out details on the amounts allocated to Education and Library Boards for library services in each year from 2005/06 to 2007/08. I will place a copy of this answer in the Library.

Amount allocated to each Education and Library Board for library services in each of the last three years

		2005/06 000s	2006/07 000s	2007/08 000s
BELB	Recurrent	5,541	5,774	5,734
	Capital	1,082	865	840
NEELB	Recurrent	4,741	5,415	5,569
	ELfNI	3,514	3,923	3,775
	Capital	316	1,193	306
SEELB	Recurrent	5,376	5,634	6,007
	Capital	243	515	2,439
SELB	Recurrent	4,533	4,996	5,273
	Capital	559	656	199
WELB	Recurrent	4,088	4,535	5,299
	Capital	327	183	261
Total	Recurrent	24,279	26,354	27,882
	ELfNI	3,514	3,923	3,775
	Capital	2,527	3,412	4,045

Notes

- The amounts shown above are final allocated figures and include additional allocations made following successful in year monitoring bids.
- The Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project (ELfNI) is administered by the NEELB on behalf of all five Boards.

Prohibition Notices

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of sports organisations that have been served Prohibition Notices under the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

(AQO 2877/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am unaware of any Prohibition Notices having been issued to sports organisations under the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Plantation of Ulster Commemorations

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the budget and departmental strategy in relation to events and infrastructure related to the upcoming commemorations of the plantation of Ulster. (AQO 2874/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Agency has confirmed that they are planning and supporting several projects and events commemorating the Plantation of Ulster. Plans are to be finalised on this issue by May 2008 and is likely to include educational DVDs and touring exhibitions throughout Northern Ireland. The Agency is in discussion with local stakeholders such as Dungannon, Derry City and Cookstown Councils.

The Irish Language Broadcast Fund has allocated funding of £60,000 to the Dissenting Voices series. This consists of four 30 minutes bilingual landmark documentary series to mark the 400th anniversary of the Plantation of Ulster.

EDUCATION

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board that will be attending the meeting with her on 8 April 2008. (AQW 4788/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá cuireadh tugtha agam do gach Ionadaí Polaitiúil ar BhOLOC chuig an gcuinníú.

I have invited all Political Representatives on the SEELB to the meeting.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to confirm if the members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, invited to the meeting arranged for 8 April 2008, will include those who have been promoting the reinstatement of the Board. (AQW 4879/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá cuireadh tugtha agam do gach Ionadaí Polaitiúil ar BhOLOC chuig an gcuirinníú.

I have invited all Political Representatives on the SEELB to the meeting.

NJC Pay Increase

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the current status of the 2007 NJC pay increase of 2.475% (3.4% on spinal column 4) which was agreed in November 2007, in relation to education sector employees. (AQW 5061/08)

The Minister of Education: Education staff groups on NJC pay scales include: Education and Library Board (ELB) staff; the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS); and the Staff Commission for ELBs. In accordance with the agreed pay policy process business cases for the implementation of the pay award for these groups were submitted by DE to the Department of Finance of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for approval in late February/March.

Faoi láthair tá mo chuid oifigigh ag plé le líon ceisteanna i dtaobh na gcásanna seo a d'ardaigh an RAP agus déanfaidh siad dianiarracht a chinntiú go réiteofar iad seo ionas gur féidir an próiseas a chur chun críche go sánuil agus gan mhoill.

My officials are currently dealing with a number of queries concerning these cases which have been raised by DFP and will endeavour to ensure that these are resolved to enable the process to be brought to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion.

Christian Ethos in Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans she has to protect the Christian ethos in schools attended by Protestant children, in light of the proposals being drafted for the Educational Skills Authority. (AQW 5138/08)

The Minister of Education: The three main Protestant Churches will maintain their right to nominate representatives to the Boards of Governors

of those controlled primary schools that they originally owned even if those schools have since been replaced by new schools.

Tá sé de rún agam fosta an tÚdarás Oideachais agus Scileanna a chumasú ionas go mbeidh sé ábalta ionadaithe ó na hEaglaisí Protastúnacha a cheapadh mar bhaill de Bhoird Ghobharnóirí bunscoileanna rialaithe eile agus meánscoileanna rialaithe i gcás gur de bhunadh an phobail Phrotastúnaigh iad formhór na ndaltaí.

It is also my intention to enable the Education and Skills Authority to appoint representatives of the Protestant Churches to the Boards of Governors of other controlled primary schools and of controlled secondary schools where the majority of pupils enrolled at these schools are drawn from the Protestant community.

Educational Psychologists

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail the shortage of educational psychologists in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5147/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (BOL) in iúl dom gur mar seo a leanas atá líon na bhfolúntas coibhéis lánaimseartha i ngach rannóg síceolaíochta oideachais BOL, ag 31 Márta 2008:-

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that the number of full time equivalent vacancies in each ELB's educational psychology section, as at 31 March 2008, is as follows:-

BELB	2
NEELB	5
SEELB	3
SELB	0
WELB	4

Educational Psychologists

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of educational psychologists employed in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5148/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an méid seo a leanas de shíceolaithe oideachais coibhéis lánaimseartha fostaíthe ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

The Education and Library Boards employ the following numbers of full time equivalent educational psychologists.

BELB	23.94
NEELB	22.54
SEELB	25.94
SELB	28.28
WELB	23.60

Underperforming Schools

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools in each Education and Library Board area that are considered to be (i) low attaining; and (ii) underperforming. (AQW 5150/08)

The Minister of Education: I have not sought to define thresholds below which schools will be described as low attaining or underperforming. Results, whether above or below the average, must take account of factors such as the context in which the school is operating and the profile of the pupils whose needs it seeks to serve. Judgements on the level of performance of individual schools therefore are based on inspection evidence and not solely on the basis of a school's results. I believe that what is important is that every school improves year on year.

The new grading system introduced by the Education and Training Inspectorate Grades schools 1-6 and describes lower grades as:

- Grade 5 - A few strengths, areas for improvement which require prompt action. Follow-up inspection required.
- Grade 6 - Major shortcomings which require urgent action. Follow-up inspection within 12 months.

Details in each Board area for schools graded 5 or 6 in inspection since September 2006 to date:-

	Primary	Post-Primary	Special
WELB	4	1	-
SELB	2	1	-
SEELB	1	-	1
BELB	1	2	-
NEELB	-	1	1

Tá sé tábhachtach a thabhairt faoi deara mar sin féin nach bhfuil sna scoileanna a ndearnadh cigireacht orthu ach sampla de líon iomlán na scoileanna i dTuaisceart Éireann.

It is important to note however that the number of schools inspected is only a sample of the total number of schools in the North of Ireland.

Early Retirement

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the impact on the ability of younger teachers to gain full time employment if older teachers are no longer able to take early retirement. (AQW 5151/08)

The Minister of Education: Teachers over the age of 50 (55 from April 2010) continue to be eligible for premature retirement benefits if they are made redundant or leave pensionable employment on the grounds of the efficient discharge of the employer's function. Premature retirement compensation comprises:

- the immediate early payment of accrued pension benefits; and
- at the employing authority's discretion, an additional service credit of up to 6½ years.

My Department has taken action to ensure that those responsible for decisions to award the discretionary element ("added years") should also be accountable for the associated costs.

In addition, reform of the Teachers' Pension Scheme effective from April 2007 provides that teachers over the age of 55 who voluntarily leave pensionable employment can, with their employer's consent, obtain early access to their pension benefits, which will be actuarially reduced. Employers cannot withhold their consent for longer than six months.

I recognise that there are concerns about the possible effect any changes to the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS) may have on the employment prospects of younger teachers. However, it is difficult to gauge the impact, if any, such changes might have on younger teachers given that prematurely retired teachers are routinely re-employed as substitute teachers, in spite of guidance issued by the Department exhorting employers to give preference to newly qualified teachers.

Ina theannta sin, cáineadh flaithiúlacht an PRCS ag an gCoiste um Chuntais Phoiblí i dTeach na dTeachtaí, a dúirt nár mhodh éifeachtach é le hairgead an cháiniócoir a chaitheamh trí phacáistí iomarcaíochta costasacha a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí aosta le fostaíocht a ráthú do mhúinteoirí óga.

Furthermore, the generous nature of the PRCS has drawn criticism from the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, who observed that giving expensive redundancy packages to older teachers in order to

guarantee employment for younger teachers is not an effective use of taxpayers' money.

Class Sizes

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the average class size in primary schools, broken down by sector, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5155/08)

The Minister of Education: Is é seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

AVERAGE CLASS SIZE1 IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS 2003/04 - 2007/08

Management type	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Controlled	23	23	23	23	23
Voluntary	19	20	19	19	19
Catholic maintained	23	23	23	23	23
Other maintained	19	20	19	18	19
Controlled integrated	21	22	22	22	22
Grant maintained integrated	26	26	26	27	26
All schools	23	23	23	23	23

Source: NI school census

Note: 1. Data refers to Year 1 – 7 classes.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail, during the 18 month period up to 31 March 2006, the number of applications for funding of home based Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) programmes that were (i) received; (ii) approved; and (iii) awarded as a result of a tribunal. (AQW 5177/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an chomhairle seo a leanas ar fáil dom:-

I am advised by the Chief Executives of the education and library boards as follows:-

Financial years 2001/02 - 2007/08	Number of applications	Number approved	Number awarded by tribunal
Belfast	19	8	0
North Eastern	5	2	0

Financial years 2001/02 - 2007/08	Number of applications	Number approved	Number awarded by tribunal
South Eastern	11	11	1
Southern	5	0	0
Western	11	8	0

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applications for funding of home based Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) programmes that were (i) received; (ii) approved; and (iii) awarded as a result of a tribunal, (a) during the 5 years up to 31 March 2006; and (b) since this date. (AQW 5178/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an chomhairle seo a leanas ar fáil dom:-

I am advised by the Chief Executives of the education and library boards as follows:-

Financial years 2001/02 - 2007/08	Number of applications	Number approved	Number awarded by tribunal
Belfast	19	8	0
North Eastern	5	2	0
South Eastern	11	11	1
Southern	5	0	0
Western	11	8	0

Commissioners' Expenses

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the remuneration and expenses paid to each of the Commissioners appointed to the South Eastern Education and Library Board, for each year since their appointment. (AQW 5182/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that the total cost of payments, including expenses, made to the commissioners since 6 July 2006 when they were first appointed, is as follows:

6 July 2006 – 31 March 2007	£75,406
1 April 2007 – 29 February 2008	£88,736

Is iad seo na suimeanna a íocadh ag na coimisinéirí aonair do na blianta faoi seach: £22,868, £19,099, £16,453, £16,986; agus £28,215, £21,616, £15,726, £23,179.

The breakdown of the amounts paid to individual commissioners for the respective years is: £22,868, £19,099, £16,453, £16,986; and £28,215, £21,616, £15,726, £23,179.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on when she intends to restore powers to the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 5191/08)

The Minister of Education: In the interests of local accountability it would be appropriate that the members of the SEELB Board should resume their former responsibilities. However, it is essential to ensure that there would be no return to the difficulties which the Commissioners inherited when they were appointed in July 2006 and that the stability which has since been achieved is sustained.

On 8 April 2008 I had a very useful meeting with the Council nominees on the Board to discuss their readiness and willingness to take up their former responsibilities and to deliver those effectively. I plan now to meet with the other members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board to advise them of the outcome of these discussions and to seek their views. Collectively, they

are the majority of the membership and their full participation will therefore be critical if the Board is to have a workable quorum.

Is é an sprioc ná bheith ábalta cinneadh deiridh a dhéanamh chomh luath agus is féidir; más féidir é a dhéanamh roimh an samhradh is amhlaidh is fearr é.

The objective is to be able to reach a final decision as soon as possible; preferably before the summer.

Teaching and Learning Resources

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of the level of teaching and learning resources that are available to teachers and learners of Irish at (i) key stage 3; (ii) key stage 4; (iii) AS level; and (iv) A2 level, in English medium post-primary schools; and to outline the action she is taking to address this matter. (AQW 5194/08)

The Minister of Education: It is for schools to decide on the level of resources they use to deliver the curriculum and to provide for them.

My Department has allocated £67,000 to the Southern Education and Library Board, on behalf of all Boards, for the development of a suitable resource

to support the teaching of Irish at Key Stage 3. This will be provided to schools later this year.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provides a range of materials to support teachers and learners taking its GCSE and GCE A-Level Irish specifications, and has a dedicated micro-site for Irish. CCEA is currently developing additional materials to support its revised GCSE and GCE A-Level Irish specifications.

Tá treoirí curtha le chéile ag CCEA agus An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim & Measúnachta sa Deisceart do mhúinteoirí i dtaca le daltaí sárbhuaacha, iléirimiúla a mhúineadh ón bhonnchéim tríd go hArd-Leibhéal. Mar pháirt de na treoirí sin, tá saintreoir le cuidiú le múinteoirí foghlaimeoirí a aithint atá níos cumasaí ó thaobh úsáid na Gaeilge de ag aois ar bith agus príomhthréithe na bhfoghlaimeoirí a bhfuil cumas teangeolaíoch acu.

CCEA, along with the National Council for Curriculum & Assessment in the South, has also produced guidelines for teachers on the education of gifted and talented pupils from foundation stage through to A-level. This includes specific guidance to assist teachers in identifying learners who are more able in the use of the Irish language at any age and key characteristics of learners with linguistic ability.

Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that pupils in Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil are taught in accommodation that meets the highest quality standards; and to outline a timeframe in which improvements to the current sub-standard accommodation will be made. (AQW 5195/08)

The Minister of Education: As the school has reached the minimum intake levels required to become eligible for capital funding, the Department has commenced the process to vest the site and premises in the school trustees and the department.

My department is currently awaiting the necessary documentation from the school trustees to take this matter forward.

I have requested that officials have an urgent meeting with the school to obtain the necessary documentation and to facilitate the school.

Agus dílsiú déanta, beidh an Roinn sna míonna atá romhainn ag breathnú i gcomhar leis an scoil ar na ceisteanna cóiríochta gearrthéarmacha agus fadtéarmacha agus déanfar breithmheas eacnamaíochta ar na roghanna don scoil.

Following vesting the department will be considering with the school in the coming months the accommodation issues for the short and longer terms and conduct an economic appraisal of options for the school.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the amount of rent payments owed by her department to Irish-medium schools, and other Irish medium groups, that will be paid; (ii) the amount owed to each school and group; and (iii) a timeframe within which this payment will be made. (AQW 5196/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair tá an Roinn ag comhoibriú le hIontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) maidir le theidhlíocht cíosa i leith chóiríocht fhaofa i scoileanna Gaeilge. Tá InaG ag soláthar eolais ar na háitribh ionas go bhféadfaí an gníomh a chur i gcrích agus beidh na hamscálaí ina leith seo ag brath ar an eolas cuí a bheith ar fáil.

The Department is currently liaising with Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) on the entitlement to rent for approved accommodation in Irish medium schools. The InaG are providing information on premises to help complete the exercise and the timescales for doing so will be dependent on having all of the necessary information.

Alcohol Abuse

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils excluded from schools in the East Londonderry constituency, where alcohol abuse played a part in their exclusion, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5206/08)

The Minister of Education: The reasons for pupil suspensions and expulsions were first collected from the education and library boards in the 2002/03 school year. The following table sets the number of pupils suspended for alcohol abuse from schools in the East Derry constituency:

School Year	Number of Pupils Suspended
2002/03 ¹	7
2003/04	1
2004/05	5
2005/06	5

1. Figure includes pupils suspended for substance or alcohol abuse

Statistics on pupil expulsions are broken down only by education and library board area and, therefore, it is not possible to provide these figures by constituency area.

Tá anailís á déanamh faoi láthair ar líon na ndaltaí a díbríodh nó a cuireadh ar fionraí le linn na scoilbhliana 2006/07 agus cuirfear na staitisticí sin ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne Oideachais nuair a bheas an anailís ar fad déanta.

Statistics on expulsions and suspensions for the 2006/07 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the Department of Education website when this has been completed.

Milburn School

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the costs involved in the repair and replacement of property at Milburn School, following the recent burglaries. (AQW 5254/08)

The Minister of Education: As a result of recent break-ins at the school the cost to replace seven broken windows, four laptop computers and repair of equipment was £1905.

Tá £6,500 caite ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt fosta ar obair le feabhas a chur ar chúrsaí slándála ag an scoil.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has also carried out work to improve security at the school at a cost of £6,500.

Breezemount School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for a new primary school in the Breezemount area of Bangor. (AQW 5256/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) published a strategic review paper in December 2005, in which the Board examined the position of a number of schools in the Bangor town area.

Mhol an Bord nach bffuil sé fós sa chás go bhféadfadh sé moltaí daingne a dhéanamh faoin athbhreithniú a chlúdódh na ceithre scoil seo.

The Board has advised that it is not yet in a position to present firm proposals arising from that review which would cover these four schools.

Bloomfield Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the future of Bloomfield Primary School, Bangor. (AQW 5257/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) published a

strategic review paper in December 2005, in which the Board examined the position of a number of schools in the Bangor town area.

Mhol an Bord nach bffuil sé fós sa chás go bhféadfadh sé moltaí daingne a dhéanamh faoin athbhreithniú a chlúdódh na ceithre scoil seo.

The Board has advised that it is not yet in a position to present firm proposals arising from that review which would cover these four schools.

Clandeboy Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the future of Clandeboy Primary School, Bangor. (AQW 5258/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) published a strategic review paper in December 2005, in which the Board examined the position of a number of schools in the Bangor town area.

Mhol an Bord nach bffuil sé fós sa chás go bhféadfadh sé moltaí daingne a dhéanamh faoin athbhreithniú a chlúdódh na ceithre scoil seo.

The Board has advised that it is not yet in a position to present firm proposals arising from that review which would cover these four schools.

Kilcooley Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the future of Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor. (AQW 5260/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) published a strategic review paper in December 2005, in which the Board examined the position of a number of schools in the Bangor town area.

Mhol an Bord nach bffuil sé fós sa chás go bhféadfadh sé moltaí daingne a dhéanamh faoin athbhreithniú a chlúdódh na ceithre scoil seo.

The Board has advised that it is not yet in a position to present firm proposals arising from that review which would cover these four schools.

GCSE and A-Level Grades

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of GCSE and A-Level grades that were (i) queried; and (ii) upgraded, for pupils in each of the last three academic years. (AQW 5293/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas atá á iarradh agat ar fáil ar an suíomh idirlín ag an Údarás um Cháilíocht agus Churaclam (QCA) -

The information that you request is available on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) website - http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_5778.aspx.

QCA publishes a report each year on the summer GCSE and A Level examinations series detailing enquiries about results and appeals made to the five awarding bodies in England, Wales and the north of Ireland. However there are no figures relating exclusively to the north of Ireland, and these could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. Whilst the majority of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA's) exam candidates will be local, CCEA's qualifications are available to pupils in England and Wales. Likewise, schools here are free to use any of the four awarding bodies in England and Wales if they so wish.

Non-Teaching Staff

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for a delay in the payment of non-teaching staff in Education and Library Boards since April 2007. (AQW 5305/08)

The Minister of Education: All public sector bodies here must seek the Department of Finance and Personnel's approval before any pay awards are implemented and, as part of that process, all bodies are required to submit a pay business case to their parent department. This procedure applies even if the public body follows a determined pay settlement in Britain.

Most non-teaching staff within the Education and Library Boards are contractually tied to the National Joint Council (NJC) terms and conditions and their pay awards are therefore determined by the NJC. Although the NJC pay award was agreed in Britain in November 2007, my Department was only able to seek DFP's approval in late February 2008 after the receipt of the completed business case.

De réir mar a thuigim, tá cead tugtha ag DFP (RAP) anois i dtaca le gach ball foirne, nach múinteoirí iad, a íoctar ar scálaí tuarastail NJC laistigh de na Boird.

I understand that DFP approval has now been given in respect of all non-teaching staff paid on NJC salary scales within the Boards.

National Pay Agreements

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why national pay agreements in Education and Library Boards require a business case. (AQW 5307/08)

The Minister of Education: In May 2007 the Executive agreed to adopt Treasury public sector pay policy. This policy requires all public sector bodies to seek approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel before any pay awards are implemented. Under this policy all public bodies, including the Education and Library Boards, are required to submit a pay business case to their parent department.

I gcás go bhfuil baill foirne ag obair laistigh den eagraíocht chéanna faor réir comhaontuithe pá nó próisis chinntiúcháin phá éagsúla, ní mór cás gnó pá ar leith a chur isteach do gach grúpa.

Where staff working within the same organisation are subject to different pay agreements, or pay determination processes, a separate pay business case must be submitted for each group. This procedure applies even if the public body follows a determined pay settlement.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4531/08, to detail the number of staff working in her department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5388/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá 4 Preasoifigeach ag obair i bPreasoifig RO – tá briseadh síos bunaithe ar ghrád na bPreasoifigeach mar seo a leanas:

There are currently 4 Press Officers working in DE's Press Office - a breakdown by grade is as follows:

Grade	Number of staff
Grade 7 (Principal Information Officer)	1

Grade	Number of staff
Deputy Principal (Deputy Information Officer)	1
Information Officer (Staff Officer)	2

ICAN Speech and Language Facility

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the action she has taken to ensure the ICAN Speech and Language Facility at Ballynahinch will be retained and funded to support the needs of children with speech and language difficulties. (AQW 5498/08)

The Minister of Education: The I Can Early Years Centre, which is attached to Ballynahinch Primary School, is funded jointly by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. The Department of Education provides no direct funding for the Centre and any decision on the future of the Centre lies with the SEELB.

Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannach BOLOD in iúl dom go bhfuair BOLOD maoiniú, de bharr plé le hÍontaobhas Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta an Oirdheiscirt, do I CAN don bhliain airgeadais 2008/09.

The Chief Executive of SEELB has informed me that the SEELB, as a result of discussions with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, has secured funding for I CAN for the 2008/09 financial year.

Pupil Numbers

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education to detail the change in pupil numbers enrolled in the Maintained and Controlled primary sectors over the last five years. (AQW 5611/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the following table.

ENROLMENTS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS BY MANAGEMENT TYPE 2003/04 – 2007/08

Management Type		2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Controlled	No of pupils enrolled	83,507	82,182	80,877	79,450	78,108
	% change on previous year	-	-1.6	-1.6	-1.8	-1.7
Voluntary	No of pupils enrolled	2,203	2,190	2,165	2,120	2,127
	% change on previous year	-	-0.6	-1.1	-2.1	0.3
Roman Catholic Maintained	No of pupils enrolled	79,993	78,699	77,678	77,044	76,480
	% change on previous year	-	-1.6	-1.3	-0.8	-0.7

Other maintained	No of pupils enrolled	2,047	2,129	2,181	2,279	2,304
	% change on previous year	-	4.0	2.4	4.5	1.1
Controlled Integrated	No of pupils enrolled	1,180	1,996	2,053	2,095	2,259
	% change on previous year	-	10.3	2.9	20.	7.8
Grant Maintained Integrated	No of pupils enrolled	4,607	4,802	4,992	5,196	5,361
	% change on previous year	-	4.2	4.0	4.1	3.2
Total	No of pupils enrolled	174,167	171,998	169,946	168,184	166,639
	% change on previous year	-	-1.2	-1.2	-1.0	-0.9

Teaching Vacancies

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teaching vacancies filled on a (i) full-time permanent basis; and (ii) full-time temporary basis, in each of the last three academic years at (a) primary; and (b) post-primary level. (AQW 5653/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

ACADEMIC YEAR 2004/2005

Employer	Primary Full-Time Permanent	Primary Full-Time Temporary	Post Primary Full-Time Permanent	Post Primary Full-Time Temporary
BELB	30	1	51	3
WELB	11	9	14	10
SELB	16	12	29	27
NEELB	33	18	43	18
SEELB	35	20	36	22
CCMS	120	84	180	62
Total	245	144	353	142

ACADEMIC YEAR 2005/2006

Employer	Primary Full-Time Permanent	Primary Full-Time Temporary	Post Primary Full-Time Permanent	Post Primary Full-Time Temporary
BELB	25	0	42	0
WELB	5	5	14	21
SELB	7	3	32	14

		M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	UPS1	UPS2	UPS3
Controlled	Primary	31	51	82	129	120	188	454	326	1507
	Post-Primary	51	100	114	104	143	153	415	269	1253

Employer	Primary Full-Time Permanent	Primary Full-Time Temporary	Post Primary Full-Time Permanent	Post Primary Full-Time Temporary
NEELB	42	10	63	32
SEELB	30	11	40	15
CCMS	98	63	131	72
Total	207	92	322	154

ACADEMIC YEAR 2006/2007

Employer	Primary Full-Time Permanent	Primary Full-Time Temporary	Post Primary Full-Time Permanent	Post Primary Full-Time Temporary
BELB	25	3	22	4
WELB	12	5	23	15
SELB	6	7	38	24
NEELB	42	14	79	54
SEELB	38	10	50	14
CCMS	81	72	131	77
Total	204	111	323	188

Teacher Numbers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers on each point of the pay scale in (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; (iv) Irish Medium; and (v) special schools, at primary and post-primary level. (AQW 5654/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

		M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	UPS1	UPS2	UPS3
Maintained	Primary	13	39	58	72	97	121	356	312	1636
	Post-Primary	30	58	91	97	134	154	379	251	1427
Integrated	Primary	1	13	8	15	15	20	42	15	68
	Post- Primary	15	26	27	33	29	39	92	88	231
Irish Medium	Primary	7	14	8	7	15	11	14	11	9
	Post- Primary	4	4	2	1	2	0	10	3	5
Special	Primary	5	7	24	21	18	41	79	58	232
	Post-Primary	1	0	0	0	0	3	7	4	36

Employer Liability Cover

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to confirm (i) if all transport providers to Education and Library Boards retain Employer Liability Cover; and (ii) if such liability is specified within the terms and conditions of the tendering process. (AQW 5884/08)

The Minister of Education: 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.

capital building projects are delivered to meet the aim and objectives of the Government's "Achieving Excellence in Construction" agenda (i.e. the building should be environmentally efficient and sustainable in terms of where it is located, how it has been constructed and how it will be used.)

Each project is required to adopt the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM). This assessment/audit sets the standards for best practice in sustainable development with four ratings from pass to excellent. All new projects are encouraged to aim for an excellent rating. BREEAM is independent in its licensing, quality assurance and certification.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Environmental Audit

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the call by the Union of Students in Ireland for an Environmental Audit to be drawn up for every college in Ireland, and if he has any plans to call for a similar audit on colleges in Northern Ireland. (AQW 5249/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Executive's Programme for Government 2008-2011, identifies sustainability as a cross-cutting theme and states that building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies and programmes. This includes a commitment to support the wider Public Sector in ensuring that sustainable development principles are taken into account when procuring works, supplies and services. A Sustainable Procurement Action Plan (2008-11) for the NI Public Sector is currently in draft and will be implemented as appropriate by the Department.

The Department has no plans for a formal Environmental Audit to be drawn up for Colleges in Northern Ireland though colleges must ensure that

Staff Reductions

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the arrangements his department has put in place to permit the reduction of staff numbers in Further Education colleges through agreed redundancies, which has been stalled by the withdrawal of funding by his department; and to give assurances that the current situation is not a crisis and will not hinder the development of infrastructures for the 6 'super colleges'. (AQW 5328/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is working with Further Education Colleges to agree a way forward which would allow redundancies under the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme to proceed later in the current academic year. A business case has been prepared to support the substantial public expenditure required to fund some 240 such redundancies. The outcome of the business case is expected to be known by the end of April 2008.

Any delay in processing the proposed redundancies under the Scheme has not been through the withdrawal of funding from my Department; the redundancies could not be supported earlier in the year because of pressures on the Teachers' Superannuation Fund. I am

unable to give any assurances as to the way forward until the outcome of the business case is known.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4758/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5390/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning currently employs seven staff in the press office, a Principal Information Officer (G7), a Senior Information Officer (DP), an Information Officer (SO) and an Assistant Information Officer (EO1), an Executive Officer (EO2) and 2 Administrative Officers (AO).

Drop-Out Rates

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the action he is taking to reduce drop out rates. (AQW 5467/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Empirical evidence suggests that attrition rates at universities are closely aligned with social background. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in particular, display, on average, an increased likelihood of drop out.

My Department, therefore, pays a widening participation premium to the Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). One of the purposes of this funding is to recognise the extra costs involved in supporting and retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

My Department also employs Careers Advisers who provide an all age advice and guidance service, to help young people and adults make informed choices about their future career paths, including their choice of course at university.

In addition, both Queen's University and the University of Ulster have in place a comprehensive range of measures which seek to ensure that all students optimise their potential and leave university with the best possible academic qualification.

Both institutions actively monitor student progression and attrition to identify particular trends and associated causes which, in turn, help to inform and identify specific actions to reduce the number of drop outs.

University Courses

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (i) males; and (ii) females, who have dropped out of undergraduate university courses in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5468/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The numbers of (i) males; and (ii) females, undergraduate students at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions who left without gaining an award in each of the last five available years are given in the table below;

Academic Year	Number who left without gaining an award	
	Male	Female
2001/02	1,480	1,960
2002/03	1,340	1,630
2003/04	1,465	1,580
2004/05	1,725	1,825
2005/06	1,480	1,875

Source: HESA Student Record 2001/02 – 2005/06

University Courses

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the average drop out rate for undergraduate university students in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5469/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The percentages of undergraduate students at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions who left without gaining an award in each of the last five available years are given in the table below;

Academic Year	Percentage
2001/02	8.9%
2002/03	7.6%
2003/04	7.5%
2004/05	8.4%
2005/06	8.0%

Source: HESA Student Record 2001/02 – 2005/06

Labour Relations Agency

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm if agreements facilitated by the Labour Relations Agency have any legal status.

(AQW 5496/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

A major part of the Agency's work is its involvement in trying to bring about agreed settlements to employment/workplace disputes. This includes both collective and individual disputes. Collective agreements facilitated by the Agency are not legally enforceable by an individual employee but would be taken into account by a court considering a breach of contract complaint.

The Labour Relations Agency itself has no enforcement role in relation to the implementation of collective agreements.

If the parties to an individual dispute agreed a conciliated settlement and then one party reneged on that agreement, the existence of the agreement would inevitably be taken into account by a court or tribunal which was then determining the original dispute. Again the Labour Relations Agency itself has no enforcement role in relation to the implementation of these agreements.

Bamford Review

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the actions (i) he has taken; and (ii) he is planning to take, to progress the implementation of the inclusion agenda, as outlined in the Bamford Report. (AQW 5521/08)

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 (DEL). DEL is concerned to ensure that it is doing everything possible within its remit to ensure that people with mental health problems and/or learning disabilities have access to the support and services they need to help them find and retain work. The Department has an extensive range of programmes designed to provide help and support towards this objective and many of the Bamford recommendations are already a feature of existing DEL policy and activity.

I met recently with Professor Roy McClelland, Chair of the Bamford Group, and discussed with him the measures that are already in place. The meeting was very positive and I have made the offer of further engagement between my officials and the Group.

DEL must engage with all eligible clients, regardless of the type of condition or disability, and within the context of available resources. 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 all people with disabilities in DEL's client group across Further Education and Training.

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 Department, in co-operation with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges and the Education and Training Inspectorate, is also 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, within the terms of further education's remit.

Townland Names

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5541/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My officials reply to correspondence using the address supplied by the correspondent and townland names where appropriate. Townland names are a valuable element of our rich cultural and linguistic heritage and I welcome their use in addresses, along with the postcode and the road name as appropriate.

Teacher Training Places

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of applicants there are for each teacher training place in (i) Stranmillis; and (ii) St. Mary's University Colleges, for the 2008-09 academic year. (AQW 5587/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The respective University Colleges have provided the following statistics relating to the number of applicants for entry in the 2008-9 academic year:

(I) STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

	Available Places	Number of Applicants
BEd Primary	68	629
BEd Post-Primary	40	187

(II) ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

	Available Places	Number of Applicants
BEd Primary	70	1040

	Available Places	Number of Applicants
BEd Post-Primary	39	311
PGCE Irish Medium Education	13	50

Return to Education

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the schemes funded by his department aimed at encouraging older people to return to education, both vocational and non-vocational; and (ii) the uptake on each of these schemes in each of the colleges to which they apply. (AQW 5640/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) There are no specific schemes aimed at encouraging older people to return to education, because all courses, both vocational and non-vocational, offered at the six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland are open to people of all ages.
- (ii) During the 2006/07 academic year there were 23,749 enrolments throughout the FE sector by people over the age of 60. Of these enrolments, 6,443 were on courses that were vocational in nature and 17,306 were on non-vocational courses. The breakdown of these enrolments across the six colleges is as follows:

College	Enrolments		Total
	Non Vocational	Vocational	
Belfast Metropolitan	6,354	2,229	8,583
Northern Regional	2,875	1,100	3,975
South Eastern Regional	1,468	1,502	2,970
Southern Regional	2,599	798	3,397
South West	2,371	365	2,736
North West Regional	1,639	449	2,088
Total	17,306	6,443	23,749

Source: FESR

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

St Patrick's Day Celebrations

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the strategies initiated

by his department to promote the tourism potential of St Patrick's Day; and (ii) the number of tourists who visited during the St Patrick's Day celebrations. (AQW 5363/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) identified St Patrick/Christian Heritage as a signature project in 2004 due to the large number of authentic sites linked to the story of St Patrick across Northern Ireland, specifically in Armagh and Down. The project recognises the importance of St Patrick's Day internationally to promote Northern Ireland specific products, and whilst local St Patrick events are part of this product the main emphasis is on developing a high quality tourism experience all year round.

In addition, NITB has produced an exhibition on the Life of St Patrick, which is currently being toured by TIL in the USA.

To support TIL's ongoing marketing efforts, the NITB has over the last 3 years developed a range of products linked to the St Patrick/Christian Heritage theme. This includes, capital projects to upgrade the visitor experience linked to the key patrician sites in Armagh and Down as well as a new St Patrick's Trail which is currently being developed to direct visitors arriving in Belfast and Dublin into Bangor, Downpatrick, Armagh and Newry. Other initiatives include the development of St Patrick themed websites and brochure material to reinforce the Northern Ireland message within TIL's promotions and promote Northern Ireland as an all year round visitor destination.

It is not possible to identify visitor numbers on any one day, either those coming direct through Northern Ireland air and seaports or those coming across the border.

Lough Neagh Tourism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the action taken by his department to promote tourism within each of the District Council areas that incorporate Lough Neagh. (AQW 5365/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Lough Neagh area (defined as Antrim, Magherafelt, Craigavon, Cookstown, Lisburn and Dungannon & South Tyrone Council areas) has benefited in each of the last five years from funding provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) and latterly through the Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs). In addition, substantial financial assistance has also been made available for product development in the area from both Invest NI and NITB;

Year	Financial Assistance
2003/04	£760,152
2004/05	£287,896
2005/06	£406,710
2006/07	£504,364
2007/08	30,072

Lough Neagh's attractions are included in all the marketing strategies for which NITB is responsible, including websites, publications and targeted campaigns to promote tourism growth in Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland Limited (TIL) features information on Lough Neagh and its hinterland in its suite of publications, and websites, which are available to potential visitors throughout the world.

District Council Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his funding plans for each District Council for each of the next two years.
(AQW 5366/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Whilst the Department has no specific funding plans for District Councils, funding can be accessed through Departmental programmes such as the New ERDF Competitiveness Programme. This provides Councils with the opportunity to seek support for economic based projects which meet the Lisbon criteria of innovation, R&D and entrepreneurship. Councils may bid for support from the Programme which has a value of £50m over its lifetime, ending in 2013.

In addition, one District Council area has been shortlisted under the Energy from Waste competition. Precise funding for this is still to be finalised.

Invest NI does not allocate its budgets to particular geographical regions and, as such, it is not possible to outline accurate funding plans for each District Council.

A further £4.5m is available for the development of tourism amenities and attractions through the Tourism Development Scheme 2008-2011 (TDS), with assistance of up to £500,000 available per capital project. Applications for TDS funding closed on the 28 March 2008 and exact funding plans are still to be finalised

Lough Neagh Tourism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the amount of money spent by his department in promoting Lough Neagh as a tourist destination.
(AQW 5367/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to quantify the amount spent promoting Lough Neagh as a tourist destination. However, substantial financial assistance has been made available for product development in the six District Council areas bordering Lough Neagh from both Invest NI and Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB);

Year	Financial Assistance
2003/04	£760,152
2004/05	£287,896
2005/06	£406,710
2006/07	£504,364
2007/08	£30,072

Lough Neagh's main tourism strengths are recognised in activity products. The majority of marketing activity is driven through websites www.discovernorthernireland.com, Regional Tourism Partnerships' websites and the Countryside Access & Activities Network's (CAAN) dedicated activity websites, www.outdoorni.com, www.walkni.com and www.cycleni.com. NITB also engages with the Lough Neagh Partnership to develop the tourist and leisure potential of the Lough.

Tourism Ireland Limited (TIL) features information on Lough Neagh and its hinterland in its suite of publications, and websites, which are available to potential visitors throughout the world. The area features as a centre for watersports, coarse and game fishing, birdwatching, equestrian activities, golf and cycling as well as for more general leisure pursuits such as walking, boating and cruising and for accommodation, restaurants and things to do and see.

Lough Neagh also benefited from funding provided by NITB to the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) and currently benefits from funding to the Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs). Lough Neagh and its attractions are included in all the marketing strategies for which the NITB is responsible, including websites, publications and targeted campaigns to promote tourism growth in Northern Ireland.

Incandescent Bulbs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to introduce a ban on incandescent bulbs, similar to that introduced by his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.
(AQW 5459/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There are no current plans to introduce a ban on incandescent light bulbs. In September 2007, the UK

Government launched a voluntary initiative with major retailers, the majority of whom are represented in Northern Ireland, to phase out inefficient light bulbs (including incandescent bulbs). The comprehensive programme which began in January 2008 will see all inefficient light bulbs disappear from shelves by the end of 2011. Some incandescent light bulbs will remain on sale, where suitable energy efficient alternatives do not exist.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4646/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5505/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
DETI employs:

- 1 x Principal Information Officer (Grade 7)
- 1 x Senior Information Officer (Deputy Principal)
- 1 x Information Officer (Staff Officer)
- 1 x Assistant Information Officer (Executive Officer 1)

In addition DETI has engaged a temporary Senior Information Officer until after the US/NI Investment conference to handle PR, co-ordination and press management for the lead up to and during the US/NI Investment Conference in May 2008.

Electricity and Gas Providers

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to give a timescale within which customers will be able to choose their electricity and gas providers in the domestic market. (AQW 5560/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The domestic electricity market in Northern Ireland has been open to competition since 1 November 2007.

Gas supply competition has been open for domestic customers in the Phoenix Natural Gas licence area of Greater Belfast and Larne since 1 January 2007.

Firmus Energy, which is currently developing the gas supply market in the towns and cities on the route of the North-West and South-North gas transmission pipelines, has been granted an 8 year period of supply exclusivity for domestic consumers. This period begins when gas first becomes available in each of the 10 urban areas served by the pipelines.

Campbelltown to Ballycastle Ferry Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the correspondence he has sent in relation to the reinstatement of the Campbelltown to Ballycastle ferry service. (AQW 5577/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Since becoming Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment I have corresponded with 6 people on 8 separate occasions in relation to the reinstatement of the Campbelltown to Ballycastle ferry service

Reconnect Grants

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications for Reconnect grants for each month from when they were first issued to 31 March 2008. (AQW 5683/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The number of applications received for Reconnect grants are detailed below on a per month basis.

2006/07

Month	Number of Applications
Jul	38
Aug	461
Sep	388
Oct	299
Nov	211
Dec	120
Jan	130
Feb	154
Mar	151

2007/08

Month	Number of Applications
Apr	143
May	193
Jun	166
Jul	144
Aug	159
Sep	169
Oct	261
Nov	305
Dec	226

Month	Number of Applications
Jan	585
Feb	1148
Mar	3710

Northern Ireland Science Park

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans for the further development of the Northern Ireland Science Park ; and how he intends to develop facilities throughout Northern Ireland, outside of Belfast.

(AQO 3011/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI support to the Northern Ireland Science Park (NISP) from 2002 to 2007 represents a total investment of almost £22m at the Queen's Island site, with an additional contribution of £2m from IFI. Currently DETI is supporting the third phase of NISP with further investment of £4.25m, matched by private funding of £2m. NISP's current property portfolio is now self sustaining.

NISP is the beneficial owner of some 100,000 net sq ft in Belfast with a further 50,000 net sq ft under construction. Detailed planning permission has been granted for an additional 100,000 net sq ft at Queens Island.

Further development of the Science Park will be sought through wholly private sector investment, not from grant aid by my Department, reflecting NISP's Mission Statement "To create a self-sustaining, internationally recognised Science Park which is both a commercially and research driven centre for knowledge-based industries."

It has always been intended that NISP would develop facilities outside Belfast and discussion is currently ongoing between NISP and the University of Ulster on the possibility of joint development of Science Park facilities in the North West.

You will wish to note that NISP's business start-up programmes, halo and NISP CONNECT, funded by the department's agents and others, including the private sector, operate across the province as a whole.

Construction Industry Deaths

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of people employed in the construction industry who have died in the workplace, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5756/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Over the past five years 17 employees in the construction industry have died as a result of injuries sustained at work. The statistics are broken down in the following table.

CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYEE FATALITIES 2003-2008 BY YEAR AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Total
1. Belfast East			1			1
2. Belfast North						0
3. Belfast South					1	1
4. Belfast West						0
5. East Antrim						0
6. East Londonderry				1	1	2
7. Fermanagh and South Tyrone		1				1
8. Foyle			1			1
9. Lagan Valley	1					1
10. Mid Ulster				1		1
11. Newry and Armagh	1			1		2
12. North Antrim						0
13. North Down		1		1		2
14. South Antrim		1		1		2
15. South Down						0
16. Strangford		1	1			2
17. Upper Bann						0
18. West Tyrone					1	1
Total	2	4	3	5	3	17

Departmental Land

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the reasons why land in Downpatrick was sold by Invest NI earlier this year for £32,500, given that it is now on the market for £300,000; and (ii) the mechanisms in place to prevent land being sold for less than the market price. (AQW 5768/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

(i) The land at the Cloonagh Road, Downpatrick was sold by Invest NI in pursuance of a policy to dispose of the freehold interest in selected estates by transferring the interest to a Property Holding

Company formed by a majority of leaseholders on the estate. This policy was established by Invest NI's predecessor, the Industrial Development Board.

The sale price was not determined by placing the interest on the open market but by private treaty with the leaseholder representatives. An independent firm of commercial agents undertook the negotiations, working closely with Land and Property Services (LPS). LPS recommended that Invest NI accept the negotiated price of £32,500 in early 2006. This recommendation reflected the prevailing value of industrial land on this estate at the time and the state and circumstances of the undeveloped plot, which in its opinion is poorly located within the development. A number of legal title issues combined to make the legal process for this sale more complex and lengthy than would normally be expected.

The market value of industrial land has risen significantly in the intervening period. Land values peaked last summer but have since fallen back. It remains to be seen if the asking price of £300,000 for the land will be achieved. LPS has not detected evidence that this level of value has been achieved in this area to date.

(ii) In April 2007, due to market pressures on its landholding, Invest NI discontinued the policy of freehold disposal. At the time when this policy change occurred, a number of disposals were underway. Invest NI was able to withdraw from most of the negotiations but advice at the time from its legal and professional teams was that this transaction had progressed too far for it to withdraw without significant penalty.

Land and Property Services monitors land values closely and on a quarterly basis recommends that Invest NI adjust the prices which it charges client companies for serviced sites.

Departmental Land

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, since 8 May 2007, the land belonging to (i) his department; and (ii) agencies sponsored by his department, that has been sold, or the sale is pending, at a price known by the department to be less than market value. (AQW 5769/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Before selling any land, the Department obtains an assessment of market value and a recommendation in respect of the terms of sale from Land and Property Services (LPS). The LPS recommendation is based on negotiations which it has undertaken on behalf of the Department or on the report of an independent commercial agent on which it has been consulted and which it has reviewed.

- (i) There have been no sales of land by the Department or its NDPBs, with the exception of Invest NI, since 8 May 2007.
- (ii) Since 8 May 2007, LPS has provided Invest NI with recommendations in respect of 53 sales of land. Invest NI has accepted the LPS recommendation in each of these sales. 43 transactions have completed and 10 are pending.

None of these transactions is considered to be at less than market value.

Ulster Weavers Apparel

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the contact he had with Ulster Weavers Apparel Limited prior to the announcement that they were closing their Banbridge plant. (AQW 5779/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has a long established working relationship with Ulster Weavers Apparel. As a result Invest NI has had regular ongoing contact with the company. In recent years, in the face of increasing international competition, Ulster Weavers Apparel has been forced to restructure in order to maintain its international competitiveness. This has resulted in the recent announcement to enter consultations with regards to the loss of 45 production jobs.

The company's current plans are to continue to service its existing customers from the Banbridge factory where 26 jobs will provide sales, marketing, product development and design functions.

Invest NI officials have kept me informed of developments with Ulster Weavers Apparel. Invest NI will continue to work with the company and will keep me fully apprised of ongoing developments.

Ulster Weavers Apparel

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all assistance provided by Invest NI to Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd. in each of the last five years; and to confirm (i) whether Ulster Weavers Apparel was part of any Invest NI trade delegations to the People's Republic of China in the last five years; and (ii) whether Ulster Weavers Apparel was part of any Invest NI trade delegations to other overseas locations in the last five years. (AQW 5780/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd received revenue grants totalling £87,900 under a Financial Assistance

Agreement dated 2nd August 2004 and £2,500 under an incentive grant in June 2007.

Since 2003, the company has participated in 4 Trade Missions to Hong Kong and China. The company has participated in 10 events organised by Invest NI in the last 5 years for which it received the financial assistance detailed below.

01 APRIL 2003 TO 31 MARCH 2008

Year	Event	Grant Paid
2003/04	Sectoral Trade Mission, ITMA, Birmingham, 2003	£520.62
	Trade Mission Hong Kong & China, Nov 03	Grant not claimed
	Trade Mission Qatar & UAE, Feb 04	Grant not claimed
	Sectoral Trade Mission Techtexil, Frankfurt, April 03	£757.90
2004/05	Trade Mission Hong Kong & China, Nov 04	£2,270
2005/06	Trade Mission Hong Kong & China, Nov 05	£745.50
2006/07	Trade Mission India, March 07	£773.60
	Trade Mission Gulf States, Jan 07	£690
2007/08	Trade Mission India, Sept 07	£677.46
	Trade Mission Hong Kong & China, Nov 07	Grant claim pending
	Total	£6435.08

ENVIRONMENT

Flood Plains

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) her policy in relation to planning applications for the development of new homes on flood plains or on land at high risk of flooding; (ii) the number of such applications that have been approved in each of the last three years; and (iii) the number of such applications that are currently under consideration. (AQW 5172/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): My Department's general policy approach to dealing with flooding is contained within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15 'Planning and Flood Risk' which adopts a precautionary approach to decision making. PPS15 is one of many material considerations in the determination of a planning application to be weighed against the development plan, and other planning

policy publications and other considerations including planning history.

My Department will consult DARD Rivers Agency on planning applications within flood plains where appropriate and have regard to what its advice is as part of the planning application assessment process. In those circumstances where new development within a flood plain would result in significant flood risk planning applications may be refused on these grounds.

My Department does not hold the statistical information you have requested as flood plains are not a search category within our current computer system.

I can advise the DARD Rivers Agency is currently preparing a National Flood Mapping Strategy and Climate Changes Maps for Northern Ireland which, when complete, will provide a strategic picture of the extent of flood plains in Northern Ireland.

Seat Belts

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any legislation she plans to introduce in relation to the lack of adequate seating and seat belts in the back of goods vehicles which have not been designed or manufactured for carrying passengers. (AQW 5248/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Article 71 of the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1995 provides, with certain exceptions, that no passenger can be carried on a goods vehicle except on a permanently attached seat placed beside the driver's seat. This does not apply to any "authorised passenger", which is defined in the Article as any person in the employment of the owner or hirer who is carried on the vehicle in connection with such employment and with the consent of the owner or hirer.

However, Article 58 of the 1995 Order makes it an offence to contravene regulation 115 of the Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations (NI) 1999, which requires a motor vehicle and its passengers to be carried in such a manner as to be no danger to those passengers.

Similarly, Article 54(c) of the 1995 Order provides that a person is guilty of an offence if he causes or permits another to use a motor vehicle or trailer on a road when the number of passengers carried by it, or the manner in which they are carried, is such that the use of the motor vehicle or trailer involves danger of injury to any person.

In the light of these offence provisions, I have no plans at present to introduce further legislation on seating and seat belts in the rear of goods vehicles. However, I can advise that the PSNI plans to take forward an education campaign in association with

my Department, leading to the deployment of an enforcement strategy if goods vehicle users fail to meet the legislative requirements.

Apartment-Style Developments

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to curb apartment style developments in areas such as (i) Ballyrobert; and (ii) Knightswood, Templepatrick. (AQW 5297/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service assess applications for apartment development within the existing planning policy framework to ensure such development does not result in unacceptable damage to the character, environmental quality and amenity of established residential areas.

In the Assembly debate on Strategic Planning Policy motioned by Mr Roy Beggs MLA on 1st October 2007, I gave a commitment to review the options available in relation to the issue of town cramming. That review of options is currently underway by officials and I am expecting their findings to be presented to me in the next few weeks.

Planning Applications

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications received, and subsequently passed, for dwellings in rural areas in 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 5298/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of planning applications received and approved from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 for single rural dwellings are:-

- Applications received in 06/07 – 2335
- Applications approved in 06/07 – 5138

The figures relate to full and outline applications for new builds or replacement single dwellings outside settlement limits. The figures for applications received and approved are not directly comparable as the approvals include applications received before 1 April 2006.

Data outside the 2006/07 period is not available at present due to the new statistical reporting system outlined in my letter to Members in December 2007. It is anticipated that this data will be available in October 2008.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the impact of the introduction of a two tier system of housing forecasts on the Belfast

Metropolitan Area Plan's receipt of a certificate of conformity. (AQW 5311/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Larne Lough Water

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the improvements in the quality of water in Larne Lough since the installation of the new water treatment plant 2 years ago. (AQW 5312/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environment and Heritage Service monitors the water quality of Larne Lough to meet the requirements of the EC Urban Waste Water Treatment, Shellfish Waters and Water Framework Directives.

I am pleased to report that the improvements carried out to Larne Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTW) by Northern Ireland Water have significantly improved the water quality within the Lough.

Since the installation of the new WWTW, reductions in nutrient concentrations have been observed. In addition, there has been an improvement in microbiological quality under the Shellfish Waters Directive.

In recent years (2004-6), Larne Lough has met all the quality standards in the Shellfish Waters Directive. In addition, Larne Lough meets the guideline standards for faecal indicator organisms in water and in general there has been an improving trend.

Monitoring of a range of water quality parameters under the EC Water Framework Directive within Larne Lough has shown that the values obtained during 2005-6 and 2006-7 are classed as good or high quality status.

Housing Potential

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if she intends to apply the same criteria as for windfall potential gain figures, to other sources of housing potential, such as Greenfield potential. (AQW 5313/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Housing Potential

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why windfall can only be counted when approved, built and occupied/ready for occupation. (AQW 5314/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Carbon Footprints

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if she will encourage other members of the Executive to measure their own carbon footprints. (AQW 5317/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have consistently stated that government, organisations, communities and individuals all have a role in tackling the issue of climate change. It is up to each individual within the Executive to determine how best they can make a contribution within their government role and in their private lives.

The Executive itself is fully committed to lowering carbon levels. In the Programme for Government we

have set a target to reduce Northern Ireland greenhouse gases by at least 25% by 2025.

Carbon Footprint

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if she has measured her own carbon footprint since taking up office. (AQW 5318/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have measured my own carbon footprint on the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website and I am taking action to see if my footprint reduces in time. I would encourage everyone to do all that they can to do likewise.

Endangered Species

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total number of registered endangered species in Northern Ireland. (AQW 5320/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no register of endangered species in Northern Ireland.

However, a list of 271 Northern Ireland 'Priority Species', which require conservation action, has been agreed by the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group.

The list has been published and can be viewed at: http://www.ehsni.gov.uk/biodiversity/sap_uk/priority_species.htm

Housing Potential

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the difference between a housing count and a housing forecast. (AQW 5331/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Housing Potential

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2575/08, in which she stated that windfalls 'can only be counted when approved, built and occupied', to detail the reasons why she stated, in a letter dated 11 February 2008 (COR/49/2008) to Mr Jim Wells MLA, that windfalls would be counted 'when approved, built and ready for occupation'; and to state which is the case. (AQW 5332/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such

times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Planning Applications

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of planning applications for (a) housing; and (b) commercial developments, currently awaiting a decision from the Southern division of the Planning Service; and (ii) the average length of time taken for a decision to be taken. (AQW 5343/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As at 4 April 2008, there were 2,841 residential and 212 commercial planning applications being processed by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. The average processing times for planning applications in this Division in 2006/2007 was 46 weeks.

Considerable progress has been made to reduce the number of outstanding applications in the Division. Over the last year, the vacant planning officer posts in the Craigavon Division have been filled as a result of a recruitment and promotion exercise. In addition, a Divisional Support Team comprised of 8 planning officers has been working in the Division on a temporary basis to assist in tackling the workload. These permanent and temporary teams have been successful in significantly reducing the number of applications awaiting determination.

I am pleased to state that Craigavon Divisional Office has issued over 5,200 decisions between 1 April 2007 and 29 February this year – approximately 1,200 more decisions issued than the number of applications received.

Housing Potential

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action she is taking to update the figures that were provided in a paper to the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Inquiry in January 2007 in relation to the count of windfall approvals achieved in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Urban and Belfast Metropolitan Area Rural areas over the period 1 April 2003 – 31 August 2006. (AQW 5369/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Potential housing yield in BMAP includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing and an allowance for windfall development. The estimate of potential yield on zoned sites is based on the density that is considered appropriate for the sites and is a forecast of the number of houses that may be built in the Plan Area.

The housing count is of the actual housing yield on all sites from the number of houses built and ready for occupation/occupied as measured, or counted, by the Department's annual housing land availability survey. The 2007 annual housing land availability survey is due to be published in the next few weeks and work on the 2008 survey will commence during the summer months. In the context of BMAP, the windfall estimate relates to unzoned sites within the urban footprint and excludes any yield on greenfield sites outside this.

The reason for only taking into account houses that are built and ready for occupation/occupied is that prior to this there remains uncertainty as to their development and contribution to the overall housing supply. The terms ready for occupation/occupied are interchangeable and both are used to determine whether a housing unit contributes to the supply of housing.

Following the Public Inquiry into the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan the Planning Appeals Commission will be making recommendations to the Department on strategic housing issues and until such times as its report is received and considered I am unable to make any assessment regarding the issue of general conformity.

Boundary Commission

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if the Boundary Commission will have the powers to make changes to any new electoral area following changes to the number of councils, particularly in relation to Belfast City Council. (AQW 5426/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will be to make recommendations regarding the boundaries and names of the 11 new local government districts and the number, boundaries and names of the wards into which each district is to be divided.

The 11 new local government districts will incorporate the whole or the major part of the current local government districts set out in the table below.

1	Antrim; Newtownabbey.
2	Ards; North Down
3	Armagh City and District; Banbridge; Craigavon.
4	Ballymena; Carrickfergus; Larne.
5	Ballymoney; Coleraine; Limavady; Moyle.
6	Belfast.
7	Castlereagh; Lisburn City.
8	Cookstown; Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough; Magherafelt.

9	Londonderry; Strabane.
10	Down; Newry and Mourne.
11	Fermanagh; Omagh.

Although Belfast is not amalgamating with any other local government district, its boundaries may be altered by the Commissioner acting in accordance with the rules.

The rules for the Commissioner are set out in Part III of Schedule 4 to the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (as amended by the Local Government (Boundaries) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006). The Commissioner is required:

- (i) to have regard to the desirability of determining district and ward boundaries which are readily identifiable;
- (ii) not to include a townland partly in one district or ward and partly in another, unless this is unavoidable;
- (iii) to ensure, as far as practicable, that no district is wholly or substantially
 - severed by the boundary of another, or
 - encompassed within the boundary of another; and
- (iv) in determining the number and boundaries of the wards within a district, to have regard to the size, population and physical diversity of a district and the desirability that there should be a proper representation of the rural and urban electorate within the district.

The district of Belfast will be divided into 60 wards, with each of the other 10 districts being divided into 40 wards, however, the Commissioner will have the discretion to increase or decrease the number of wards per district by up to 5, where the Commissioner considers it desirable in regard to the matters mentioned in (iv) above.

Northern Area Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the draft Northern Area Plan. (AQW 5435/08)

The Minister of the Environment: While the draft Northern Area Plan (DNAP) was published in May 2005, progress on taking it forward to an Independent Examination has been delayed because of a judicial challenge from Seaport Investments Ltd in relation to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) which accompanied the Plan.

The final judgement of the Court, which was handed down on 13 November 2007, did not quash

either the draft Plan or the 2004 Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations but made a number of declarations. Following careful consideration, my Department has lodged an appeal against certain of these declarations. The appeal is scheduled to take place on the 2nd and 3rd June 2008.

The Department also carried out a review of its decision to carry out an environmental assessment of DNAP under the terms of the relevant EC Directive and the 2004 Regulations. On 6 November 2007 the Department determined that it was not feasible to carry out such an assessment for DNAP. At the court hearing in November counsel representing Seaport indicated that his clients intended to challenge this determination.

In these circumstances, my Department is not yet in a position to indicate when it would be able to progress the draft Plan to an Independent Examination.

District Council Lending

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current (i) capital loans; and (ii) financial lease agreements, for each District Council.

(AQW 5439/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The figures requested relating to loans and financial lease agreements have been extracted from district councils' 2006 / 2007 accounts and are set out in the table below. The data for capital loans represent "long term borrowings" and "borrowings repayable within 12 months".

District Council	Capital loans £	Financial lease agreements £
Antrim	21,463,047	1,635,543
Ards	15,736,108	621
Armagh	20,161,749	69,771
Ballymena	34,025,917	0
Ballymoney	8,327,623	0
Banbridge	12,944,711	48,743
Belfast	21,132,573	0
Carrickfergus	11,237,979	541,450
Castlereagh	19,862,343	1,158,832
Coleraine	27,199,696	0
Cookstown	1,777,695	0
Craigavon	8,285,181	0
Derry	21,108,714	0

District Council	Capital loans £	Financial lease agreements £
Down	15,047,691	910,938
Dungannon & South Tyrone	1,995,999	687,730
Fermanagh	2,680,197	1,006,375
Larne	6,567,321	0
Limavady	8,975,699	0
Lisburn	20,380,663	0
Magherafelt	0	0
Moyle	7,843,152	0
Newry and Mourne	20,607,681	0
Newtownabbey	27,943,248	0
North Down	21,670,731	0
Omagh	9,474,237	406,585
Strabane	2,569,365	0
Totals	369,019,320	6,466,588

Tree Preservation Order

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if the trees at Myrtle Lodge, Newcastle which were recently felled were subject to a Tree Preservation Order. (AQW 5446/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The trees felled at Myrtle Lodge, Newcastle were subject to a Tree Preservation Order.

MLA Co-option

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which she will introduce legislation that will allow co-option in relation to MLAs who are also councillors. (AQW 5458/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Elections, in respect of the Northern Ireland Assembly and district councils, are an excepted matter, under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and responsibility for legislation relating to elections rests with the Secretary of State.

The procedure for filling vacancies on councils in the period between local government elections without requiring mid-term elections, sometimes referred to as co-option, is outlined in the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962.

As this arrangement constitutes part of electoral law, responsibility for any changes to this legislation lies with the Secretary of State.

Global Warming

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the value of the climate measurement carried out by the Armagh Observatory on a daily basis since 1795, in relation to measuring the progress of global warming.

(AQW 5478/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2004 the Department published a report entitled 'Climate Change Indicators for Northern Ireland.' The report used climate measurements provided by Armagh Observatory relating to temperature, precipitation and snowfall. The time series used in the report for each of the climatic variables was based on advice provided by the Observatory, in the case of temperature from 1844 onwards, precipitation from 1932 onwards and snow days from 1960 onwards. The report analysed these historic climate records to look for trends and evidence for global warming in Northern Ireland's climate. Using this data, the report was able to identify that mean annual temperatures have been increasing and have been consistently high from 1990 onwards, with the highest annual temperature in almost 170 years of climate data being seen in 1997.

The Department continues to maintain this database of climate change indicator statistics, some of which is based on the climate data provided by Armagh Observatory. This data is an important tool used by the Department in monitoring climate change in Northern Ireland. The Department maintains ongoing links with Armagh Observatory in updating these datasets, and at a future stage, may publish further editions of the Climate Change Indicators Report, as important trends in Northern Ireland's climate become evident.

Plastic Carrier Bags

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) any initiatives, either planned or in progress, to reduce and eliminate the use of plastic carrier bags, and (ii) any discussions with the major supermarket chains on this issue.

(AQW 5479/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The current UK-wide voluntary agreement between Government, the Waste Resources Action Programme and retailers aims to reduce the overall environmental impact of all carrier bags by 25% by the end of 2008. Retailers are seeking to achieve this reduction by:

- encouraging customers to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags they use;

- reducing the impact of each carrier bag e.g. by using less material or incorporating recycled content; and
- enabling the recycling of more carrier bags where appropriate.

In last month's budget speech the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that legislation would be introduced to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags if we have not seen sufficient progress on a voluntary basis. This is obviously a very significant development and my officials are currently liaising with colleagues in GB to obtain more detailed information on initial legislative proposals and we are also considering any possible implications for Northern Ireland.

Following discussions last year major supermarket chains are already signed up to the current UK voluntary agreement and I am encouraged by the varied initiatives brought forward by supermarket chains to reduce usage of carrier bags. The Waste Resources Action Programme hosted a meeting with retailers in February 2008 to review progress on the voluntary agreement and reported that although there is now clear momentum from retailers more work needs to be done to bring about a substantial reduction in the environmental impact of free single-use carrier bags.

Back Garden Development

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which new laws will be introduced to prevent back garden development. (AQW 5480/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I will shortly be considering whether policy on back garden development is needed.

Biodiversity Protection

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the measures she will be taking to help protect biodiversity. (AQW 5481/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are several measures being taken by my department to help protect biodiversity and these are set out in the Recommendations of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy. The strategy, which is led by DoE, also includes actions for other Departments, with the overarching objective of halting biodiversity loss.

European Waste Directives & Regulations

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to outline the European Waste Directives & Regulations with which her department is required to comply; (ii) to detail whether she has complied with all these directives and regulations and is projected to meet all targets that have been set. (AQW 5482/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are numerous European Waste Directives/Regulations, however, not all of these have a direct impact on my Department in terms of compliance issues. My Department is required to comply with the Waste Framework Directive and Directives on Hazardous Waste, End-of-Life Vehicles and Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment and I have every confidence that it is meeting its obligations in respect of those Directives as appropriate.

EU targets are generally set at Member State level and I remain determined to ensure that my Department continues to do all it can to meet EU targets as appropriate.

Tree Protection Orders

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for the last five years, (i) the number of incidents where trees with Tree Protection Orders (TPOs) have been felled illegally; (ii) the number of successful prosecutions the department has pursued against those who have felled trees subject to TPOs; and (iii) the amount of fines imposed on those prosecuted for breaching TPOs. (AQW 5486/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In the last five years my Department has investigated 61 cases where it was alleged that trees protected by a TPO had been damaged or destroyed without the required consent of my Department.

The felling of trees covered by a TPO is only illegal if it can be demonstrated to the court that the person or persons involved has wilfully destroyed or wilfully damaged a tree in a manner likely to destroy it.

My Department's approach in such cases, however, is to attempt to reach a resolution, through negotiation, without the need for formal court action.

There has been only one successful prosecution in the last five years when 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.

A developer was recently convicted for the removal of 39 trees within Ballycastle Conservation Area. Trees in a Conservation Area are afforded the same protection as if they were covered by a TPO. The

developer was fined £5000 and £425 court costs and is also required to replant trees on the site.

Countryside Visitors

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the strategies she has to increase the number of visitors to the countryside during the summer months. (AQO 2916/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department, through Environment and Heritage Service, provides public access to its sites, properties, historic buildings and monuments, the vast majority of which are located in the countryside. While most of these are open throughout the year they are promoted further during the summer through the EHS calendar of events, distribution of promotional materials, an advertising campaign and working in partnership with the tourism industry and local councils. EHS promotes the range of benefits to be gained by visiting these sites and other scenic areas in Northern Ireland's wider countryside, particularly Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Visitor numbers to EHS properties are weather dependent and the poor summer weather in 2007 resulted in fewer visitors at Country Parks and monuments than in previous years. That said, the number attending EHS events in 2007, for example the summer fair at Dunluce Castle, showed a marked increase, reflecting the benefits of effective marketing of the programme.

EHS also supports, through grant aid, a wide range of organisations that encourage the public to enjoy and appreciate our natural heritage through the provision and promotion of opportunities for sustainable access and countryside recreation. Key examples include the Countryside Access and Activities Network, the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, the National Trust, Lagan Valley Regional Park and district councils. The financial support provided assists such bodies to manage sites, provide access routes, organise events, develop and maintain networks of paths and promote access opportunities throughout the countryside. Some of these groups provide summer programmes of events including walks.

The Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, has advised me that her Department will continue to promote access to and use of forest parks and forest recreation areas by continuing to invest in the maintenance of paths, toilet blocks and other visitor facilities.

Chicken Waste Incinerator Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4394/08 to give her assessment of the value of having (i) a chicken waste incinerator plant in an area of high scenic value; and (ii) a plant located close to Lough Neagh that would adversely affect the quality, character and features of interest in the area. (AQW 5489/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It would be inappropriate for me to offer any response since to do so would potentially prejudice the process of determining a planning application.

Planning Applications

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the progress being made in reducing the backlog of planning applications in the Craigavon Planning Office. (AQW 5536/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As at 4 April 2008, there were 2,841 residential and 212 commercial planning applications being processed by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. The average processing times for planning applications in this Division in 2006/2007 was 46 weeks.

Considerable progress has been made to reduce the number of outstanding applications in the Division. Over the last year, the vacant planning officer posts in the Craigavon Division have been filled as a result of a recruitment and promotion exercise. In addition, a Divisional Support Team comprised of 8 planning officers has been working in the Division on a temporary basis to assist in tackling the workload. These permanent and temporary teams have been successful in significantly reducing the number of applications awaiting determination.

I am pleased to state that Craigavon Divisional Office has issued over 5,200 decisions between 1 April 2007 and 29 February this year – approximately 1,200 more decisions issued than the number of applications received.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action her department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5543/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In dealing with general correspondence to my department, replies are posted to the address provided by the correspondent which, on occasions, includes the townland name.

Where a townland name is included in a planning application, that name will be recorded and used thereafter in relation to the application.

Driver and Vehicle Agency employs systems which give the official postcode address and therefore do not include townland names.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4677/08, to detail the number of staff working in her department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5591/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The department's Press Office has a staffing strength of 5 posts. The grade breakdown of the posts is: one Principal Information Officer (currently vacant); one Senior Information Officer; one Staff Officer; one Executive Officer Grade 2, and one Administrative Officer.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment whether she will initiate legislation to protect the environment by the prevention of planting Genetically Modified crops. (AQW 5610/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to initiate legislation to prevent the planting of genetically modified (GM) crops. My department consulted on co-existence measures and I am considering the way forward.

Otters Relocation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action she is taking to ensure the relocation of otters that inhabit fish ponds and fisheries of home owners and businesses. (AQW 5615/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Otters are a European protected species and may only be legally relocated under the terms of a licence issued by my Department. My officials do not recommend the relocation of otters in these circumstances. Relocation would not solve the problem in the long term as experience shows that other otters would quickly fill the gap left by the removal of the original animals.

My officials are happy to advise owners of fish ponds and fisheries on how to exclude otters from sensitive areas. This provides a lasting solution and does not require a licence.

Draft Rural Planning Policy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if the new draft rural planning policy will be comprehensively equality proofed to ensure that it does not discriminate against any section or individual in rural society. (AQW 5626/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm, as is the case for all Planning Policy Statements, the new draft PPS 14 will be subject to the statutory equality process as set out under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3222/08, to detail (i) the outcome of the latest proceedings brought against Ulster Farm By-Products; (ii) the charges that were heard in court; and (iii) the sanctions that were imposed. (AQW 5739/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department submitted a case file to the Public Prosecution Service under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003, regarding failure to comply with Regulation 33(1)(b): "It is an offence for a person – to fail to comply with or contravene a condition of a permit." The conditions in question set out limits for polluting substances in the Company's effluent discharge to the local river.

At Antrim Magistrate's Court on 7 April 2008, Ulster Farm By-Products pleaded guilty to two offences that took place in January and February 2007 and was fined £5,000 plus costs.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths attributed to Sudden Unexpected Death In Epilepsy in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 5270/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The table attached gives the number of deaths registered in Northern Ireland for each year between 1998 and 2007 where the primary cause of death was 'Epilepsy' or 'Status Epilepticus' and among those where "sudden unexpected death in epilepsy" was mentioned on the death certificate.

Registration Year	Deaths due to epilepsy ¹	Of which - sudden unexpected mentioned ²
1998	22	0
1999	17	0
2000	23	0
2001	23	1
2002	26	0
2003	27	1
2004	32	2
2005	31	0
2006	33	0
2007 ^p	35	2

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code G40 and G41 for years 2001-2007 and Ninth Revision code 345 for years 1998-2000.

² Deaths where "sudden unexpected death in epilepsy", or a similar phrase, was mentioned on the death certificate.

^p Provisional Data

Rates Collection Agency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people employed in the Rates Collection Agency dealing with (i) domestic; and (ii) commercial properties, (a) currently; and (b) in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5324/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 31st March 2008 there were some 372 staff (297 permanent staff + 75 casuals) employed within Land & Property Services (LPS) operations dealing with both domestic and commercial property. LPS replaced the former Rate Collection Agency on 1 April 2008.

The numbers of staff employed in rate collection in each of the last five years are as follows-

2003	267 staff
2004	292 staff
2005	301 staff (274 + 27 casuals)
2006	308 staff (278 + 30 casuals)
2007	324 staff (291 + 33 casuals)

Departmental Underspending

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his department's forecasted underspend for the 2007-08 financial year, to detail the amount of funding that is at risk of being returned to the Treasury. (AQW 5410/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Under HM Treasury's End Year Flexibility mechanism, all underspend by Northern Ireland departments is carried forward for spending in subsequent years. In this context there is no risk of any funding being lost to the Treasury. However, as the draw down of our EYF stock has to be negotiated with the Treasury there is a risk that there may be a delay in accessing these funds.

Therefore, it is essential that departments seek to reduce the level of underspend in order that capital projects can be completed and improved services introduced as early as possible.

National Joint Council Pay Award

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of business cases that remain outstanding for the 2007 National Joint Council pay award for (i) seconded teachers; and (ii) those paid under Soulbury conditions, broken down by each Education and Library Board. (AQW 5436/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are still a number of outstanding pay remits relating to staff in the education sector. The Department of Education has still to provide my officials with business cases for some Education and Library Board staff groups, including Chief Executive and Second Tier Officers, Foreign Language Assistants, Mechanics, Teacher Related and Youth and Community workers

Rates Cap

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a timescale within which he will reduce the cap on rates from £500,000 to £400,000. (AQW 5511/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have published a consultation paper seeking views on the reduction of the maximum capital value, from £500,000 to £400,000. The consultation process will last for 12 weeks, ending on 27 June 2008, and seeks the views of all interested parties.

Final decisions on the way forward can only be taken after completing the necessary impact assessments, considering the views expressed during consultation and liaising with the Finance and Personnel Committee. If the decision to reduce the maximum capital value is confirmed in light of the consultation, I intend to introduce the measure from April 2009, through subordinate legislation, which of course would be subject to Assembly approval.

Building Regulations

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if the price of oil was taken into consideration in relation to the decision to drop mandatory renewables from building regulations; and if so, to detail the price per oil barrel that was used in the calculations. (AQW 5512/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost of oil was taken into account in preparing the draft Regulatory Impact Assessment. At that time oil was £63.19/US barrel (\$124.14/US barrel) as a cost to the domestic consumer.

The latest figures from the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) price domestic heating oil at 3.17p/kWh or \$115.75 per US Barrel. This makes microgeneration even less cost

effective than when the figures in the draft Regulatory Impact Assessment were calculated.

Sick Leave

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the steps he is taking to reduce the levels of sick leave across Government departments. (AQW 5537/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I continue to take a close and active interest in this matter and my concern about the unacceptably high levels of sickness absence across the Northern Ireland Departments has been well documented.

Last July I submitted a paper to the Executive, seeking their endorsement of a range of key actions which I believed would at least start to bring about the much needed improvement in the levels of absence.

I recently met with the Permanent Secretaries from each Department and took the opportunity to impress upon them the importance of senior level commitment to addressing the problem. Following my meeting with Permanent Secretaries, my officials have prepared an updated Action Plan which consolidates many of the key actions agreed previously by the Executive. A copy of the Action Plan and the outline of the approach adopted by the NICS in dealing with sickness absence have been placed in the Library.

I will continue to take a close interest in this matter and will review progress on a quarterly basis. Departmental officials will also be briefing their respective Ministers on a regular basis.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5544/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel recognises the historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names and uses them when it is appropriate to do so.

In addition, Land and Property Services maintain the Pointer product which is a definitive address database for Northern Ireland. Every address within Pointer is allocated to its appropriate townland and the system also records the history and alternative spellings of the name, based on information provided by the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project. The Pointer product is available to all Departments in Northern Ireland under the terms of the Northern Ireland Mapping Agreement and will also be accessible to the public through the Departments web site.

The latest editions of the 1:50,000 Discoverer Map series produced by my Department also include townlands.

Fuel Smuggling

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the annual cost to the economy from fuel smuggling. (AQW 5561/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Fuel smuggling in Northern Ireland imposes a revenue loss to the UK Exchequer and adversely affects local fuel retailers. HM Revenue and Customs estimated the revenue loss at £280 million in 2005. This reflects both the revenue loss resulting from fraud (rebated fuel fraud and smuggling) and that lost from legitimate cross-border purchases of fuel by Northern Ireland residents.

Government Departments

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the analysis he has carried out on the effectiveness of financial administration, in relation to a reduction in the number of Government departments. (AQW 5599/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: While the need to maximise efficiency is particularly important over the period to 2010-11, no specific analysis has yet been carried out on the effectiveness

of financial administration in relation to a reduction in the number of Government departments.

Land Registry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the reasons for the delay in processing the land registry application transfer DN146569. (AQW 5614/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Registrar wrote to the applicant explaining the situation and apologising for the delay on 27 March.

Senior Civil Servants

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) gender; and (ii) religious background, of senior civil servants in each Government department. (AQW 5620/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Monitoring of the Northern Ireland Civil Service workforce, including the most senior grades, is carried out at a corporate level. While in recent years most recruitment to the Senior Civil Service has been via singleton competitions to vacancies in individual departments, this group of staff are managed as a corporate resource. Outreach and positive action measures are also taken at a corporate level. Departments therefore have little or no scope to address gender or community background imbalances in their own workforces. For these reasons it is not appropriate to provide a breakdown by Department. It is also likely that, due to the relatively small number of staff at this level in many departments, we would be unable to provide this information in order to protect the confidentiality of individuals' community background details. The table below shows the profile of the Senior Civil Service group in the 11 Northern Ireland Departments and their Executive Agencies at 1 January 2008.

Total	Male	Female	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined
206	153	53	119	74	13

Performance-Related Pay

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of members of staff in his department that have contracts providing for performance-related pay. (AQW 5687/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of DFP staff who have contracts providing for performance-related pay is 2889.

Performance-Related Pay

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any plans he has to introduce performance-related pay in future staff contracts. (AQW 5693/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service already operates performance related pay systems for both the Senior Civil Service (SCS) cadre and for staff below SCS level.

Civil Service Disability

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether a permanent employee in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, diagnosed with a disability, can be transferred to a suitable position of similar grade within existing vacancies in another department. (AQW 5711/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An employee diagnosed with a disability can be transferred, within their existing grade, to a suitable post in another Department.

Vioxx

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths attributed to Vioxx, in each year from 1999 to 2004 inclusive. (AQO 2660/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Rofecoxib, a drug used to treat arthritis and acute pain, was also marketed in the UK under the brand name Vioxx and Vioxx Acute. Between 1999 and 2004 no deaths were registered in Northern Ireland where the drugs, Vioxx, Vioxx Acute or Rofecoxib were mentioned on the death certificate.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Community and Voluntary Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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 4275/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My Department has been responsible for distributing ringfenced resources under the Children and Young People's Funding Package, launched by Peter Hain in 2006. This included additional funding for a range of voluntary and community sector projects working with disadvantaged children and young people, including afterschool projects and projects previously supported by the Children's Fund. These projects related to the work of a number of Departments. This central funding package ended on 31 March 2008 and it is for each Department to decide any further funding for projects for which they are responsible.

For my part, I have identified resources within my Budget to fund for another year, until March 2009, the projects whose activities support the objectives and functions of DHSSPS.

OFMDFM has advised me that additional central funding will be made available to support the remaining Children's Fund projects for one further year and my Department has been asked to act as the distribution point for these funds. This funding does not cover some 55 afterschools projects funded through Playboard NI and providing play programmes, homework support, cross-community and cultural programmes.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost associated with corporate branding of each of the new Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 5217/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to identify separately, on a Trust by Trust basis, the costs associated with corporate branding, as this project is being taken forward on a regional basis. To date, the project has cost a total of £68,253.

Developing Better Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the purchase price and associated costs of the Developing Better Services building, situated in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital grounds. (AQW 5234/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Developing Better Services building situated in the grounds of the Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital was tendered and constructed at a cost of £281,414. The running costs for the building are approximately £6,900 per annum.

The building provides accommodation for Trust staff who have been recruited to develop and implement the New Hospitals for the South West (NI) programme and manage the procurement of, inter alia, the new South West Hospital, north of Enniskillen and the Omagh enhanced local Hospital Complex at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can be supported and retained in community and healthcare centres. (AQW 5303/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am anxious to increase access to a range of psychological therapies and psychosocial interventions, including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

The additional funds allocated to mental health from the Comprehensive Spending Review will facilitate this, through, for example, the recruitment of additional Psychotherapists, with the aim that by 2011 there will be a 13 week maximum wait for psychotherapy.

My Department is also engaged in developing a strategy on psychotherapy. This will dictate how a co-ordinated approach to these services, including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, can be best delivered, supported and retained by providers in both the statutory and independent sectors.

Foreign Nationals

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of foreign nationals employed as nurses in the Health Service. (AQW 5326/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available in the form requested, however current numbers of qualified nursing staff recorded as being of non-EU origin (i.e. from a country outside the European Union) have been provided in the table below.

HSC Trust	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	618	496.55
Northern	153	151.95
Western	114	80.80
Southern	64	56.31
South Eastern	169	150.88

Notes: 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.

Agency Nurses

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) associated costs, of agency nurses in each psychiatric hospital. (AQW 5344/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A headcount figure for agency nurses is not available due to the variable nature of their working pattern. Their input is best measured on a whole-time equivalent (WTE) basis which will accurately reflect the overall contribution of potentially many individual agency nursing staff employed over the course of a year. This information, along with the associated costs of such staff employed in psychiatric facilities, is provided in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: AGENCY NURSING STAFF (WTE) AND COSTS BY TRUST/PSYCHIATRIC FACILITY, 2007/08

HSC Trust	Site	Whole-time equivalent ¹	Costs
Belfast ²	Knockbracken	44.11	£1,113,607
	Mater	5.90	£148,955
	Belfast City	2.28	£57,524
Southern	Craigavon Area Hospital	0.29	£10,479
Northern ³	Holywell Hospital	0.40	£10,224
	Whiteabbey	0.02	£482
South Eastern ⁴		2.00	£49,000
Western ⁵		0	£0

- 1 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.
- 2 Whole-time equivalents have been estimated using costs divided by Band 5 nurse cost.
- 3 Figures represent 11 months of data to February 2008.
- 4 Figures not available by hospital and costs are approximate.
- 5 The Mental Health department of the Western Trust does not use agency nursing staff.

Golden Handshakes

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of former staff from each Health Trust Board who received a golden handshake

who have subsequently been re-employed by any of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 5374/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Review of Public Administration implementation since the 2006/07 year has given rise to a number of staff being offered voluntary early retirement or voluntary redundancy. As part of those arrangements my Department instructed Health and Social Care employers that staff who received payments for voluntary early retirement or voluntary redundancy should not be re-engaged unless there is some special business reason for so doing. The records for such payments prior to 2006/07 are not held centrally and could only be obtained from individual HSC employers at a disproportionate cost. Accordingly, it is not possible to give details requested for the three years prior to that date.

Golden Handshakes

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 5 years, (i) the amount of money paid in golden handshakes in each Health Trust Board; and (ii) where these golden handshakes are recorded. (AQW 5375/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information requested is only held centrally for the 2006/07 and 2007/08 years, information for the years from 2003 to 2006 could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. The information provided relates to voluntary early retirement and voluntary redundancy as a result of the Review of Public Administration as part of the process of securing large reductions in the number of managerial staff while minimising the risk of compulsory redundancies. (i) Belfast HSC Trust, 2006/07 - £681,654, 2007/08 - £4,439,840, Northern HSC Trust, 2006/07 - £nil, 2007/08 - £4,190,461, Southern HSC Trust, 2006/07 - £618,761, 2007/08 - £2,999,281, South Eastern Trust, 2006/07 - £nil, 2007/08 - £2,237,595 and Western Trust, 2006/07 - £nil, 2007/08 - £1,295,253. (ii) These payments have been recorded in the Trust's accounts.

Golden Handshakes

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of former senior managers that received golden handshakes in each Health Trust Board. (AQW 5376/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information requested is only held centrally for the 2006/07 and 2007/08 years,

information for the years from 2003 to 2006 could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. The information provided relates to voluntary early retirement and voluntary redundancies as a result of the Review of Public Administration for staff down to the level immediately below an Assistant Director. Belfast HSC Trust, 2006/07 (3), 2007/08 (35), Northern HSC Trust, 2006/07 (nil), 2007/08 (40), Southern HSC Trust, 2006/07 (3), 2007/08 (25), South Eastern Trust, 2006/07 (nil), 2007/08 (16) and Western Trust, 2006/07 (nil) 2007/08 (11).

Blood Transfusion Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for 2007, (i) the total number of units of blood donated through the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service; and (ii) the number of blood transfusions in hospitals. (AQW 5382/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total number of units of blood donated through the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS) during 2007 was 58,629.

Information on the number of patients receiving a blood transfusion each year is not available. However, the number of units of red blood cells issued from the NIBTS to all hospitals in Northern Ireland during the year was 54,574.

The number of units transfused per patient varies widely but studies have indicated that the average transfusion episode involves approximately 3 units of red cells per patient.

Cancer Cases

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of cases of (a) breast cancer; (b) prostate cancer; (c) lung cancer; and (d) colorectal cancer, that were confirmed in 2007; and (ii) how these compare with each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5383/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of new cases of cancer each year is held by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry. The most recent information available relates to 2005. The table below details the number of new cases of breast cancer (ICD-10 C50), prostate cancer (ICD-10 C61), lung cancer (ICD-10 C33-C34) and colorectal cancer (ICD-10 C18-C21) in 2005 and the preceding five years.

TABLE: INCIDENCE OF SELECTED CANCERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2000-2005

Year of diagnosis	Cancer site (ICD-10 code)			
	Breast (C50)	Prostate (C61)	Lung (C33-34)	Colorectal (C18-21)
2000	952	578	861	881
2001	932	559	888	954
2002	956	663	875	914
2003	1043	754	894	1011
2004	1142	781	969	979
2005	1080	747	872	970

Private Treatment

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual costs incurred by his department in using private treatment in hospitals to meet NHS waiting time targets. (AQW 5391/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There has been a significant improvement in hospital waiting times over the last two years. At the beginning of April 2006, there were 110,000 people waiting more than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment, and nearly 10,000 waiting more than 21 weeks for inpatient or daycase treatment. Today, only a handful of patients are waiting longer than 13 weeks for an outpatient appointment or 21 weeks for treatment. This transformation has been achieved through the implementation of a comprehensive programme of reform together with investment in additional capacity, including the transfer of some patients to independent sector providers.

In 2006/07, a total of £22.9m was spent to have patients assessed and treated in the independent sector. Total expenditure for 2007/08 is not yet available, but £20.7m was spent during the period April to December 2007.

Bonuses Paid

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 5 years, (i) the number of bonuses paid; and (ii) the value of the bonuses paid, to staff in each Health and Social Care Trust area; and to confirm if bonuses are reflected in the accounts of each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5416/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Bonuses paid to Health and Social Care Trust staff are reflected in note 5.1 within the

Trust accounts. This note shows the total salaries and wages costs including performance pay or bonuses, overtime and allowances. The note does not separately identify bonuses. Accordingly, it is not possible to provide information on the number and value of such bonus payments as this information is not held centrally and could only be obtained from individual employers at a disproportionate cost.

Bonuses Paid

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate where the payment of bonuses to staff are reflected in the accounts of each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5417/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The payment of bonuses to staff is contained within note 5.1 of the Trust accounts. This note shows the total staff costs of the Trust and is analysed between salaries and wages, social security costs and pension costs. Bonuses are included within salaries and wages, but are not separately identified within the note.

Bonuses Paid

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the amount spent on staff bonuses in each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the past five years; (b) the range of such bonuses; and (c) the number of recipients of bonuses. (AQW 5418/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Bonuses paid to Health and Social Care Trust staff are recorded in the Trust accounts as part of the total salaries and wages costs which includes performance pay or bonuses, overtime and allowances. Accordingly, it is not possible to provide information on the amount, range or the number of recipients as this information is not held centrally and could only be obtained from individual employers at a disproportionate cost.

Medical Secretaries

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why medical secretaries are still waiting for their pay bands to be sorted out under Agenda for Change. (AQW 5428/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process for implementing Agenda for Change for all staff groups including medical secretaries has been agreed with Health Service Trade Unions. This process is being implemented in partnership by Health and Social Care employers and local staff

side representatives. Medical secretaries in a number of the Health and Social Care organisations have received their new rates of pay. I have instructed Health and Social Care employers that all staff must be on the Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of June 2008 and I expect them to meet this target.

Community Pharmacy Contracts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the new Community Pharmacy Contracts. (AQW 5437/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department's community pharmacy contract negotiating team has been working with the Pharmaceutical Contractors' Committee (PCC) since April 2004 on developing a new contract for community pharmacy.

So far the main developments have been a jointly agreed framework for the new contract, preparation by the departmental team of detailed service specifications and standards for the services to be provided, a survey commissioned jointly by the Department and PCC into the costs of running pharmacies in Northern Ireland and some discussion on introducing certain services as the first part of a phased approach to implementing the new contract.

I am disappointed by the lack of progress made over the last four years and had hoped that patients across Northern Ireland would, by now, be benefiting from services such as the enhanced Minor Ailments and Repeat Dispensing schemes. Officials have over a considerable period of time made a series of offers to PCC which attempted to meet PCC's objections and which represented a step change in remuneration levels; but I am sorry to say that all of these have been rejected. Nevertheless the provision of high quality healthcare services to patients remains an imperative, and I am pleased to say that officials are currently looking at other more innovative ways to ensure that patients across the province are able to benefit from a wider range of community pharmacy-focussed services.

My guiding principle is that patients deserve the modern, patient-centred healthcare services from community pharmacies that we all agree are essential. The recent pace of negotiation is not acceptable and needs to be quickened. I will be looking to the profession to engage with officials to ensure rapid progress is made in the coming months. In any case I will be looking for the delivery of as many of these services as is practicable as soon as possible so that patients throughout Northern Ireland are able to enjoy the considerable benefits that will result.

Public Private Partnerships

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all Public Private partnerships commenced during the previous periods of devolution by his department, and to detail their cost. (AQW 5452/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the previous period of devolution my Department did not commence any Public Private Partnerships.

Elder Abuse

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, further to his answer to AQW 4873/08, why is there an exceptionally large number of instances of elder abuse in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 5474/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As stated in my response to AQW 4873/08 my Department does not collect information on the number of instances of elder abuse. To collect the data requested, Health and Social Services Boards, who routinely collect this information from their respective Health and Social Care Trusts, were asked to provide information on the number of instances of allegations of elder abuse reported in their areas. Unfortunately, I regret to inform the Hon member that the information provided to my Department by the Southern Health and Social Services Board was found by the Board to be incorrect when sources were re-checked. The table below reflects the true position in the Southern Board area. (The figures in italics are the incorrect figures given in my previous Answer.)

	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
NHSSB	39	28	41	49	51
SHSSB	43 (35)	44 (41)	39(42)	103(68)	118(76)
EHSSB	60	105	76	94	217
WHSSB*	N/A	N/A	21	80	62

* Figures for the WHSSB are for adults of all ages

While the number of instances of elder abuse in the Eastern Board area is greater than elsewhere (48% of total reported incidents) it is largely reflective of the higher proportion of older people living in that area (42% of NI population).

The information provided cannot be broken down into the format requested by all four Health and Social Services Boards.

Elder Abuse

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, further to his answer to AQW 4873/08, to detail how these figures are broken down between hospitals, care homes and private residences. (AQW 5475/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As stated in my response to AQW 4873/08 my Department does not collect information on the number of instances of elder abuse. To collect the data requested, Health and Social Services Boards, who routinely collect this information from their respective Health and Social Care Trusts, were asked to provide information on the number of instances of allegations of elder abuse reported in their areas. Unfortunately, I regret to inform the Hon member that the information provided to my Department by the Southern Health and Social Services Board was found by the Board to be incorrect when sources were re-checked. The table below reflects the true position in the Southern Board area. (The figures in italics are the incorrect figures given in my previous Answer.)

	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
NHSSB	39	28	41	49	51
SHSSB	43 (35)	44 (41)	39(42)	103(68)	118(76)
EHSSB	60	105	76	94	217
WHSSB*	N/A	N/A	21	80	62

* Figures for the WHSSB are for adults of all ages

While the number of instances of elder abuse in the Eastern Board area is greater than elsewhere (48% of total reported incidents) it is largely reflective of the higher proportion of older people living in that area (42% of NI population).

The information provided cannot be broken down into the format requested by all four Health and Social Services Boards.

Elder Abuse

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, further to his answer to AQW 4873/08, to detail how this data has been collected. (AQW 5476/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As stated in my response to AQW 4873/08 my Department does not collect information on the number of instances of elder abuse. To collect the data requested, Health and Social Services Boards, who routinely collect this information from their respective Health and Social Care Trusts, were asked to provide information on the number of instances

of allegations of elder abuse reported in their areas. Unfortunately, I regret to inform the Hon member that the information provided to my Department by the Southern Health and Social Services Board was found by the Board to be incorrect when sources were re-checked. The table below reflects the true position in the Southern Board area. (The figures in italics are the incorrect figures given in my previous Answer.)

	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
NHSSB	39	28	41	49	51
SHSSB	43 (35)	44 (41)	39(42)	103(68)	118(76)
EHSSB	60	105	76	94	217
WHSSB*	N/A	N/A	21	80	62

* Figures for the WHSSB are for adults of all ages

While the number of instances of elder abuse in the Eastern Board area is greater than elsewhere (48% of total reported incidents) it is largely reflective of the higher proportion of older people living in that area (42% of NI population).

The information provided cannot be broken down into the format requested by all four Health and Social Services Boards.

Medical Secretaries

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) his plans to address the concerns of medical secretaries in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) the action his department has taken in relation to banding under Agenda for Change; and (iii) the reasons why medical secretaries in some Health and Social Care Trusts have been graded at band 4, while medical secretaries in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are band 3. (AQW 5477/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process for implementing Agenda for Change for all staff groups including medical secretaries has been agreed with Health Service Trade Unions and is being implemented in partnership by Health and Social Care employers and local staff side representatives. (i) Medical secretaries in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have gone through the matching process and are now at the consistency checking stage which must be completed before the Agenda for Change rates of pay can be put into payment; (ii) my Department has no part in the matching process this is completed by Health and Social Care employers and local staff side representatives, however, I have instructed Health and Social Care employers that all staff must be on the Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of June 2008 and I expect them to meet this

target.; (iii) Medical secretaries in all Health and Social Care organisations are graded depending on their job description and it is possible that this will be different in separate HSC organisations.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4676/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5507/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 13 members of staff employed within the press office of my Department (12 full-time and 1 part-time). There are seven press officers who provide direct support to me and other departmental officials on core press office activity. Two staff are employed to work specifically on the print and publicity requirements for the Department, with a further four (3 full time and 1 part time) to provide administrative support. The positions are graded as follows:-

- 1 X Principal Information Officer – Grade 7
- 2 X Senior information Officers – Deputy Principal
- 3 X Information Officers – Staff Officers
- 2 X Assistant Information Officers – Executive Officer 1
- 1 X Executive Officer - EOII
- 2 X Administrative Officers - AO
- 1 X F/T Administrative Assistant – AA
- 1 X P/T Administrative Assistant - AA

Mental Health of Pregnant Women

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the provision and support his department is providing for pregnant women who are experiencing (i) mental illness; and (ii) personality disorder. (AQW 5510/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Many pregnant women with ongoing mental illness or personality disorders will already be known to services and be receiving care, either at the primary care level or from specialist mental health services. These established care arrangements should continue throughout her pregnancy, and should be provided in co-operation with those delivering her maternity care.

For those women who, during their pregnancy, develop, or exhibit for the first time, a mental health problem, I would expect midwives and obstetricians to

recognise that there is a potential mental health issue and that established liaison arrangements should be in place to enable them to quickly contact an appropriate source for advice, support and, where necessary, specialised treatment.

Mental-Health Facility

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact a new mental health facility at Craigavon Area Hospital will have on the St. Luke's site in Armagh City. (AQW 5549/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The immediate impact which the opening of the Crisis Resource Centre at Craigavon Area Hospital will have on the St. Luke's site in Armagh will be that two wards, which had been temporarily re-sited there for the last 6 years, will return to their original location in Craigavon.

St. Luke's will continue to provide one general adult psychiatric ward, the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit for the whole of the Southern area, the Addictions unit for the whole of the Southern area, the Southern Dementia Assessment Unit and 4 long-stay/rehabilitation wards.

In the longer term, the Southern Trust and the Southern Board will be commencing a review to modernise and reform all mental health services in the Southern area, to ensure that the Trust continues to develop a range of services consistent with best practice, and in line with the Bamford Review. As part of this process, the enhancement of community-based treatment and care options should enable the further review of the number and location of in-patient psychiatric beds over time.

Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people refused admission to Craigavon Area Hospital in the last 12 months, due to lack of available beds; and (ii) the hospitals that these people were transferred to. (AQW 5550/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No patients have been refused admission to Craigavon Area hospital during the financial year 2007/2008 if it is deemed that the patient requires a period of acute inpatient care.

Ambulance Cover

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the level of ambulance cover in the south Armagh area. (AQW 5641/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Services Board is responsible for commissioning ambulance services in the South Armagh area from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. The level of cover commissioned is determined on the same basis as for other parts of Northern Ireland and takes into account such factors as the rural nature of the area and local patterns of demand for emergency ambulances. Ambulance cover is provided primarily by resources operating from Armagh and Newry Ambulance Stations as follows:

NEWRY AMBULANCE STATION

Monday to Sunday:	3 x A&E resources:	0800 to 2400hours
Monday to Sunday:	2 x A&E resources:	2400 to 0800hours

ARMAGH AMBULANCE STATION

Monday to Sunday:	2 x A&E resources:	0800 to 2400hours
Monday to Sunday:	1 x A&E resources:	2400 to 0800hours
Friday only:	1 x A&E resource:	1600 to 2400hours

These resources are deployed on the basis of NIAS's Tactical Deployment Plan for the Southern Board area which enables ambulance control to predict throughout the day, on the basis of historical data, where demand for ambulances is most likely to originate and deploy ambulances temporarily in certain areas to achieve better response times.

Dental Practices

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the dental practices in Omagh and Strabane that accept new Health Service patients without requiring them to pay fees. (AQW 5661/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware that there is at present, a lack of dental practices in the Omagh and Strabane areas willing to actively accept new Health Service patients to their practice lists. The Department however is unable to detail exactly what practices in these areas are willing to accept new health service patients as this information can change daily.

Currently there are 10 dental practices in Omagh and 5 in Strabane who are all registered on the dental list of the Central Services Agency (CSA) to facilitate the undertaking of health service dentistry. The decision as to whether a dentist is willing to accept or discontinue health service work is a matter for the individual dentist, who is free to decide to increase or decrease the numbers of health service patients he or she is prepared to take at any given time.

There is no obligation on dentists to accept a patient for health service treatment, nor do current contractual arrangements permit Health and Social Services Boards to compel dentists to provide Health Service dental services. Dental practices in Omagh and Strabane

are under no obligation to inform the Western Health Board of which patients they are treating under the Health Service or under a private contract.

Statistical data, however, shows that as at March 2008 all but one of the fifteen practices registered with the CSA to facilitate the undertaking of health service dentistry in the Omagh and Strabane areas had accepted new health service patients during 2007/08 and another practice, which had a small number of new registrations, was an orthodontic practice and would only treat patients on the Health Service on a referral basis for specialist treatments. Details of these registrations and the practices involved are detailed in the table below:

Dental Surgeries in Omagh and Strabane				HS Patients Accepted During 2007/08	No. of HS Patients Accepted During 2007/08
Surgery No	Address 1	Address 2	Postcode		
274	Riverview Dental Practice, Mountjoy Road	Omagh	BT79 7AA	Yes	160
328	6 New Brighton Terrace	Omagh	BT78 1LL	Yes	694
481	27 Campsie Road	Omagh	BT79 0AE	Yes	1,158
681	3 James Street	Omagh	BT78 1DH	Yes	827
753	8 Holmview Terrace, Campsie	Omagh	BT79 0AH	Yes	456
756	2 Carlisle Villas	Omagh	BT79 7DH	Yes	851
1191#	33 Campsie Road	Omagh	BT79 0AJ	Yes	2
1212	6 James Street	Omagh	BT78 1DH	No	0
1239	84 Oldmountfield Road	Omagh	BT79 7ET	Yes	715
1261	The Grange Dental Care, 2 Crevanagh Road	Omagh	BT79 0AL	Yes	375
109	30 Bridge Street	Strabane	BT82 9AE	Yes	1,857
451	9 Railway Street	Strabane	BT82 8EG	Yes	526
684	5 Castle Place	Strabane	BT82 8AW	Yes	1,697
717	Edenvale, 1 Eden Terrace	Strabane	BT82 8EN	Yes	661
838	39 Abercorn Square	Strabane	BT82 8AQ	Yes	159

Notes:

* A new Health Service patient is defined as a patient who is registered at a dental surgery at March 2008, but not in April 2007.

This dental practice is an orthodontic practice and would therefore not have many registered patients as it treats the vast majority of its patients on referral.

Not all patients receiving health service dental treatment are exempt from paying dental fees. Those patients who aren't automatically exempt will be required to pay 80% of the cost of the treatment, up to a maximum of £384. Unlike health service dentistry however, the charges for private dental treatment are not regulated by the Department and are generally speaking more expensive than health service charges.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sanctuary Cove Roadway

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to expedite the completion date for the Sanctuary Cove roadway in Kircubbin. (AQW 5197/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised that while the roadways within Sanctuary Cove have

been largely completed, it would not be appropriate to undertake final surfacing until the sewerage system within the development has been brought up to an acceptable standard for adoption by Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Both the roadways and the sewerage system within the development have not yet been adopted and remain the responsibility of the developer.

NIW has advised me that it has consulted extensively with the developer about the requirements to bring the sewerage system up to an adoptable standard, but has been awaiting information from the developer for some time to enable the process for formal adoption to proceed.

Parking Tickets

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each month since the NCP scheme was introduced, the number of parking tickets issued in (i) Banbridge; (ii) Lurgan; (iii) Portadown; (iv) Lisburn; (v) Coleraine; (vi) Dungannon; (vii) Newry; (viii) Omagh; (ix) Ballymena; (x) Bangor; (xi) Newtownards; (xii) East Belfast; (xiii) South Belfast; (xiv) West Belfast; (xv) North Belfast; and (xvi) Belfast City Centre. (AQW 5203/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in each month since the introduction of Decriminalised Parking Enforcement, for the towns requested, is as listed in the tables below.

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARKING TICKETS ISSUED SINCE THE NCP SCHEME WAS INTRODUCED

	Nov 06	Dec 06	Jan 07	Feb 07	Mar 07	Apr 07	May 07	Jun 07
Banbridge	99	253	227	152	169	179	132	115
Lurgan	204	393	372	280	377	348	317	213
Portadown	215	536	491	433	516	534	447	365
Lisburn	514	591	396	342	399	324	341	529
Coleraine	437	489	476	384	332	374	340	372
Dungannon	71	109	150	297	430	318	244	272
Newry	507	631	718	552	538	508	497	448
Omagh	575	652	688	547	506	440	679	510
Ballymena	409	575	455	425	452	445	506	671
Bangor	228	251	249	313	319	304	350	522
Newtownards	87	151	266	215	243	286	293	397
Belfast	2167	3047	3208	2973	3345	3148	4268	3951

	Jul 07	Aug 07	Sept 07	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	March 08
Banbridge	172	228	176	123	149	88	78	120	128
Lurgan	296	326	211	282	159	152	141	125	121
Portadown	366	431	408	345	211	272	211	209	223
Lisburn	448	454	440	458	444	631	388	437	526
Coleraine	411	504	485	501	369	386	313	392	438
Dungannon	309	339	345	300	337	284	219	224	123
Newry	485	485	438	469	461	260	299	387	359
Omagh	518	537	416	455	571	442	431	406	421
Ballymena	500	622	471	436	416	528	346	324	314
Bangor	551	490	383	311	330	293	270	327	282
Newtownards	369	375	314	355	386	309	311	281	281
Belfast	3902	4027	3909	4464	4274	3329	3404	4700	4500

Please note that figures for Belfast are not collated on a regional basis

Urney Road and Great Northern Road Junction

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to carry out a review of the traffic system in operation at the Urney Road and Great Northern Road junction in Strabane, with a view to enhancing motorist and pedestrian safety. (AQW 5236/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that they have recently carried out a safety review at this junction, particularly in light of the five collisions that have occurred within the last three years.

As three of these collisions were due to rear end shunts Roads Service proposes to treat each of the approach roads with high friction anti-skid surfacing in an attempt to improve safety at the junction. This work is planned to be completed during the current financial year. Thereafter, the site will be kept under review.

Corkey Road/Lough Road Junction in Loughgiel

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if consideration will be given to improving footway links for pedestrians at the Corkey Road/ Lough Road junction in Loughgiel. (AQW 5247/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Road Services have advised that they will carry out an initial assessment of your request, for consideration of a minor improvement scheme at the Corkey Road/ Lough Road junction in Loughgiel.

On completion of the initial assessment, Roads Service will write to you and inform you of the outcome.

Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4076/08, to confirm that his department liaised with the PSNI to ascertain whether a crash barrier would aid traffic management adjacent to 41 Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin. (AQW 5277/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The erection of a crash barrier is subject to certain criteria, which are assessed and determined by my Department's Roads Service. I can advise that the PSNI are not consulted as to whether a crash barrier is required or is an appropriate treatment for any specified location.

Translink: Advertising

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money spent by Translink on (i) television advertising; (ii) radio advertising; and (iii) newspaper advertising, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5279/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The amount of money spent by Translink on (i) television advertising; (ii) radio advertising; (iii) newspaper advertising; and (iv) outdoor advertising, in each of the last 5 years was:

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Television	£96,000	£28,650	£116,400	£189,500	£114,200
Radio	£31,697	£53,837	£54,670	£144,169	£159,585
Newspaper	£2,965	£70,696	£57,194	£188,805	£179,005
Outdoor	£84,068	£60,110	£99,975	£195,392	£215,071
Total	£214,730	£213,293	£328,239	£717,866	£667,861

Translink: Spending on Fuel

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money spent by Translink on fuel for trains and buses, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5280/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The amount of money spent by Translink on fuel for trains and buses in each of the last 5 years was:

	2003/04 £m	2004/05 £m	2005/06 £m	2006/07 £m	2007/08* £m Period 1-11
Ulsterbus	11.6	12.2	12.2	15.7	15.1
Citybus	3.1	3.4	3.9	4.8	4.7
Flexibus	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
NI Railways	1.5	1.6	2.4	4.0	4.0
Total	16.3	17.3	18.6	24.6	23.9

* Figures for 2007/08 are provided up to period 11. Accounts for period 12 (the final period of the year) are not yet finalised and have therefore not been included. Initial estimates are that fuel costs have risen by 9% in 2007/08 compared to the previous year.

Irish-Language Translation

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total number of documents

that have been partially/fully translated into the Irish language; and (ii) the total cost of these translations.
(AQW 5285/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) My Department has translated in full six documents into the Irish language.
- (ii) The total cost of these translations was £749.84.

The Department is currently reviewing its policies towards the use and promotion of the Irish language.

Rapid Transport Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the procurement options that are being considered for the proposed Rapid Transport Scheme, for the Greater Belfast area. (AQW 5296/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit system for Belfast, which was published on 8 April, looked at a range of procurement options, including various PPP/PFI solutions. It also identified the scope for contributions to be provided by private developers. I will be considering the findings of the study in this regard, and will be ensuring that all viable procurement options are fully explored before a final decision is made.

Car Parking Spaces

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of car parking spaces owned by the Roads Service which are currently allocated as disabled parking only. (AQW 5306/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that they presently provide 712 disabled car parking spaces in off-street car parks either owned or leased by them. They also provide 1793 on-street disabled car parking places.

Disabled Persons Badge Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people currently on the Disabled Persons Badge Scheme. (AQW 5308/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as at 31 March 2008, 90,912 individuals and 250 support organisations are registered with the Disabled Persons Badge Scheme (Blue Badges).

Disabled Persons Badge Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of Blue Badges that have been withdrawn from drivers due to fraudulent use. (AQW 5309/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in the last five years, no Blue Badges have been withdrawn due to fraudulent use.

Roads Service/NIW Work: 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 in April 2008.
(AQW 5334/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that preparation for the traffic calming schemes at Glenavy Road and Main Street Crumlin is complete and that the road humps and markings will be completed during April 2008. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised that it has no work planned in Crumlin or the surrounding area during April 2008.

Roads Service/NIW Work: 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 Randalstown and the surrounding areas in April 2008.
(AQW 5335/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials and NIW have advised that no work is planned in the Randalstown and surrounding areas during April 2008.

Roads Service/NIW Work: 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 Mallusk and the surrounding areas in April 2008.
(AQW 5337/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials have advised that during April, work will continue on the M2 Improvements Scheme between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions.

Following the demolition of the Hightown Bridge in early March, construction of the replacement structure will progress at this location. This will involve the

construction of new bridge abutments on both the northern and southern sides of the motorway and a new bridge pier in the central reserve.

The other main elements of this scheme that will be undertaken during April include surfacing at Sandyknowes city-bound on-slip and the erection of a safety barrier in the motorway verge between Sandyknowes and Greencastle.

During April there will also be a change to the temporary traffic management arrangements on the M2, to allow the widening works to progress.

Routine maintenance work on the M2 motorway will involve emergency telephone and communications cabinet cleaning, weed control treatments and routine maintenance of structures.

NIW has no work planned for Mallusk or the surrounding area during April.

Translink: Spend on Vandalism Repairs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent by Translink on repairing damage to (i) trains; and (ii) buses, caused by vandalism in each of the last five years. (AQW 5338/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have advised me that the amount of money spent on repairing damage caused to buses by vandalism in each of the last five years was:

2003/04	£723k
2004/05	£720k
2005/06	£568k
2006/07	£744k
2007/08	£602k*

* The 2007/08 figure is for periods 1-11; firm figures for period 12 are not yet available.

The figures for the cost of vandalism to trains are currently being reviewed by Translink to ensure their accuracy. This process will take a number of weeks to complete, and Ports and Public Transport Division will write to you with the information at that stage.

Translink have taken various initiatives aimed at minimising vandalism, and the numbers of incidents are reducing. However, the cost of repairs is higher for new vehicles. For example, it costs £150 to replace a window on a new Wright's Solar bus, as opposed to £24 for a similar repair to an older Leyland Tiger.

Road Repairs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of capital expenditure by his department on the repair and maintenance of existing roads in each of the last five years, broken down by parliamentary constituency and local government district. (AQW 5341/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its spend on a parliamentary constituency basis. It does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each Council area.

In relation to AQW 5341/08, I should advise that repair and maintenance expenditure is classed as Resource spend rather than Capital spend. Roads Service expenditure on operation and maintenance, includes Structural Maintenance, Highways Structures, Routine Maintenance, Traffic Maintenance, Winter Maintenance, Street Lighting Maintenance, Car Parking Maintenance and EU schemes.

The table below details such spend in each Council area during the last five years for which figures are available.

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend				
	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k
Antrim	3,863	4,976	3,913	4,218	3,251
Coleraine	3,740	5,167	3,960	3,960	4,139
Limavady	2,636	3,555	3,156	3,327	2,737
Moyle	1,448	1,808	1,835	2,111	1,860
Ballymoney	2,590	2,768	2,442	2,410	2,283
L'derry	7,290	6,067	5,655	5,324	5,281
Ballymena	4,011	5,354	5,020	5,493	4,432
Larne	2,205	2,432	2,316	2,632	2,754
Belfast	14,517	14,895	15,123	15,576	13,730
Castlereagh	2,183	2,327	2,179	3,149	3,029
Newtownabbey	3,607	3,513	3,676	2,418	3,189
Carrickfergus	1,646	1,536	1,325	1,296	1,764
North Down	4,068	4,002	2,409	4,160	3,640
Lisburn	6,225	7,081	7,369	6,245	5,695
Ards	3,216	3,547	3,661	3,706	3,468
Armagh	4,542	5,482	5,863	6,011	5,477
Newry & Mourne	5,256	7,069	7,567	6,839	5,843
Banbridge	3,586	4,008	3,690	4,008	3,841

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend				
	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k
Craigavon	4,991	5,258	5,380	5,241	5,217
Down	4,641	5,089	5,042	4,914	4,503
Magherafelt	2,668	3,449	3,029	3,242	2,612
Omagh	5,779	7,048	6,173	6,004	5,587
Strabane	4,357	4,829	5,312	4,758	4,746
Cookstown	2,600	3,282	3,026	2,605	2,857
Fermanagh	5,822	7,461	6,809	6,142	6,737
Dungannon	4,985	7,038	5,397	5,395	5,477
Totals	112,472	129,041	121,327	121,184	114,149

Roads Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of capital expenditure by his department on new roads in each of the last five years, broken down by parliamentary constituency and local government district. (AQW 5342/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The table below details capital spend in each Council area during the last five years for which figures are available.

District Council	Capital Spend				
	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k
Antrim	9,825	10,066	4,952	1,901	2,801
Coleraine	933	1,143	2,555	2,152	1,380
Limavady	9,553	3,490	2,615	1,390	1,145
Moyle	213	151	333	383	177
Ballymoney	354	264	948	3,753	1,223
L'derry	3,009	4,081	9,325	9,165	3,754
Ballymena	959	724	1,259	2,343	1,910
Larne	612	1,956	650	1,825	346
Belfast	9,875	8,443	20,160	7,246	26,628
Castlereagh	506	664	1,551	8,440	835
Newtownabbey	2,380	4,572	5,694	3,476	1,578
Carrickfergus	392	441	721	1,712	2,566
North Down	947	568	1,310	1,892	1,916
Lisburn	1,308	2,209	3,097	3,855	3,673
Ards	2,879	3,685	1,859	1,790	1,725
Armagh	681	947	2,561	2,270	1,677

District Council	Capital Spend				
	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k
Newry & Mourne	1,185	7,780	19,922	17,692	62,010
Banbridge	1,251	3,845	4,018	2,262	2,221
Craigavon	1,410	1,944	3,973	4,879	1,803
Down	528	719	1,721	2,679	1,539
Magherafelt	661	637	1,964	1,344	966
Omagh	1,670	1,366	6,201	7,869	3,455
Strabane	7,828	2,056	2,274	3,006	2,067
Cookstown	537	673	948	975	1,078
Fermanagh	895	1,163	3,675	4,137	2,121
Dungannon	419	746	3,556	5,401	15,361
Totals	60,810	64,333	107,842	103,837	145,955

Capital spend includes Major Capital, Minor Capital, Street Lighting, Car Parks, Other Capital (including Ferry), Transportation Policy and Land.

I should also 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.

Northern Ireland Water

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether Northern Ireland Water will make provisions to compensate the companies contracted to install water meters, that incurred set up costs, before the scheme was cancelled; and to detail these provisions. (AQW 5372/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that work to install water meters is continuing, but at a reduced level to that originally envisaged following the deferral of domestic charging.

Enterprise plc is the sole contractor for implementation of the metering programme and NIW has no contractual liability to pay compensation for this reduced volume of work. However, set up costs to cover the establishment of offices and information technology requirements

were paid to the contractor prior to the commencement of the contract.

NIW has no contractual relationship with companies subcontracted by Enterprise, and will not therefore be making provision to compensate them.

Northern Ireland Water

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm if he is aware that as a result of the suspension of the contract established by Northern Ireland Water, to install 44,000 water meters, that a number of specialist organisations that were contracted to carry out the works have incurred financial loss. (AQW 5373/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the sole contractor for implementation of the metering programme is Enterprise plc and the contract has not been suspended.

I appreciate that, as a result of a reduced level of metering following the deferral of domestic charging, there are implications for companies subcontracted by Enterprise. However, Northern Ireland Water has no contractual relationship with these companies and therefore has no liability for any financial loss incurred by them.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the contracts; and (ii) the costs incurred by Northern Ireland Water for emptying slurry tanks. (AQW 5379/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not provide a slurry tank emptying service.

It does, however, provide a desludging service to customers whose household wastewater discharges to a septic tank, a domestic treatment plant or a cesspool. This service is contracted out at a cost of almost £1 million per year.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the consultancy firms used by Northern Ireland Water; and (ii) the expenditure on each firm in fees and other costs, since 1 April 2007. (AQW 5380/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the

consultancy firms employed since 1 April 2007 and associated fees and other costs, are as detailed below. These costs relate to the period to the end of February 2008 and are split between capital consultancy, relating to the design and build of infrastructure projects, and other consultancy. They are exclusive of VAT.

CAPITAL CONSULTANCY

Adjust Procurement Solutions Ltd	£26,287
Archaeological Development Services Ltd	£5,826
Atkins Limited	£58,152
Bhb Fire and Specialist Training Consultants	£255
Biwater Graham Joint Venture	£123,206
Biwater Treatment Ltd	£216,925
Black & Veatch Ltd	£246,674
Bsg Civil Engineering Limited	£329,015
Building Design Partnership Limited	£155,732
Business Publication Company (N.I.)	£250
Capita Symonds Ltd	£593,822
Chandlerkbs	£31,741
Construction Consultancy Services	£452,085
Construction Supervisory Services Limited	£71,085
Contractauditline	£1,397
Dawson-Wam Ltd	£116,916
Dla Piper Rudnick Gray Cary Uk Llp	£31,357
Doran Consultant	£384,739
Earth Tech Engineering Ltd	£91,472
Ec Harris & Partners	£36,403
Entec	£11,223
Ewan Group Plc	£83,440
Faber Maunsell Ltd	£352,819
Glover Site Investigation	£2,444
Halcrow Management Sciences Limited	£81,855
Halcrow Water Services	£363,835
Hyder Consulting Limited	£254,476
I B M United Kingdom Ltd	£1,199
Intapeople Ltd	£5,880
Intra Consulting	£15,540
It Project Recovery Limited	£67,965

Adjust Procurement Solutions Ltd	£26,287
Jacobs Uk Ltd	£580,470
John Graham (Dromore) Ltd	£36,091
Mcadam Design	£1,938,394
Mcauley & Browne	£17,000
Mmc Associates	£6,150
Mouchel Limited	£8,100
Mulholland & Doherty	£1,196,391
Mouchel Parkman Services Limited	£210,653
Mwh Uk Ltd	£546,217
Nicholas O Dwyer & Partners	£240,609
Ollave Ltd	£24,525
Peter J Graham Consultancy Ltd	£17,363
Pipeline Simulation Ltd	£480
Pricewaterhouse Coopers Llp	£867,285
Purac Brand	£201,757
R Robinson And Sons	£311,891
Rps Kirk McClure & Morton (Rps Kmm)	£1,504,314
Safety Advice Centre	£850
Scott Wilson	£471,457
Service & System Solutions (Sx3) Ltd	£6,000
The Event-Ful Consultancy Ltd	£300
Waterpeople Limited	£4,575
Wdr & Rt Taggart	£360,334
White Young Green	£637,307
Williams Ind Services Ltd	£75,448
Wj Mcdowell&Partners	£301,282
Wrc Plc	£34,422
Ws Atkins Consultants Ltd	£2,759,590
Xansa	£125,281
Total	£16,698,551

OTHER CONSULTANCY

Alvarez & Marshall Europe	£10,934
Austin Hunter	£800
A J Mccann Consultants	£4,044
Bcm Services	£760
Bdo Stoy Hayward	£24,875
Being Communication Limited	£50,000
Bespoke Performance Management Limited	£24,071

Black & Veatch	£31,000
Btw Shiells	£8,500
Building Design Partnership Ltd	£2,357
Charlie Harris (Practical Planning)	£61,360
Consult Nb 1 Ltd	£34,850
Contracting Out Llp	£154,759
Deloitte	£35,000
Dp Contracting Ltd	£9,360
Dundas & Wilson	£291,016
Empathy Rating Syndicated Research	£4,200
Ernst & Young	£79,838
Frontier	£34,000
Fujitsu	£29,896
Halcrow	£72,736
Hcl Communications	£1,390
Independent Occupational Health Ltd	£18,497
Insidedge	£45,000
Interim Management Assignments (Ni) Ltd	£179,847
Jacobs Uk Ltd	£2,136
John Smith	£77,241
Kirkwood Management Consultancy	£53,163
Kpmg	£1,200
Mercer Human Resource Consulting	£53,622
Mcadam Design	£175,729
Mott Mcdonald Group	£891,922
Nick Owen Associates	£1,922
Ntuition Ltd	£6,106
Odour Assessment	£6,700
Peter Briens	£4,550
Peter Graham Consultancy	£5,400
Practical Planning Limited	£121,108
Pricewaterhousecoopers Llp	£4,783,885
Robinson Consulting	£31,926
Rospa - Health & Safety Audit	£56,000
Sacker & Partners	£5,718
Strategic Planning	£8,000
The Event-Ful Consultancy Ltd	£11,143
The Helm Corporation Ltd	£556,537
Weber Shandwick	£50,270
Total	£8,113,368

Crawfordsburn Village

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why road calming measures were deemed suitable for Conlig village, but were not deemed suitable for Crawfordsburn village. (AQW 5393/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that traffic calming measures have been introduced by my Department's Roads Service at both Conlig and Crawfordsburn villages.

Many factors are taken into account when considering the most appropriate measures to try to influence driver behaviour and the speed of vehicles. These include the type of road; the surrounding environment; existing road alignment; the type of features available; the most likely approach speed to the first traffic calming feature and the likely support for any proposed measures.

In the case of Conlig village, traffic must turn off the main dual carriageway from Bangor to Newtownards, at which point vehicles encounter the first traffic calming measure - namely village gateway signs. In turning off the main dual carriageway, vehicle speeds are automatically reduced to such an extent that the provision of road humps is appropriate.

The roads leading into Crawfordsburn village are of a rural nature and are subject to the national speed limit. On entering the village there are traffic calming features, in the form of village gateway signs, as well as carriageway markings. However, as there are no features in the road alignment that would significantly reduce the speed of vehicles, road humps are not considered appropriate at this location.

Car Ferry Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to create a car ferry service between Bangor and Carrickfergus. (AQW 5394/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has no plans to create a car ferry service between Bangor and Carrickfergus.

Water Pressure Problems

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to fix the water pressure problems for residents in Cootehall Road, Crawfordsburn. (AQW 5429/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is aware that some residents of Cootehall Road,

Crawfordsburn are experiencing low water pressure. The properties affected are on a shared supply pipe and previous investigations, including exploratory excavations, have been unsuccessful in identifying the cause of the problem.

Northern Ireland Water commenced further investigations on 17 April in a further attempt to identify the source of the low water pressure. This will involve investigatory work in private gardens, necessitating the co-operation of the residents. The Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water will write to you when the investigations are complete.

Pay and Display Tickets

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will lobby NCP to ensure that pay and display tickets are provided with an adhesive surface to ensure they can be attached to car windscreens. (AQW 5430/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are a number of Pay and Display machines which do not operate satisfactorily with the current adhesive tickets. To rectify this problem, NCP Service's stationery supplier is currently conducting tests with a view to producing adhesive tickets compatible with all Roads Service's Pay and Display machines. Suitable adhesive tickets, will be rolled out to all Pay & Display machines when they become available.

In the interim, any customers issued with non-adhesive tickets should ensure that these are displayed on the dashboard of their vehicles.

Free Travel Passes

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to ensure that free travel passes for the over 60s are extended to cover the United Kingdom, as well as throughout Ireland. (AQW 5434/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have no plans at present to seek reciprocity of free travel arrangements in England, Scotland and Wales. There are no plans to reduce the qualifying age for the free travel scheme in the south, so it would not be feasible to reduce the age for cross-border travel for residents of the north.

Sewers Provision

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on (i) the provision

of new sewers; and (ii) the enhancement of the existing network, in Rasharkin. (AQW 5440/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, following agreement with the relevant landowners for a suitable pipe-line route, a comprehensive construction contract has been awarded for improving the sewerage infrastructure in Rasharkin. This will involve:-

- the provision of a relief sewer along Finvoy Road, through private land and back into the existing sewerage system on Finvoy Road, to provide additional hydraulic capacity within the system and reduce the risk of flooding;
- the provision of a new combined sewer to the west of the town to Moneyleck Road;
- the upgrading of the combined sewer on Moneyleck Road;
- a new storm sewer, mostly routed parallel to the new combined sewer, discharging to the watercourse in the vicinity of the wastewater treatment works.

It is estimated that the work will cost in the region of £707,000 and construction is programmed to commence in June 2008.

Public Private Partnerships

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all planned Public Private partnerships during the 2008-2011 Budget period for new roads. (AQW 5450/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The construction and operation of two packages already procured by my Department's Roads Service, through the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) form of Public Private Partnership (PPP) contract, will continue through the 2008-2011 Budget period. At this time, Roads Service has not identified any further PPP contracts where construction will commence during the 2008-2011 Budget period.

Public Private Partnerships

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all planned new projects where there will be a contribution towards the construction by the private sector. (AQW 5451/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002 -2012 anticipates £100 million of investment from developer contributions. The RTS will be delivered through three 'daughter' documents:

the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP), the Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015 (SRTP) and the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP). These documents identify schemes which will require proportionate funding from developers in order to realise RTS expectations. Examples include: the recently completed Skeoge Link and the A2 Buncrana Road in Derry, which have strategic importance to the North Western Corridor; the A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor; the North Lisburn Feeder Road which is already substantially completed, Winters Lane and the Strathroy Link Road in Omagh; the Cherrymount Link in Enniskillen; and the recently completed major road improvements on the A1 at Banbridge, which were constructed in association with a major retail development.

In addition, Roads Service receives a number of smaller contributions from developers to deliver road improvements, in order to mitigate the otherwise adverse impact the development schemes may have on the roads infrastructure.

These contributions are generally delivered through a legal agreement and are generally supported by a Traffic Impact Assessment which attempts to identify areas of the network which may be adversely affected by the proposed development and hence require some form of mitigation measures. It is normal for the agreement to specify a timescale for the delivery of these mitigation measures.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that it has no new projects where the private sector will contribute.

Water Booster

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which his department will install a water booster to service homes in the Aghyaran Road Upper, Castlederg. (AQW 5454/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has recently approved capital funding for the provision of a water booster station to service homes in Upper Aghyaran Road, Castlederg.

NIW aims to have the water booster station operational by the end of 2008, but this timing is subject to the acquisition of any land that may be needed and to the completion of all statutory processes including planning approval.

A5 Dual Carriageway

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a progress report on the A5 dual carriageway scheme. (AQW 5455/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In late 2007 my Department's Roads Service appointed consultants, Mouchel, as client advisor for this project. Mouchel are currently gathering information to enable constraints on the project to be identified and preliminary design work to be carried out. They are currently on target to meet the first milestone for the project, which is identification of the preferred corridor, in 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

You may also be interested to know that a series of public information days are planned over the next month and details will be published in local press.

Press Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4680/08, to detail the number of staff working in his department's press office, broken down by grade. (AQW 5504/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Within the Department for Regional Development's Press Office, the numbers and grades of staff are as follows:

Grade	Number
Principal Information Officer	1
Senior Information Officer	2
Assistant Information Officer	1
Total	4

Traffic Congestion

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to reduce traffic congestion in North Belfast, particularly at school opening and closing times. (AQW 5508/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) is

proposing a programme of up to 14 Quality Bus Corridors (QBC's) focused on Belfast, which will build upon those implemented to date. These will include the M2 (City Express), Shore Road, Antrim Road and Crumlin Road corridors in North 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.

Legislation is currently being developed for an additional 2.8 km. of bus lane on the Antrim Road 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 North Belfast.

Traffic levels are however continuing to grow and as such, improved bus speeds associated with QBC's 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 which my Department is progressing through its Travelwise initiative. Over time these initiatives are expected to contribute to a reduction in private car travel for journeys to the city centre at peak times.

It is recognised that 'the school run' makes a significant contribution to traffic congestion at school openings and closing times. My Department's Travelwise initiative is also seeking to address this issue by encouraging more pupils, parents and teachers to walk, cycle, use public transport or car share the journey to school. All schools have been invited to participate in this initiative and Roads Service officials have been working with a number of schools in the North Belfast area to provide additional facilities such as enhanced road markings, signs and pedestrian crossings.

The BMTP also proposes several park-and-ride sites for each of the six main transport corridors into Belfast. In total my Department is planning to provide over 6000 park and ride spaces for the greater Belfast area by 2015.

A new rail halt, together with 650 Park & Ride spaces, is proposed at Templepatrick to attract longer distance motorists from the M2 motorway and the 750 space site at Fortwilliam will serve downstream motorists approaching Belfast on the M2 and M5 motorways. In addition, a 90 space site is proposed at Ballyhenry Rd, Sandyknowes served by existing bus services and other smaller facilities will be provided at existing rail halts. All these will help to reduce the volume of traffic travelling through North Belfast towards the city centre.

The improvements works to the M2 motorway, which are currently under construction, include widening the Belfast-bound carriageway to 3 lanes between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions, widening the country-bound carriageway to 3 lanes over the Greencastle Interchange and replacing the Longlands, Hightown and Collin Bridges over this section of the M2. These significant improvements will provide additional carriageway capacity and reduce journey times on the M2 and on other parallel routes into Belfast from the north, particularly during peak hours.

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.

Disability Discrimination Act

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5219/08, to detail the stations and halts on the Ballymena to Derry/Londonderry line to be included in Phase 2 of works to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. (AQW 5532/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The stations and halts to be upgraded as part of phase 2 of this programme are Ballymena, Cullybackey, Ballymoney, University, Dhu Varren, Portrush, Castlerock and Derry.

Coleraine station has already been upgraded.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5546/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I recognise the cultural, historic and linguistic importance of townland names. Staff in the Department have access to the "Pointer" address database which includes the townland name within its specification.

Eleventh Night Bonfires

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure

in relation to eleventh night bonfires in the last five years. (AQW 5600/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my response to his previous question concerning monitoring expenditure relating to Eleventh Night bonfires (AQW 2220/08).

My Department's Roads Service does not monitor expenditure specifically related to Eleventh Night bonfires. However, the table below provides details of Roads Service's estimated expenditure on attending/repairing bonfire sites in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

Year	Estimated expenditure attending/repairing Eleventh Night bonfires
2003/04	£100k
2004/05	£80k
2005/06	£218k
2006/07	£63k
2007/08	£60k

Rail Passenger Numbers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the rail passenger numbers on the (a) Belfast to Larne; (b) Belfast to Derry/Londonderry; (c) Belfast to Bangor; and (d) Belfast to Portadown lines for the 2007-08 financial year; and (ii) the percentage change for each line from the previous year. (AQW 5637/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that rail passenger numbers for 2007-08 are not yet available. Translink expect to have final rail passenger numbers for 2007-08 within the next few weeks. Ports and Public Transport Division will write to you with the above information once they receive it from Translink.

Free Travel Fares

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the timescale for implementing free fares for everyone aged 60 and over. (AQW 5657/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave Mr Shannon, the Member for Strangford on 09 April 2008 (AQW 5463/08).

Fallagh Road, Gortin

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will immediately engage in the repair and upgrade of the Fallagh Road, Gortin, Omagh. (AQW 5662/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Fallagh Road, Omagh, is a low traffic rural single lane road, serving the needs of 9 or 10 properties. It is considered to be in reasonable condition for the amount of traffic and general usage it receives. It has been maintained in accordance with the Department's Maintenance Standards. Roads Service will consider it for inclusion in a Surface Dressing programme in 2009, but it will have to compete against other similar schemes for funding.

Water Mains Work

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale for the reinstatement of the Ballyeasborough Road, Kircubbin following water mains work, given the current state of disrepair of the road. (AQW 5708/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the reinstatement of the pipe track on the Ballyeasborough Road, Kircubbin was completed on Friday 11 April 2008.

Road Works

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timeframe for the completion of road works on Main Street, Gortin, County Tyrone. (AQW 5781/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a water main has been replaced on Main Street, Gortin and work on the permanent reinstatement of the road is now underway with expected completion by the end of April 2008.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Shared Ownership Schemes

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm (i) if people who purchase their homes through shared ownership schemes do not pay stamp

duty until they own 80% of the property; and (ii) that this criteria is applicable to buyers who purchase their homes (a) before; and (b) after, 6 April 2008. (AQW 5281/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Shared ownership purchasers can elect to pay stamp duty at the outset on the market value of the property or can elect to make a non-market value election and have the option of paying stamp duty when they own 80 per cent of the equity in their property. This is the criteria applicable to shared ownership purchasers before and after 6 April 2008.

Housing Waiting Lists

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants registered on housing waiting lists in each local authority area. (AQW 5420/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information, as at 31 December 2007, is as follows:

District Council Area	Housing Applicants
Antrim	1037
Armagh	860
Ards	1626
Moyle	353
Ballymena	1540
Ballymoney	519
Banbridge	680
Belfast	9553
Carrickfergus	1032
Castlereagh	1356
Coleraine	1372
Cookstown	387
Craigavon	1949
Derry	2293
Down	1214
Dungannon	825
Fermanagh	1015
Larne	512
Limavady	546
Lisburn	2578
Magherafelt	488
Newry & Mourne	1763
Newtownabbey	1713

District Council Area	Housing Applicants
North Down	1858
Omagh	704
Strabane	559
Total	38332

Co-Ownership Housing

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact the withdrawal of the Co-Ownership Housing Scheme will have on first time buyers trying to join the property ladder. (AQW 5472/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Co-ownership scheme has not been withdrawn. The Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association is starting the current year with a grant of £15m — almost 4 times that of its opening grant in 2007/2008. The Association will use this grant and external finance to achieve the Programme for Government target of helping 500 people this year.

Caravan Owners

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if she has agreed a timetable with the Minister of the Environment to introduce legislation to protect caravan owners. (AQW 5513/08)

The Minister for Social Development: While I will be considering issues for a housing policy consultation document which will lead to a Housing Bill later this year, the Bill will focus on my key housing priorities and I have no plans to introduce legislation on caravans.

Housing Executive

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive schemes she has cancelled or delayed in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5514/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have not cancelled or delayed any schemes in the North Down constituency. The Housing Executive is responsible for operational matters in relation to its programme of works. These programmes are always drawn up subject to the availability of finance, acceptable tender prices and other statutory approvals. Estimated start dates may therefore be subject to change. On that basis all programmes are subject to continuous review.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the assistance that will be given to residents in the Village area of South Belfast who, after vesting, wish to remain in the Donegall Road area. (AQW 5516/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Following vesting each household affected will have its future housing requirements determined and efforts will be made to meet these requirements within the social sector in residents' area of choice. In addition to the new housing that will be constructed within the redevelopment area, a number of adjacent sites in the locality will provide housing for people wishing to remain within the area.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the assistance that will be given to homeowners in the Village area of South Belfast, who have their properties vested as a part of regeneration. (AQW 5517/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Homeowners affected by vesting are entitled to the market value of their property at the date of vesting, plus Home Loss Payment and Disturbance Payment. Homeowners can appoint an agent to act on their behalf and appropriate fees are payable by the Housing Executive.

Homeowners who choose to be rehoused in social housing will be placed on the Social Housing Waiting List for their area(s) of choice and will be awarded priority status for rehousing, following vesting.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the progress that has been made in relation to the regeneration of the Village area of South Belfast, since her announcement on 26 February 2008. (AQW 5518/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since my announcement of 26 February 2008, formal approval for the economic appraisal of the Village Urban Renewal project has been secured from the Department of Finance and Personnel. My officials and officials from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have been working on the ground to advance the first stages of the regeneration project.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit in each of the first 3 months of 2008; and (ii) how this compares for the same periods in 2006 and 2007. (AQW 5526/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures show the number of claims where an amount of Incapacity Benefit was in payment at the date of extract. It is not possible to provide the requested information for March 2008 as data is extracted every six weeks and a scan was not scheduled for completion in this month. A scan has been completed for April 2008 but the results are not yet available.

CUSTOMERS IN RECEIPT OF INCAPACITY BENEFIT IN JANUARY, FEBRUARY AND MARCH EACH YEAR FROM 2006 TO 2008.

	2006	2007	2008
January	72,442*	70,318	69,183
February	72,572	70,329	69,004
March	71,918	70,013	Not yet available

* No data is available specifically for January 2006 as samples are only taken every six weeks. The figure supplied is for the number of customers in receipt of Incapacity Benefit at the data extract of 23 December 2005.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of (a) successful; and (b) unsuccessful applications for Disability Living Allowance that were considered in January; February; and March 2008; and (ii) how these figures compare with the same periods in 2006 and 2007.

(AQW 5527/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the tables below.

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE – RESULT OF APPLICATIONS

Year	Month	Successful	Unsuccessful
2006	January	1335	925
	February	819	553
	March	1310	1058
2007	January	1176	998
	February	873	942
	March	989	1002

Year	Month	Successful	Unsuccessful
2008	January	845	920
	February	925	1137
	March	751	938

Housing Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if she will be seeking voluntary redundancies first, in relation to the potential job losses within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

(AQW 5528/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an operational matter for the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive's policies provide for a number of mechanisms to manage staff reductions. In line with best practice, these include the termination of temporary contracts, the release of agency staff and seeking volunteers for early retirement and/or redundancy.

Housing Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions she has had with trade unions and staff in relation to the potential job losses within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

(AQW 5529/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an operational matter for the Housing Executive. I understand however that there have been ongoing discussions between the Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, through the agreed internal industrial relations mechanisms, over the need to manage manpower budgets, as is the case for all Government Departments.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action her department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001.

(AQW 5547/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Where a correspondent specifies their townland when providing their address to my Department, the townland name will, where possible, be included in the Department's written correspondence to them.

House Numbers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4720/08, to detail the number of these houses that were in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 5554/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available in the precise form requested. However, within the Housing Executive's District Offices covering Newtownards, Castlereagh and Downpatrick, a total of 1203 dwellings were visited.

Co-ownership Scheme

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline the mechanisms the co-ownership scheme has to regulate expenditure throughout the financial year; and (ii) to explain why this scheme has run out of funds for three months. (AQW 5556/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have given co-ownership at the start of this year, a grant of £15m, which will help 500 people onto the first rung of the housing ladder. Since I came into office, funding for Co-ownership has increased significantly. Responsibility for day to day financial management, including the rate at which applications are processed, rests with the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association.

Co-ownership Scheme

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the budget allocation for the co-ownership scheme in the 2007-2008 financial year. (AQW 5557/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the 2007/2008 year £4.2m was initially allocated to the co-ownership scheme and I was able to increase it by an additional £14.6m to £18.8m.

Co-ownership Scheme

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the budget allocation for the co-ownership scheme in the 2006-2007 financial year and any additional funding allocated for the same period. (AQW 5558/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the 2006/07 year £4.2m was allocated to the co-ownership scheme.

Co-ownership Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she intends to take to alleviate the shortage in funding for co-ownership. (AQW 5563/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The co-ownership scheme is starting this year with a grant of £15m, which will help 500 people onto the first rung of the housing ladder. The Co-ownership scheme has already received more than enough applications to use up this year's overall funding and achieve the targets set out in the Programme for Government.

There are limits to public spending yet there have been no cutbacks in funding for Co-ownership. I have delivered very substantial increases in funding for Co-ownership and I am very much on course to achieve the goals set out in my New Housing Agenda

No Drinking Areas

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which she will introduce new laws to allow councils to designate whole council areas as No Drinking areas. (AQW 5564/08)

The Minister for Social Development: New powers relating to the public consumption of alcohol have been included in the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 which Minister of State Paul Goggins has laid before Parliament. The measures in the draft Order, which will replace the drinking in public bye-laws, are intended to ensure that problematic drinking can be tackled on the spot in a focused and targeted way. Only those public areas where nuisance, annoyance or disorder is associated with public drinking may be designated by councils. Subject to Parliamentary approval of the draft legislation, the new provisions will come into effect when councils next designate areas that are a source of problematic drinking.

Housing Executive

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people currently on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list, for housing in (i) Portavogie; (ii) Greyabbey; (iii) Carrowdore; (iv) Ballyhalbert; (v) Ballywalter; (vi) Kircubbin; and (vii) Portaferry. (AQW 5565/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The waiting list for social housing at 31 March 2008 is as follows.

	(a) Total number of applicants	(b) Applicants at (a) with 30 or more points
Portavogie	40	20
Greyabbey	16	7
Carrowdore	21	13
Ballyhalbert	11	2
Ballywalter	45	21
Kircubbin	48	21
Portaferry	81	41

Housing Associations

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by Housing Associations in (i) Portavogie; (ii) Greyabbey; (iii) Carrowdore; (iv) Ballyhalbert; (v) Ballywalter; (vi) Kircubbin; and (vii) Portaferry. (AQW 5566/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current number of Housing Association properties in these areas are as follows:

(i) Portavogie 0, (ii) Greyabbey 6, (iii) Carrowdore 20, (iv) Ballyhalbert 8, (v) Ballywalter 33, (vi) Kircubbin 3, (vii) Portaferry 43

Housing Executive

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in (i) Portavogie; (ii) Greyabbey; (iii) Carrowdore; (iv) Ballyhalbert; (v) Ballywalter; (vi) Kircubbin; and (vii) Portaferry. (AQW 5567/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The stock remaining in Housing Executive ownership at 31 March 2008 in each area is as follows:

	Bungalows	Flats	Houses	Cottages	Total
Portavogie	47	7	14	13	81
Greyabbey	32	0	25	16	73
Carrowdore	41	0	32	9	82
Ballyhalbert	6	0	2	3	11
Ballywalter	49	6	58	21	134
Kircubbin	49	0	52	16	117
Portaferry	103	8	62	12	185

Housing Executive

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive allocations in (i) Portavogie; (ii) Greyabbey; (iii) Carrowdore; (iv) Ballyhalbert; (v) Ballywalter; (vi) Kircubbin; and (vii) Portaferry. (AQW 5568/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Allocations by both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Associations are set out in the following table:

	2005	2006	2007
Portavogie	3	5	4
Greyabbey	1	3	4
Carrowdore	5	3	5
Ballyhalbert	0	0	1
Ballywalter	5	5	17
Kircubbin	4	5	8
Portaferry	11	7	11

Housing Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if 400 workers will lose their jobs within the Housing Executive in the next year. (AQW 5579/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an operational matter for the Housing Executive. All Government Departments and their Non Departmental Public Bodies are required to achieve a 5% efficiency saving in running costs each year for the next three years commencing 08/09. In order to achieve this saving the Housing Executive estimates that around 450 posts will be lost over the three year period.

House Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4720/08, to detail the number of those houses that were located in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5589/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available in the precise form requested. However, within the Housing Executive's District Offices covering Newtownards and Bangor, a total of 907 dwellings were visited.

Urban Regeneration

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the amount of money spent by her department on urban regeneration, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5593/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The figures requested are as follows –

TABLE 1. URBAN REGENERATION SPEND FROM 2002 TO 2007

	2002/03 £m	2003/04 £m	2004/05 £m	2005/06 £m	2006/07 £m
Belfast	13.21	10.54	12.69	11.91	18.6
North West	2.91	14.06	16.81	2.66	4.14
Regional Cities & Towns	2.70	2.17	0.51	2.15	3.61
Total	18.82	26.77	30.01	16.72	26.35

Urban regeneration expenditure is not recorded by parliamentary constituencies. The above information identifies expenditure across the three main development areas.

Travelling Community

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the contact her department has had with representatives of the travelling community in relation to unacceptable behaviour by members of that community at travellers' sites. (AQW 5607/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Any reports of unacceptable behaviour on Traveller sites are investigated at local Housing Executive District Office level in accordance with established housing management and antisocial behaviour policies and procedures. The Housing Executive also works closely with Traveller Support organisations in the resolution of such incidents and in working towards avoiding future occurrences.

Energy Efficient Homes

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the assistance available to those householders who wish to make their homes more energy efficient and environmentally friendly, including those who wish to install solar panels. (AQW 5627/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Low Carbon Building Programme Phase 1, a UK wide

Scheme, managed by the Energy Saving Trust on behalf of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) allows householders to access grant assistance to install solar panels. The maximum assistance available is £400 or 30% of the relevant eligible cost, whichever is lower. The Warm Homes Scheme also offers a range of energy efficient measures such as insulation, draught proofing and advice to homeowners and private sector tenants in receipt of certain benefits. As well as the insulation measures offered as part of Warm Homes, those over 60 and who are in receipt of one of the necessary benefits may also be eligible for heating measures.

Travelling Community

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5079/08, what is her assessment of the impact this is having on (i) the geographical spread of travelling community sites throughout Northern Ireland; and (b) community relations between the travelling and settled communities. (AQW 5636/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There is currently a good geographical spread of sites across Northern Ireland namely in Belfast, Craigavon, Derry, Strabane, Omagh and Dungannon. An assessment of Traveller accommodation needs is currently being undertaken by the Housing Executive and the findings of this will inform their rolling programme of Traveller accommodation provision subject to land availability and planning issues.

The Housing Executive's Community Cohesion unit works to promote good relations between the settled and Traveller communities across Northern Ireland consulting directly with community representatives with regard to the proposed development of Traveller accommodation within an area.

Community Houses

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the assistance she can provide to establish a community house or flat in the Strand area of Holywood, similar to other community houses in other areas of the North Down area. (AQW 5643/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There is high demand and low turnover of stock in the Strand area. Between January and December 2007 only 5 allocations were made to social housing applicants. Given this level of demand it would be difficult to justify leasing accommodation to a Community Association at the present time.

House Fires

Mr Brolly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the support she is providing to those made homeless as a result of recent home fires in Limavady. (AQW 5645/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing Executive staff were on site to provide assistance to those affected by the incidents in question and a contractor was appointed to carry out emergency repairs to all the affected properties.

Those residents presenting to the Housing Executive as homeless were provided with the full range of available advice and assistance, including the provision of furniture storage and temporary accommodation facilities as required. Some residents chose to make their own temporary accommodation arrangements.

Neighbourhood Renewal Programme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the criteria a project, currently funded under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme until August 2008, would have to meet to secure future funding. (AQW 5715/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have consistently identified the need for the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund to be targeted at actions which most effectively address the priority needs of Neighbourhood Renewal areas. These needs have been determined and agreed by local communities led by the Neighbourhood Partnerships and are set out in the Action Plans.

Funding for projects and activities that are key to delivering Neighbourhood Renewal priorities can receive funding up to March 2011, subject to necessary economic appraisals. Where projects are delivering activities which address priorities and are the core responsibility of another statutory body, my Department will continue to provide funding, subject to the necessary appraisals, to March 2009. This will allow time to reach agreement with the relevant statutory body on how best these needs will be met in the future.

Belfast Regeneration Office

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which projects, currently funded by the Belfast Regeneration Office up to August 2008, will be informed if they will be given funding beyond that date. (AQW 5716/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My press statement of 10 March 2008 outlined the basis on which

future funding commitments from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund will be made. Belfast Regeneration Office officials are currently working through a process to determine which projects or services currently funded through to the end August 2008 will: receive assistance through to March 2011; receive assistance through to March 2009 (where statutory responsibility rests with another Government Department) and; those for whom funding will cease from 31 August 2008 in line with current contracts for funding. Communication with the project promoters concerned and the respective Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships will commence in the coming weeks. It is impossible to be definitive in terms of timescale at this stage given that all commitments will be subject to the necessary appraisal and approval process.

Renewing Communities Funding

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if Renewing Communities funding has ended, and if so, can projects that were funded under this initiative access funding from her department. (AQW 5717/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department had responsibility for co-ordinating and monitoring the implementation of Renewing Communities Action Plan. However as this was a cross departmental initiative each participating Department was and remains responsible for the management and delivery of actions they brought forward. Renewing Communities ended on 31 March 2008 as there was no centrally designated budget available to continue after that date. The continuation of actions funded under Renewing Communities rests with each sponsoring Department and they have either sought to continue supporting the actions by consolidating these into their mainstream programmes, or decided not to continue funding individual actions. Questions on specific actions need to be addressed to the relevant lead Department.

Housing Executive

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, (i) the estimated damage caused to open space and green areas, maintained by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, by off-road bikes such as quads and scramblers; and (ii) the financial costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to repair such damage. (AQW 5829/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not readily available. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive cannot disaggregate its figures on anti social behaviour to include only those involving off-road vehicles.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION**Assembly Jobs****Assembly Jobs**

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm (i) that it has complied with the published job specifications and process for the post of Clerk, particularly that 'following testing candidates will be interviewed, as required in test score order', and if it has not, to detail the reasons why; and (ii) if it has taken independent legal advice to determine if it is in breach of legal requirements relating to the published job specification and process. (AQW 5265/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response:

- (i) I can confirm that the Assembly Commission has complied with the published job specification and process for the post of Assembly Clerk.

The job specification for Assembly Clerk set out at paragraph 6 the selection process to be followed for the recruitment competition. Paragraph 6.1 stated that candidates 'may be required to undertake a written test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'. Applicants were also informed that such tests could take place before an eligibility check was carried out. Paragraph 6.2 of the job specification stated that 'should testing take place, candidates will be interviewed, as required, in test score order'.

Candidates for the Assembly Clerk competition undertook a written test (comprising three elements: critical thinking; verbal application; and numerical analysis) on 24 and 25 October and 16 November 2007. The relevant sections of the application forms for all candidates who reached the required standard in the test were checked, in test score order, against the eligibility criteria set out in the job specification. All 25 applicants considered eligible from the information provided in the application forms were invited to interview.

- (ii) The Commission seeks its legal advice, in the first instance, from its in-house counsel, the Assembly's Legal Services office. The Commission does not propose to release, or comment on, any legal advice that it may have taken. But I am glad to assure you that the Commission is content that the published job specification and the competition process, comply with all legal requirements.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Assembly Commission to confirm if (i) the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency was asked to, and subsequently provided, dedicated job related tests in relation to the posts of Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk; (ii) 'off the shelf' tests were used; and to detail (a) the independent, external validation that has been sought by the Commission on the relevance of the tests; and (b) the experience, expertise and authority that the Implementation Group has to validate and sign off on the tests. (AQW 5266/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The job specifications for the competitions for Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk set out, at paragraph 6, the selection process to be followed for each of the recruitment competitions. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assistant Assembly Clerk stated that 'a job-related skills test may be used to decide which applicants will be invited to interview. Invitation to interview will be determined at test, with those who achieve the highest scores being invited first'. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'candidates may be required to undertake a test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'. Paragraph 6.2 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'should testing take place, candidates will be interviewed, as required, in test score order'.

Both job specifications informed applicants that such tests could take place before eligibility checks were carried out.

(i) & (ii) The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, was subsequently commissioned by the Assembly Commission and, following detailed analysis of job descriptions supplied by the Assembly, selected appropriate papers from a group of commercially available tests, widely used across the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the public sector.

(ii)(a) The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency validated the tests in terms of both relevance to the posts and in terms of compliance with equality requirements.

The table at Annex A illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assembly Clerk (critical thinking, verbal application and numerical analysis) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assembly Clerk competition.

The table at Annex B illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assistant Assembly Clerk (legal interpretation, verbal reasoning and numerical

reasoning) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assistant Assembly Clerk competition.

(ii)(b) The Implementation Group was not involved in either the selection or validation of the tests.

Assembly Jobs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Assembly Commission to detail how the tests undertaken by applicants for the posts of (i) Assembly Clerk and (ii) Assistant Assembly Clerk, are consistent with the job specification outlined to applicants. (AQW 5267/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The decision to hold open Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk recruitment competitions was taken by senior management in 2006, during the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and were to run as soon as possible after restoration.

The competition for Assistant Assembly Clerk was advertised on 10/11 May 2007, with a closing date of 1 June 2007. The competition for Assembly Clerk was advertised on 17/18 May 2007, with a closing date of 15 June 2007.

The job specifications for the competitions set out at paragraph 6, the selection process to be followed for each of the recruitment competitions. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assistant Assembly Clerk stated that 'a job-related skills test may be used to decide which applicants will be invited to interview. Invitation to interview will be determined at test, with those who achieve the highest scores being invited first'. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'candidates may be required to undertake a test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'. Paragraph 6.2 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'should testing take place, candidates will be interviewed, as required, in test score order'.

Both job specifications informed applicants that such tests could take place before eligibility checks were carried out.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, was subsequently commissioned by the Assembly Commission and, following detailed analysis of job descriptions supplied by the Assembly, selected appropriate papers from a group of commercially available tests, widely used across the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the public sector. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency validated the tests in terms of both relevance

to the posts and in terms of compliance with equality requirements.

The table at Annex A illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assembly Clerk (critical thinking, verbal application and numerical analysis) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assembly Clerk competition.

The table at Annex B illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assistant Assembly Clerk (legal interpretation, verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assistant Assembly Clerk competition.

Assembly Jobs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Assembly Commission to detail the reasons why tests addressing 'general management/supervisory skills and editing skills', as stated in the job specification for the Assembly Clerk position, included a mathematics test on a company profit and loss scenario. (AQW 5268/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The job specification for the Assembly Clerk competition, advertised on 17/18 May 2007, stated (at paragraph 6.1) that 'Candidates may be required to undertake a written test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'.

The test comprised three elements – critical thinking, verbal application and numerical analysis.

The numerical analysis element of the test consisted of short problems and measured the ability to understand the relationships between pieces of numerical information. The items were drawn from a variety of contexts to ensure their relevance to a range of managerial jobs and they required no specific knowledge of profit and loss accounts. This element of the test is designed specifically to measure the numerical abilities needed to perform effectively in middle to senior management positions and is particularly relevant in respect of the eligibility criterion 'applying strong analytical and interpretative skills and the ability to produce well-judged decisions/solutions within deadlines'.

Assembly Jobs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Assembly Commission to confirm if the decision was taken to introduce a test to filter applicants before conducting an application sift based on the criteria outlined in the job specification, for the posts of Assembly Clerk and Assistant

Assembly Clerk, due to the high number of applicants.
(AQW 5269/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The job specifications for the competitions set out at paragraph 6, the selection process to be followed for each of the recruitment competitions. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assistant Assembly Clerk stated that 'a job-related skills test may be used to decide which applicants will be invited to interview. Invitation to interview will be determined at test, with those who achieve the highest scores being invited first'. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'candidates may be required to undertake a test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'. Paragraph 6.2 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'should testing take place, candidates will be interviewed, as required, in test score order'.

Both job specifications informed applicants that such tests could take place before eligibility checks were carried out.

662 applications were received for the Assistant Assembly Clerk competition and 354 applications were received for the Assembly Clerk competition. While it was decided that job related skills tests would be used before any eligibility sift of applications was carried out, as a means of short listing, the tests used were relevant for each of the positions.

Assembly Jobs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Assembly Commission if the introduction of tests went beyond the published specifications, requirements and process around the Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk competitions; and whether the Commission has taken independent legal advice on the validity of this approach.
(AQW 5310/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The decision to hold open Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk recruitment competitions was taken by senior management in 2006, during the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and were to run as soon as possible after restoration.

The competition for Assistant Assembly Clerk was advertised on 10/11 May 2007, with a closing date of 1 June 2007. The competition for Assembly Clerk was advertised on 17/18 May 2007, with a closing date of 15 June 2007.

The job specifications for the competitions set out, at paragraph 6, the selection process to be followed for each of the recruitment competitions. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assistant Assembly Clerk stated that 'a job-related skills test may be used to decide which applicants will be invited to interview. Invitation to interview will be determined at test, with those who achieve the highest scores being invited first'. Paragraph 6.1 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'candidates may be required to undertake a test or tests that will cover general management/supervisory skills and editing skills including grammar and punctuation'. Paragraph 6.2 of the job specification for Assembly Clerk stated that 'should testing take place, candidates will be interviewed, as required, in test score order'.

Both job specifications informed applicants that such tests could take place before eligibility checks were carried out.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, was subsequently employed by the Assembly Commission and, following detailed analysis of job descriptions supplied by the Assembly, selected appropriate papers from a group of commercially available tests, widely used across the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the public sector. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency validated the tests in terms of both relevance to the posts and in terms of compliance with equality requirements.

The table at Annex A illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assembly Clerk (critical thinking, verbal application and numerical analysis) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assembly Clerk competition.

The table at Annex B illustrates how the three elements of the test for Assistant Assembly Clerk (legal interpretation, verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning) are consistent with the main duties and responsibilities outlined in the job specification for the Assistant Assembly Clerk competition.

As outlined above the possible introduction of tests did not go beyond the published specifications, requirements and processes for the Assembly Clerk and Assistant Assembly Clerk competitions.

No legal advice on the validity of the approach was sought as there had been no deviation from the information provided in the job specifications.

ANNEX A
ASSEMBLY CLERK

Exercise	About the exercise	What are the skills assessed?	Relevant sections of Job Specification
Critical Thinking Test (40 mins)	This test requires consideration of a series of propositions (either an inference, an assumption, a conclusion or an argument) relating to a given statement. The candidate's task is to study each statement and to evaluate how appropriate or valid these propositions are.	Measures higher level verbal reasoning abilities across five areas: 1. Drawing Inferences Ability to judge the validity of inferences that have been made by others. 2. Recognising Assumptions Ability to recognise presuppositions and assumptions that are implicit in statements made by others. 3. Argument Evaluation Ability to recognise whether particular conclusions necessarily follow from the evidence given by particular statements and premises. 4. Deductive Reasoning Ability to weigh evidence and decide if generalisations or conclusions based on given evidence are actually warranted. 5. Logical Interpretation Ability to distinguish between arguments that are strong and relevant and those that are weak and irrelevant to a particular question.	Applying strong analytical and interpretative skills and the ability to produce well-judged decisions/solutions within deadlines. Attending plenary sessions of the Assembly to support the Speaker and Committee Chairpersons by providing advice and factual information in response to questions.
Verbal Application (20 mins)	These are a collection of tests designed specifically to measure the verbal and numerical abilities to perform effectively in middle to senior management positions.	Measures the ability to understand the meaning of words, logic within sentences and the use of grammar. One use of this test would be to assess a candidate's ability to understand, complete or correct high level written text.	Applying strong analytical and interpretative skills and the ability to produce well-judged decisions/solutions within deadlines; Undertaking research and providing timely and accurate briefs;
Numerical Analysis (35 mins)		Measures the ability to interpret and use complex business-related numerical information. This test would be particularly useful in assessing a manager's ability to identify trends across a wide range of data or combine statistics from different sources to establish new information patterns.	Preparing draft Committee Reports; Attending plenary sessions of the Assembly to support the Speaker and Committee Chairpersons by providing advice and factual information in response to questions; Preparation of draft speeches, speaking notes, and press releases for the Speaker, Committee Chairpersons and others, as necessary; Leading, managing and influencing people through motivation, effective written and oral communication, and recognition of individuals' development needs.

ANNEX B

ASSISTANT ASSEMBLY CLERK

Exercise	About the exercise	What are the skills assessed?	Relevant sections of Job Specification
Legal Interpretation	Candidates are required to read and interpret part of a fictional health and safety code, and then assess a variety of organisations for compliance with this code.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to understand regulatory concepts documentation; - Information seeking and logical reasoning in a legal context; - Intellectual flexibility, adaptability, ability and rigour; - Problem-solving and analytical skills; - Concern for order and accuracy; - Decision-making in a legal context; - Verbal and numerical reasoning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing advice on the content and effect of draft legislation and on legislative procedures; - Analysing complex information to support and influence decision-making; - Developing policy strategy and office procedures in accordance with current legislation.
Verbal reasoning	Candidates are required to reason with, and evaluate the logic of written information. The task is to decide whether a statement, made in connection with a piece of text or information is – True or False or You Cannot Say.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to understand and critically evaluate the meaning of written material. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Undertaking research and investigatory work, and providing timely and accurate analysis, recommendations and briefs; - Analysing complex information to support and influence decision-making;
Numerical reasoning	Candidates are required to reason with, and draw appropriate conclusions from, numerical information. The data is presented in the form of a range of different tables, charts and graphs which summarise basic business information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to analyse and manipulate numerical data. <p>(Note: Candidates are allowed to use calculators, as the emphasis is on understanding and evaluation, rather than simple computation).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assisting in the preparation of draft speeches, speaking notes, and press releases as necessary.

Paintings and Statues

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission to provide a list of all paintings and statues which are displayed in Parliament Buildings and its precincts.
(AQW 5316/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):

Description	Location
46 Rowel Friers drawings of Members of the Northern Ireland Parliament 1972	Members bar
Portrait of Mr Seamus Mallon MP by Rita Duffy unveiled 25 March 2003	Members dining room
“The Assembly in Session” by Noel Murphy February 2003	Room 41
“The House will divide” by Noel Murphy unveiled 10th February 2003	Senate
Portrait of Lord Alderdice by Carol Graham unveiled on 11 March 2005	Members dining room

Description	Location
State opening of N.I Parliament small version by William Conor	Room 41
State opening of NI. Parliament large version by William Conor	Senate
Reconciliation Monument by Josefina de Vasconcellos. These are also at Berlin, Coventry, and Hiroshima. The sculpture was unveiled in November 2000.	At Massey Avenue close to Parliament Buildings
Print of Irish House of Commons	Speaker’s Office
Oil painting, said to show William III, the Duke of Schomberg and the Pope	Speaker’s Office By Pieter van der Meulen
Stone statue of a woman engraved ‘Thrift is the gleaner behind all human effort’ by John Knox dated 1951	At Massey Avenue
Bronze statue of Lord Craigavon by L.S Merrifield of Chelsea, commissioned in 1938 but due to the war not installed until 1945	Ceremonial Stairs Great Hall
Statue of Lord Carson in bronze by L.S Merrifield	Roundabout at top of Prince of Wales

Description	Location
Somme Memorial, large piece of granite with an engraved plaque	At Massey Avenue
Large Granite stone with an inscription in memory of Mo Mowlam	Entrance to children's play park.

There are also several paintings on display in offices which are on loan from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Paper Correspondence

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission if it will contact (i) charities; (ii) non-governmental organisations; (iii) trade unions; and (iv) lobby groups, to request that they provide MLAs with the option of receiving correspondence by e-mail rather than letter, to prevent paper from being wasted. (AQW 5457/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission is keen to develop mechanisms which assist in the reduction of paper posted to Parliament Buildings. To this end, the Commission will consider the inclusion of a statement within the Members' pages of the Northern Ireland Assembly Website encouraging both individuals and organisations to request whether or not a Member would like to receive their correspondence by email rather than in letter form.

Events in Parliament Buildings

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the advice given to the Speaker; (ii) how this advice was delivered; and (iii) the reasons why the advice was not put out to consultation, in relation to the introduction of the interim criteria on events in Parliament Buildings. (AQW 5515/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response:

(i) the advice given to the Speaker;

At a meeting of the Assembly Commission (the Commission) on Monday 25 February 2008 members discussed a range of issues relating to the holding of events at Parliament Buildings that were already, or had the potential to become, politically sensitive in nature. An initial paper outlining the handling of such events on previous occasions was presented by Assembly officials to all members of the Commission, including the Speaker. Members agreed to adjourn the meeting in order to consider the issues set out in that paper and to consult with their party groups.

Following that meeting, and acting in his capacity as Chairperson of the Commission the Speaker met with each Commission Member to discuss the issues surrounding proposed events. Following these discussions the Speaker asked Assembly officials to prepare a draft paper to include a number of options for revising and reviewing the criteria upon which events may be organised at Parliament Buildings, within the context of the Commission's obligation to develop good relations.

Following further consultation on that draft paper with individual Commission members the paper was tabled at a meeting of the Commission on Wednesday 5 March, and discussed at that meeting and a subsequent meeting on Thursday 6 March. Legal advice was sought by officials when drafting that paper. A verbal report on that advice was given to all members of the Commission, including the Speaker, at the meeting on Wednesday 5 March and a written copy of the advice was presented by the Assembly's acting Director of Legal Services at the meeting on Thursday 6 March. He also responded to specific questions from Commission members.

(ii) how this advice was delivered;

The Speaker received verbal advice from Assembly officials in advance of each meeting of the Commission, and written advice in the form of the two papers that were presented to all members of the Commission. All members of the Commission, including the Speaker, received both verbal and written reports of legal advice, as detailed in response to part i. above.

and

(iii) the reasons why the advice was not put out to consultation, in relation to the introduction of the interim criteria on events in Parliament Buildings.

In advance of the second paper being tabled the Speaker consulted with each member of the Commission. Once tabled, it was for the Commission to consider how to proceed in relation to the options presented.

The Commission agreed the following:

- i. To request officials to bring forward a paper on the establishment of a Good Relations Working Group, including recommendations on composition, procedures and remit;
- ii. That the remit of a Good Relations Working Group would include a review of the policy on events at Parliament Buildings, including arrangements and criteria for sponsorship;
- iii. That pending consideration of any recommendations arising from the work of that Working Group, interim criteria would be put in place for

the organisation and sponsorship of events at Parliament Buildings.

It is envisaged that in fulfilling its remit, including a review of policy on events at Parliament Buildings, any Good Relations Working Group will wish to consult widely.

Booking Procedure

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5068/08, for a copy of the legal advice given to the Commission in relation to the term 'cross community' in its new booking procedure. (AQW 5570/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): As stated in the Commission's response to your previous Assembly Question, when officials were preparing the paper entitled 'Events at Parliament Buildings' dated 4 March 2008, they discussed the paper and its content with the Assembly's acting Director of Legal Services. Written and verbal advice on the powers of the Commission in relation to events and accommodation was then provided to the Commission on 6 March.

In the interests of protecting the ability of the Commission to freely discuss matters with and take advice from its legal advisers, we do not propose to release a copy of any legal advice given.

Good Relations Working Group

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5069/08, to provide a timescale within which the remit for the Good Relations Working Group will be available; and to detail the basis on which it is consulting with the Community Relations Council in relation to the proposed remit. (AQW 5573/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): A paper is currently being prepared for submission to an Assembly Commission meeting on the 24 April 2008. This paper will set out the key issues in relation to the Assembly Commission's statutory obligation to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations.

Following the Commission's consideration of this paper, decisions may be taken on the Group's remit and on any further consultation to be undertaken.

Event Sponsorship

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5068/08, to confirm if it (i) allows MLAs to sponsor events for members of the public; and (ii) fully implements the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 when dealing with (a) the public; (b) sponsors; and (c) agents. (AQW 5574/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response:

- (i) The Commission can confirm that it permits MLAs to sponsor events by members of the public or organisations who want to hold events in Parliament Buildings. The Member must satisfy themselves of the nature of the event to be organised, obtain necessary information and follow the procedures to book the event via the Events Office. As long as the event being booked meets the Assembly Commission's policy on events and functions, the event can be confirmed and held.
- (ii) It is not the task of the Commission to implement the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, but I am glad to assure you that the Commission complies fully with all the statutory duties imposed by the Order.

Section 75

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission, further to AQW 5072/08, (i) on what basis was Duncan Morrow chosen to deliver Section 75 briefing to the Speaker and senior officials; (ii) what payment was made for this briefing; and (iii) has the Commission any plans to provide training on all aspects of Section 75 to members of the Commission by the Equality Commission. (AQW 5575/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response:

- (i) on what basis was Duncan Morrow chosen to deliver Section 75 briefing to the Speaker and senior officials;

The briefing to which the reply to AQW 5072/08 referred was focused on the duty placed upon the Assembly Commission to "have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations" as set out in Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Mr Morrow was chosen to deliver that briefing on the basis of his position as Chief Executive of the Community Relations Council and his experience as a member of the Good Relations Steering Panel of Belfast City Council.

- (ii) what payment was made for this briefing;

No payment was made for this briefing.

and

- (iii) has the Commission any plans to provide training on all aspects of Section 75 to members of the Commission by the Equality Commission.

The Equality Commission as an organisation does not deliver Section 75 training externally, however we will shortly be going out to tender to secure the services of a training provider who can deliver Section 75 and other equality training to all secretariat staff. It is also envisaged that the training provider will be asked to deliver training to Members of the Assembly Commission.

Information Booklets

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission if information booklets on the Assembly are available in a range of different languages, and if so how many languages are catered for. (AQW 5578/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly does not currently publish information booklets in any language other than English. However one of the objectives contained within the Assembly's Business Plans for the current year is to carry out a review of all public information literature. This will include an assessment of the need for this literature to be published in other languages.

You may be interested to know that an electronic translation of the Draft Equality Scheme was produced in Irish. Braille and large print copies of the Disability Action Plan were also produced.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 25 April 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Integrated Development Fund

Mr F McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what arrangements it has made to extend the Integrated Development Fund pilot scheme. (AQO 1500/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The future of the Integrated Development Fund (IDF) was considered as part of the broader work on central cross cutting programme funds, in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) 2007 process. As a result of these considerations the Northern Ireland Executive's Budget, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and Programme for Government covering the years 2008-09 to 2010-11 do not contain a provision for further allocations to central funds, including the IDF. This is on the basis that if the individual projects supported under these funds are considered to be of significant value then the funding provision should be "mainstreamed" by the relevant Departments, rather than being managed centrally. In these circumstances, there are no plans to review the IDF pilot scheme.

Funding for the outstanding IDF projects committed to in principle will be submitted for approval on a case by case basis, subject to the provision and approval of the required economic appraisals for the respective projects.

Integrated Development Fund

Mr P Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to review the Integrated Development Fund. (AQO 1501/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The future of the Integrated Development Fund (IDF) was considered as part of the broader work on central cross cutting programme funds, in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) 2007 process. As a result of these considerations the Northern Ireland Executive's Budget, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and Programme for Government covering the years 2008-09 to 2010-11 do not contain a provision for further allocations to central funds, including the IDF. This is on the basis that if the individual projects supported under these funds are considered to be of significant value then the funding provision should be "mainstreamed" by the relevant Departments, rather than being managed centrally. In these circumstances, there are no plans to review the IDF pilot scheme.

Funding for the outstanding IDF projects committed to in principle will be submitted for approval on a case by case basis, subject to the provision and approval of the required economic appraisals for the respective projects.

Flash Flooding

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps being taken by the Civil Contingency Policy Branch to deal with the threat of regular flash flooding. (AQW 4926/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The role of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) is to promote effective civil contingencies policy and development across the public sector. There is a well-established "lead department principle" which means that departments are responsible for civil contingencies within their policy sectors. Responsibility for preparing for and responding to coastal and river flooding rests with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); and responsibility for preparing for and responding to other types of flooding rests with the Department for Regional Development (DRD).

As part of its role in promoting effective civil contingencies development across the public sector, CCPB facilitated a review of the response to the June 2007 flooding on behalf of the Executive and is about to establish a multi-agency Severe Weather Group. The objectives of the group will be to assess the current capability of public services in Northern Ireland to respond to a severe weather incident and identify actions which could further strengthen resilience. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has agreed to chair the Severe Weather Group.

CO2 Emissions

Mr S Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps being taken to reduce CO₂ emissions. (AQW 4929/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland and its associated Implementation Plan contain a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025.

Lead responsibility for achievement of this target lies with the Department of the Environment, with contributions being made by the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, and by other Departments.

Actions are being taken in areas which include:

- Review of the NICS estate to determine suitable, and cost effective, renewables technology installations in public buildings by DFP;
- Implementation of the Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework by DETI;
- Schemes designed to support household energy efficiency by DSD; and
- Policy development in the area of transport emissions by DRD.

Commissioner for Children and Young People

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the budget that has been allocated to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (i) in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) for each of the next 3 years. (AQW 5139/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The budget allocation for the Commissioner for Children and Young People in each of the last three years (2005-08) was £1,897,000 per annum.

The Budget allocation for each of the next three years is as follows:

- 08/09 - £1,853,000
- 09/10 - £1,806,000
- 10/11 - £1,762,000

The year on year reduction relates to efficiency measures which have been applied to the administration element of the Commissioner's budget.

This allocation is without prejudice to the outcomes of the Commissioner's Article 24 Review of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Deloitte

Review on the effectiveness of the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland.

Sub Group on Children

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of meetings of the Ministerial sub group on children that have been held; and (ii) the dates of those meetings. (AQW 5349/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People has held two meetings to date. The meetings were held on 13 March 2008 and 10 April 2008.

Deloitte and Touche Research

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost of commissioning the Deloitte and Touche research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide. (AQW 5852/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The cost of commissioning Deloitte to conduct the research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide was £86,244. This cost was incurred during direct rule. A further £4,183 was spent on printing copies of the research report for circulation to Assembly Members.

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its plans to ensure that all departmental policies are rural-proofed. (AQW 5867/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM has developed a Policy Toolkit containing practical guidance for all Departments on the wide range of impact assessments, including rural proofing. Officials in OFMDFM apply the guidance provided in the development of policy.

Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of staff in their department who, since 8 May 2007, have (i) received official warnings; and (ii) faced disciplinary procedures. (AQW 6044/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Since 8 May 2007, 17 staff have received official warnings and one member of staff has faced disciplinary procedures.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Forest Service Staff

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of Forest Service staff who were transferred to the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in 2006, that have been on long-term sick leave in the last two years. (AQW 5483/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The percentage of staff who were transferred to the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in 2006, that have been on long-term sick leave in the last two years is 100% (2 staff transferred and both were on long-term sick leave).

Staff Meetings

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of occasions on which the department's personnel section has arranged meetings with members of staff in canteens, with the potential of members of the public being present, in each year since 2004; and to give her assessment of this practice. (AQW 5484/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are no records kept of such meetings since these are held on an ad-hoc basis. I am aware that some meetings do take place in canteens but these are infrequent and held in discreet areas with the agreement of the individual(s) concerned. I see no difficulty in this practice provided all parties are in agreement with the meeting arrangements and the location, and where there is no potential for anyone to overhear or disturb the meeting.

I can advise that both formal and informal meetings are held in designated conference or interview rooms.

Staff Suspension

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm if a member of staff is suspended from work for one working day, is it normal practice for the member of staff to be escorted from

the workplace and stripped of personal assets owned by the department (such as mobile telephones, keys, etc.). (AQW 5485/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Where a decision has been taken to suspend an officer, for whatever period, it is normal practice to discreetly escort the officer from the workplace. Immediately prior to this the officer will be asked to hand over all items/equipment in their possession which are Departmental property. Examples include mobile telephones, keys, security passes, IT equipment.

Townland Names

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action her department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5538/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department recognises the historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names and uses them where applicable in its documents and correspondence.

Generating Energy

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on her department's policy on generating energy from waste. (AQW 5555/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As outlined in the Renewable Energy Action Plan my Department recognises the opportunities presented by generating energy from agri-food waste.

The Department recognise that renewable energy technologies will create opportunities for livestock farmers as assessed and reported by the Expert Group on Alternative Use of Manures in March 2006.

Currently my Department are exploring the potential to develop an Energy from Agri-Food Waste Challenge Fund. An Agricultural Stakeholder Forum on Renewable Energy and a number of studies currently underway will inform the development of this fund.

The Agri-Food and Bio-Sciences Institute (AFBI) has a key role to play in the development of a Renewable Energy Centre of scientific excellence at AFBI Hillsborough. A dedicated programme of research will support the continued development of renewable energy options appropriate to the land based sector in the North.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) continue to deliver tailored education, training and technology transfer programmes to those entering and within the industry in the areas of energy efficiency and renewable energy deployment.

DARD work closely with DETI on renewable energy, there have been and will be continue to be numerous contacts between the two Departments at official level to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the development of renewable energy.

Farming Industry

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of times she has met formally with representatives of the farming industry since assuming office in May 2007. (AQW 5569/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have met with representatives of the farming industry on 70 occasions in my capacity as Minister since May 2007.

Forest Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how much notice (in working days) was given to employees transferred from the Forest Service to the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in 2006. (AQW 5576/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Those Forest Service staff, who transferred to the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in 2006, received formal transfer notes on their last working day 30 March 2006, before the effective date of transfer, 3 April 2006. However the staff had been aware of the likelihood of transfer for several months and had been verbally informed of the decision to transfer the training function from Forest Service to College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise approximately three weeks prior to the receipt of formal transfer notes. The planned date of transfer was known by the staff at least four working days before receipt of the formal note of transfer.

Katesbridge Farm Raid

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her department was aware that those who were responsible for the farm near Katesbridge that was raided by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals on Friday 4 April

2008, had convictions for animal cruelty and were banned from keeping livestock. (AQW 5582/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: This case is currently under investigation by the PSNI, assisted by veterinary and enforcement staff from my Department. While I cannot speculate on who was responsible, my Department is aware of animal welfare convictions and disqualifications applying to a number of people associated with the holding in Katesbridge. One person was convicted and disqualified as recently as 28 March 2008.

Animal Exports

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of live animal exports from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland that subsequently went straight to slaughter, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5602/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table summarises the number of live animals exported from the North. As DARD only records figures for exports from the North the relevant Departments in the South and Britain were asked to provide figures for their jurisdictions. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF), Dublin have advised that they can only provide figures for 2008 exports to date. However, whilst a very limited set of figures can be produced they could not be provided within the timescale of this Assembly Question. The Department for environment, food and rural affairs (Defra), London have advised that they do not hold the figures requested.

Year	No of direct slaughter exports from the North (including to Britain)
2003	350,406
2004	359,847
2005	212,376
2006	331,621
2007	333,861
2008 (up to 11 April)	66,532

Tank Costs

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 5081/08, if the actual costs agreed by a chartered quantity surveyor in relation to these tanks should be reviewed, and to confirm that farmers should not be penalised on

account of the length of time it takes her department to deliver. (AQW 5609/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department does not intend to review actual costs agreed by a chartered quantity surveyor as the revision of upper limits for items would be inconsistent and would allow inflation on some aspects of projects and not others.

I am aware that farmers have had to absorb the cost of inflation in their projects. However, I would emphasise that this is not due to any processing delay by the Department following my securing of budget last June.

Budget is available to ensure that all farmers who applied have an opportunity for grant and the budget secured was based on costs at application. Since receiving assurance of the budget availability I am pleased to note that my Department has made significant progress in delivering this scheme.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the estimated number of farmers who do not meet the required storage capacity for slurry following the ending of the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. (AQW 5618/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that some 18,700 farms either have sufficient existing slurry storage or are planning to invest in additional storage through the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) to meet the minimum slurry storage requirement of the Nitrates Directive Action Programme.

The remaining 8000 farms had the option of applying to the FNMS and did not. It is likely that these are smaller farms with relatively extensive farming practices. They may chose to reduce stock numbers, rent additional storage off farm or change farm management practices to meet the minimum slurry storage requirement.

The exact number of farmers who do not meet the minimum slurry storage requirement in future will depend on a range of variable factors including the storage available to them either on or off farm, livestock numbers and farm management practices.

Replanted Woodland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of land, in hectares, where woodland was replanted in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 5621/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The area of Forest Service forest replanted in each of the last 3 years is set out below.

2004/2005	903 hectares
2005/2006	840 hectares
2006/2007	750 hectares

In addition, 233 hectares of the estate is currently under re-establishment by natural regeneration.

Fishing Industry

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of times she has formally met with representatives of the fishing industry since May 2008. (AQW 5656/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since May 2007 I have met with representatives of the fishing industry on 13 occasions.

Flood Protection Measures

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount she has invested in flood protection measures, broken down by (i) parliamentary constituency; and (ii) local government district, over each of the last five years. (AQW 5659/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD, Rivers Agency as the statutory drainage and flood defence authority for Northern Ireland provides flood protection measures in relation to flooding from rivers and the sea.

Rivers Agency does not hold the amounts invested in flood protection measures broken down by parliamentary constituency. The figures set out below detail the capital expenditure on flood defence schemes over the last five calendar years by District Council area.

District Council Area	2003 £	2004 £	2005 £	2006 £	2007 £
Antrim	1,244,051	258,646	41,928	6,583	16,372
Ards	64,332	48,221	3,477		
Armagh	65,193	35,318			
Ballymena	145,800	133,143	102,189	11,611	330
Banbridge	14,371	263,877	216,872	38,673	39,358
Belfast	279,791	18,710	375		7,299
Carrickfergus	220,880			24,842	203,119

District Council Area	2003 £	2004 £	2005 £	2006 £	2007 £
Coleraine	17,310	89,996	541,840	50,120	26,393
Cookstown				700	
Craigavon	378,282	314,165	16,556	694	12,872
Derry	35,360	543,076	374,014	5,994	13,361
Down		377,060	672,544	217,029	47,264
Dungannon	68,494	2,286			
Fermanagh	235,581	706,452	777,302	1,418,942	602,517
Larne	52,345	25,884		345	1,628
Limavady	172,830	234,093	67,475	972	12,615
Lisburn	11,010	198,395	279,574	457,340	333,153
Magherafelt	164,755	15,926	101,280	74,824	397,183
Newry & Mourne	458,475	874,617	1,482,690	3,548,136	1,227,008
Newtown-abbey	2,140	236,515	20,410	6,215	1,819
North Down	513	85,747	14,058	922	82
Strabane	274,167	188,434	2,875		
Totals	3,905,679	4,650,561	4,715,461	5,863,941	2,942,374

In addition the Rivers Agency undertakes an annual maintenance programme of designated watercourses, sea defences and grilles to minimise the risk of flooding. The maintenance costs for the last five financial years are detailed below. These figures are not held by parliamentary constituency or by District Council area.

2002/03 £'000	2003/04 £'000	2004/05 £'000	2005/06 £'000	2006/07 £'000
2485	3978	2861	2118	1567

Bulls Imported

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of bulls imported in each of the last six months, broken down by breed and age. (AQW 5709/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of bulls imported in each of the last six months and in April to date are shown in the table below:

Month of import	Breed	Number imported 30 months of age or under	Number imported over 30 months of age
October	Charolais	16	1
	Salers	0	1
	Aberdeen-Angus	7	0
	Friesian	1	0
	Hereford	3	0
	Limousin	8	0
	Parthenais	1	0
	Shorthorn	1	0
	Simmental	5	0
November	Charolais	5	2
	Salers	1	0
	Aberdeen-Angus	3	0
	Friesian	1	0
November	Limousin	4	0
	Holstein	2	0
	Montbeliarde	2	0
	Simmental	4	0
December	Charolais	11	0
	Friesian	3	1
	Hereford	0	1
	Limousin	10	1
	Holstein	14	0
	Montbeliarde	2	0
	Simmental	2	0
	Maine Anjou	1	0
	Ayrshire	2	0
	Belted Galloway	1	0
	Galloway	0	1

Month of import	Breed	Number imported 30 months of age or under	Number imported over 30 months of age
January	Charolais	2	1
	Aberdeen-Angus	2	0
	Friesian	4	0
	Limousin	1	0
	Holstein	21	2
	Shorthorn	0	1
	Montbeliarde	1	0
	Ayrshire	1	0
	Belted Galloway	2	0
	Galloway	1	0
	Blonde D'Aquitaine	1	0
	Danish Red	1	0
	Jersey	2	0
February	Charolais	10	0
	Salers	2	0
	Aberdeen-Angus	2	0
	Friesian	2	1
	Hereford	1	0
	Limousin	13	0
	Holstein	2	0
	Shorthorn	1	0
	Montbeliarde	2	0
February	Simmental	3	1
	Ayrshire	2	0
	Belted Galloway	0	1
	Belgian Blue	2	1
	Blue Albion	1	0
	Lincoln Red	1	0
	Longhorn	1	0

Month of import	Breed	Number imported 30 months of age or under	Number imported over 30 months of age
March	Charolais	15	1
	Aberdeen-Angus	6	0
	Friesian	5	0
	Hereford	1	0
	Limousin	16	0
	Holstein	4	0
	Simmental	2	0
	Blonde D'Aquitaine	1	0
	Belgian Blue	4	0
April (to date)	Charolais	2	0
	Aberdeen-Angus	2	0
	Hereford	1	0
	Limousin	10	0
	Blond D'Aquitaine	1	0

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she plans to introduce legislation which would make it mandatory for all departmental policies to be rural-proofed. (AQW 5720/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As set out in the Programme for Government I am currently looking at reinvigorating the rural proofing process and defining the role of a rural champion. The Programme for government also outlines my intention to develop a Rural White Paper and these important initiatives will help ensure that rural issues are given due consideration within Government. My Department will be consulting later this year on how rural proofing can be enhanced and the issue of a legislative base will be considered as part of that consultation.

Fishing Industry

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to estimate the value the fishing industry to the Northern Ireland economy. (AQW 5766/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Provisional figures for 2007 estimate the value of sea fish landed into our ports at £20.5m.

For the fish processing sector the latest data available is for 2005. In that year gross turnover was £77.9 million.

Farming and Fishing Figures

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, for the 2006-07 financial year, (i) the total number of farmers; (ii) the total amount paid out by her department in the form of Single-Farm payments; (iii) the number of fishing boats registered at ports; and (iv) the total amount of funding made available to the fishing industry through the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance.

(AQW 5824/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: £220.79m (excluding modulation) was paid to 39,426 farmers in respect of Single Farm Payments for the 2006 scheme year.

Figures for the number of fishing boats registered at ports is only available on a calendar year basis and is outlined below:-

- 2006 - 326 boats
- 2007 - 321 boats.

The total amount of funding made available to the fishing industry through the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance was £26.54m of which £5.55m was committed during 2006/07.

Single Farm Payments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Single Farm Payments that are still outstanding in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 5859/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Single Farm Payment (SFP) Branch (The Department) does not hold SFP details on a constituency basis. The data is currently held by county/postcode.

Woodland Planting

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to address the shortfall in woodland planting and targets not being met. (AQW 5865/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Forest Service has met its targets to

establish new plantations in the public and private sector combined over the previous three years. The targets and outturn of new woodland area created are as follows:

Year	Target	Outturn
2007-2008	550 ha of new plantation including 100 ha of Short Rotation Coppice	552 ha of new plantation including 275 ha of Short Rotation Coppice
2006-2007	500 ha of new plantation including 100ha of Short Rotation Coppice	549 ha of new plantation including 195 ha of Short Rotation coppice
2005-2006	500 ha of new plantation	606 ha of new plantation

Forest Service will continue to provide grant aid and advice to encourage the creation of new woodlands and the sustainable management of existing woodland through the forestry measures in the Rural Development Programme.

This year, Forest Service also intends to improve the awareness among farmers and landowners of the benefits of woodland creation through a series of events and media opportunities.

Abattoir in Downpatrick

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the contact her department has had with the Planning Service in relation to the planning application for an abattoir in Downpatrick, lodged by Finnebrogue Venison. (AQW 5873/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Ian Pearson, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, liaised with Angela Smith - former Minister responsible for the Planning Service - in January 2005 to ascertain if the Planning Service had taken into account the potential economic consequences when considering the planning application and the subsequent appeal.

My Department officials involved in the administration of project claims have been in regular contact with the Planning Service in relation to the Finnebrogue project. This is in a general capacity to determine if planning approval has been granted. This information has been used to inform budget profiling for the scheme.

Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update of the progress that has been made in the implementation

of the Rural Development Programme, particularly measure 1.3 - 'Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings'. (AQW 5892/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: You will be aware that the objective of Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (NIRDP) is to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors by supporting restructuring, development and innovation. The total budget of the Axis is approximately £45 million, and Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings is supported under measure 1.3.

Axis 1 also supports: measure 1.1, Vocational Training and Information Actions; measure 1.2, Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability; and measure 1.4, the Supply Chain Development Programme.

An economic appraisal of Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings is currently being carried out by external consultants. That should be completed by the end of April, after which it will require clearance from my Resource and Economics Branch and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

My officials are working on the terms of reference and operating guidelines necessary to appoint a third-party delivery agent to administer the scheme. A list of eligible items of equipment that will attract the grant and lead to modernisation across all farming sectors is also being prepared. Those documents cannot be finalised until the economic appraisal process is complete, but I expect that the measure will be open in full for applications before the end of 2008.

Regarding measure 2.1, I can confirm that Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances for both 2007 and 2008 have been paid under the new programme.

Measure 2.2, the Agri-environment Programme, will be delivered through the new and improved Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) and the Organic Farming Scheme. Legislation passed through the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on 8 April. Scheme literature and computer delivery mechanisms for the NICMS are at an advanced stage of development. It is anticipated that the NICMS will open to applications in late spring or early summer 2008.

There are three forestry measures in the NIRDP. All are open for applications, and some existing commitments have been carried forward from the previous programme. Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) is part of measure 1.3, Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings. The establishment of SRC under the measure is designed to assist the development of wider renewable energy markets. Approximately 270

hectares of SRC were planted last year, with a further 122 hectares approved for planting in 2008.

The aim of Measure 2.3, First Afforestation, is to promote a steady expansion of tree cover to increase the diverse benefits that forests provide. Approximately 287 hectares were planted under the measure last year.

Measure 2.4, Forest Environments, grant-aids environmental improvements to existing woodland, for example, control of the rhododendron and replanting a greater range of tree species after harvesting to encourage biodiversity. Approximately 87 hectares were grant-aided under the measure.

Axis 3, quality-of-life measures, of the NIRDP, which aim to improve the quality of life in rural areas and encourage diversification of the rural economy, will be delivered by seven Joint Council Clusters, each in partnership with a newly appointed Local Action Groups (LAG). The Axis 3 has been allocated £100 million of funding, within which up to (20%) may be utilised for local animation and support of the bottom up (Leader) delivery mechanisms stipulated by the EU.

The animation activity necessary to stimulate the new cluster areas is mostly completed. The Ards Cluster has selected a Local Action Group while Antrim and Cookstown have opened calls for their Local Action Groups. Ballymena and Omagh intend making their call this week and Armagh cluster has commenced animation of its area. I anticipate that my Department will open a call for development strategies at the beginning of May and the closing date for completed strategies will be 31st July.

Cappagh Burn

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm if she will instruct her department to designate Cappagh Burn, and immediately engage in the maintenance of this water course. (AQW 5924/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD is not responsible for designation of watercourses. The designation of watercourses for maintenance by DARD Rivers Agency, at public expense, is determined by the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland as provided for under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973.

Proposals for designation of watercourses should meet objective criteria whereby intervention at public expense is justified and these guide Rivers Agency in making recommendations to the Drainage Council. Rivers Agency has no plans to submit proposals to the Drainage Council to consider designation of the

Cappagh Burn as maintenance is considered to be within the capabilities of riparian landowners.

It is open to any person to make a submission to the Drainage Council requesting designation of a watercourse, and I would suggest that you may wish to consider this.

Killyclogher Burn

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's plans to conduct a survey of the Killyclogher Burn, with a view to generating measures that will protect the river bank from erosion. (AQW 5925/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department carries out annual inspections of this watercourse and the latest inspection did not indicate that any structures were affected by erosion of the river bank. The level of expenditure to provide further bank protection to the properties at Knock-na-moe Bungalows could not be justified under benefit – cost considerations.

Killyclogher Burn

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide (i) an update on the survey carried out on Branch B of the Killyclogher Burn, affecting the Knock-Na-Moe Bungalows; and (ii) an indicative timeline for the completion of remedial works at this location. (AQW 5926/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The survey carried out on Branch B of the Killyclogher Burn at Knock-Na-Moe Bungalows has indicated several structural deficiencies in the watercourse culvert that require remedial works. Cost beneficial options for the remedial works to address flooding are currently being considered and the preferred option for the works will be submitted to the Drainage Council for consideration at a future meeting. Subject to Drainage Council acceptance, the works will be prioritised in the Rivers Agency works programme for 2009/2010.

Seed Potato

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a timescale within which her department will be in a position to open a tendering process for (i) companies; and (ii) individuals to bid to become a marketing partner in relation to the new varieties of seed potato developed by the Northern Ireland Horticultural and Plant Breeding Station, Loughgall. (AQW 6249/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have indicated that I would like to continue to support the public/private potato breeding partnership at AFBI, Loughgall. My officials are currently working up options and costings.

I know that the potato industry works to an annual cycle and so I aim to have any future partnership(s) in place for this year's harvest. With this in mind, I hope to make further contact with industry in the coming weeks.

Seed Potato

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the Quinn/Ultimo reviews on the need for new varieties of seed potato, to detail the steps she has taken to bring to market the stream of new varieties produced within the last 5 years. (AQW 6251/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My officials have worked to withdraw the commercialisation rights of the Loughgall potato varieties from the Department's previous commercial partner. All rights to these varieties currently rest with DARD/AFBI. At the present time DARD/AFBI have not decided what to do with the commercialisation rights to these varieties. One possible option would be to assign these to any new commercial partner(s).

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural 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 6285/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Neighbourhood Renewal Areas were defined under the Department for Social Development's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. This strategy targets the 36 most deprived urban areas over which my Department has no remit.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Loyal Orders

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the steps he is taking to assist the Loyal Orders in accessing Government support. (AQW 5608/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): In order to assist Loyal Orders in accessing Government support, the Department has set up a liaison group to facilitate dialogue with both Bands Associations and Loyal Orders. The liaison group will take the lead in identifying current and potential sources of public sector support for Loyal Orders. This will include highlighting areas of existing good practice which might be replicated in other areas.

Also, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland has, over the last two years, assisted the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland by visiting and providing preservation advice on records at Schomberg House, piloting digitisation of a sample of records held by Lodges and offering on-going advice on storage, preservation and access matters.

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to ensure that all departmental policies are rural-proofed. (AQW 5797/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: All DCAL policies are proofed, or have their impact assessed against a wide range of criteria including: equality, environmental, regulatory and rural tests. The Department makes use of the Integrated Impact Assessment tool (IIA) in undertaking the various assessment processes.

Protestant Working-Class Communities

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether he intends to continue to fund programmes recommended by the Taskforce on Protestant Working Class Communities. (AQW 5835/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Renewing Communities programme was supported by a 2 year funding package which ended in March 2008. The Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure has not provided funds to continue the pilot projects beyond that date.

The Re-Imaging Communities programme will continue with funding provided by the Arts Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the International Fund for Ireland. This programme is open to all communities.

Shooting Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the assistance he is giving to shooting sports in their preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games. (AQW 5899/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for assisting shooting sports in their preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games rests, in the first instance, with the governing bodies of the sports. Sport Northern Ireland, however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, administers the Athlete Support Programme which provides athletes with financial support to train, compete and access a range of support services such as coaching, sports science and sports medicine.

Shooting Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the incentives his department can offer beginners to the sport of shooting, in preparation of the 2012 London Olympic Games. (AQW 5900/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for providing incentives to beginners to the sport of shooting rests, in the first instance, with the governing bodies of the sports. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, invests in governing bodies through its lottery and exchequer budgets. In terms of shooting sports, any SNI participation programmes will fall under the remit of the respective shooting governing bodies.

Departmental Funding

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the funding his department has provided to (a) POBAL; and (b) the Ulster-Scots Agency; and (ii) the date on which these 2 organisations last submitted an annual report and accounts to his department. (AQW 5905/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has not provided funding to POBAL nor has it received any annual reports and accounts from the organisation.

As part of the North South Language Body, the Ulster-Scots Agency has received the following funding from DCAL:-

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
£0.5m	£0.97m	£1.07m	£1.16m	£1.34m	£1.36m	£1.61m	£1.93m

The annual reports and accounts from the Ulster-Scots Agency are consolidated and published with those for Foras na Gaeilge as the North South Language Body (NSLB). The last agreed published consolidated annual report and account for the NSLB was for the 2003 year.

Departmental Funding

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for the 2008-09 financial year, the funding allocated by his department to sports and recreation clubs in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 5938/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. Details of the exchequer funding allocated to sports and recreation clubs in the East Antrim constituency for the 2008/09 financial year are as follows:

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2008/09	Larne Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club 112-120 Glenarm Road Larne BT40 1DZ	Club house facilities	520,000

Departmental Funding

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, since May 2007, the funding allocated by his department to sports and recreation clubs in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 5939/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. Details of the exchequer funding allocated to sports and recreation clubs in the East Antrim constituency since May 2007 are as follows:

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2008/09	Larne Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club 112-120 Glenarm Road Larne BT40 1DZ	Club house facilities	520,000

Departmental Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding he has allocated to sports and recreation clubs in North Down parliamentary constituency for 2008/2009. (AQW 5992/08)

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 advised that, to date, no exchequer funding has been allocated to sports and recreation clubs in the North Down parliamentary constituency for 2008/2009.

Staff Absences

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of staff in his department that were absent due to stress for more than (i) 5 days; (ii) 10 days; (iii) 15 days; (iv) 20 days; (v) 25 days; (vi) 30 days; (vii) 35 days; and (viii) 40 days, broken down by grade. (AQW 6010/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Year	Number of Staff Absent with Work Related Stress
2003	None
2004	None
2005	1 Staff Officer or analogous absent more than 10 days
2006	1 Administrative Officer or analogous absent more than 10 days
2007	1 Administrative Officer or analogous absent more than 5 days 1 Staff Officer or analogous absent more than 10 days 1 Staff Officer or analogous absent more than 30 days 1 Deputy Principal or analogous absent more than 40 days

Armagh Observatory

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding available for the Armagh Observatory. (AQW 6012/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In 2008/09 the funding available for the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium is as follows:

Revenue:	£1.3m
Minor capital:	£0.05m
Cost of capital and depreciation:	£0.511m
Total:	1.861m

It is a matter for the Board of Governors of the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium to decide what proportion of that funding to allocate to the Armagh Observatory.

Football Grounds

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to AQW 5059/08, when the Health and Safety improvements for football grounds will commence. (AQW 6015/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for commencing health and safety improvements at football grounds rests, in the first instance, with the owners of the grounds. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, has been assisting owners implement health and safety improvements for some time through the Interim Safe Sports Grounds Scheme and the Stadia Safety Programme. This work is ongoing.

Maze Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the amount of money allocated towards a new stadium; (ii) when this money was allocated towards a new stadium; (iii) if this money is ringfenced for a new stadium; (iv) if this money is conditional on the new stadium being located at the Maze/Long Kesh site; and (v) whether this money could be used for a new stadium at a site other than the Maze/Long Kesh site (AQW 6045/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: An indicative allocation of £70 million has been made in the current budget period of 2008/09 to 2010/11 for the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium. The Outline Business Case, which presents a number of options on the Stadium, is presently being considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel. In the event of a decision not to proceed with the stadium proposal, the Department will seek approval from the Executive to reassign this funding. The Department will look to other priorities, initially within Sport, and then within its other programmes to utilise this money

Sport NI

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the progress of the recruitment process undertaken in relation to the appointment of a chairperson and vice-chairperson of Sport NI; and to detail (i) the reasons for the delay in

making these appointments; and (ii) when these posts will be filled. (AQW 6050/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: An appointment process for the position of Chair to the Board of Sport NI is ongoing. The previous appointment process did not provide a sufficient range of candidates from which I could make a choice and I therefore decided to extend the competition.

I expect to appoint a Chair to the Board of Sport NI in July 2008.

Mr Dominic Walsh was appointed as Vice- Chair from 1 January 2008 and is currently Acting Chair.

Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of staff in his department who, since 8 May 2007, have (i) received official warnings; and (ii) faced disciplinary procedures. (AQW 6141/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has

- (i) 14 staff who have received official warnings since 8 May 2007 however one was overturned on appeal.
- (ii) No staff who faced disciplinary procedures.

Maze Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of money spent by his department to date on proposals to have a Multi Sports stadium built at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQW 6155/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department has spent £3,397,835 to date on the proposals for a Multi-Sports Stadium. The large majority of this expenditure, £2,953,370, has been incurred on stadium design. Business planning, Programme, Management and other consultancy costs account for the balance of £444,465.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5356/08, to detail the proposals in the bid document relating to the opening and closing ceremonies for the World Police and Fire Games; and to confirm that these ceremonies are being held in the new stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQW 6165/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Further to my answer to AQW5356/08 I can confirm that the Belfast Bid Committee did state in their bid documentation that it was proposed that the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2013 World Police and Fire Games would be held at the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium at the Maze.

However, I would emphasise that this was a proposal and it will be for those with responsibility for the delivery of the Games to finalise the arrangements for the opening and closing ceremonies.

2012 Olympics Games

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to detail the current status of the Strategic Business Case for Elite Facilities Programme for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympic Games; (ii) to give a timescale within which Stage Two of the programme will begin; and (iii) to give a timescale within which bidders will be advised of the success or otherwise of their applications. (AQW 6203/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Strategic Outline Business Case for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme has been approved and Sport Northern Ireland has begun work on the next stage of the competition. This includes preparing a revised timeline for the delivery of the programme and Sport Northern Ireland will be in contact with those short listed in the near future.

EDUCATION**Assembly Questions**

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of requests she has received from MLAs to have answers to written Assembly questions translated into Irish. (AQW 4743/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I answer my questions in English and in Irish and I believe people should celebrate the diversity of language. Irish is the native language of Ireland and is protected and promoted in accordance with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. I take my statutory duties very seriously as I do my right to use the Irish language.

Is iomaí Comhalta de chuid an Tionóil seo a bhfuil an Ghaeilge luachmhar acu mar atá agamsa.

There are many Members of this Assembly who value Irish as I do.

Pay Award

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the current situation in relation to the pay award agreed with the joint negotiating council last year, and to give a timescale within which this payment will be implemented. (AQW 5073/08)

The Minister of Education: In accordance with the agreed pay policy process business cases for the implementation of the pay award for Education sector staff were submitted by DE to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in late February/March. My officials are currently progressing these cases in conjunction with DFP.

Pay remits covering the majority of staff have been agreed and payment of the new rate and arrears will commence in April.

Déanfaidh oifigigh s'agamsa iarracht a chinntiú go socrófar gach seoltán pá neamhioctha go gasta agus ar bhealach sásúil.

My officials will endeavour to ensure that all outstanding pay remits are brought to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion.

Educational Psychologists

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of pupils waiting for referral to an educational psychologist from (a) primary level schools; and (b) secondary level schools, and (ii) the waiting time for such a referral in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5149/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the numbers of pupils at primary and secondary level schools waiting for referral to an educational psychologist is not available as this data would be held at school level and would involve a disproportionate amount of staff time and resources to obtain.

Dá bharr sin, níl an t-aga feithimh d'atreorú mar sin ar fáil ach an oiread. Dhíreoinn aird an chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé do AQW 1314/08, ceist a chuir an Comhalta do Loch Cuan, Michelle McIlveen, síos agus a foilsíodh sa Tuarascáil Oifigiúil ar 9 Samhain 2007. Léiríonn an freagra sin cá fhad a bhí ar pháistí fanacht de ghnáth nuair a atreoraíodh iad le síceolaí oideachais a fheiceáil i ngach ceann de na cúig bliana acadúla dheireanacha.

Consequently the waiting time for such a referral is also not available. I would, however, refer the Member to my reply to AQW 1314/08, tabled by the Member for Strangford, Michelle McIlveen, and published in the Official Report on 9 November 2007 which details

the average waiting time for assessment by an educational psychologist, for each of the last five academic years, once a child has actually been referred.

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the disposal of the Bangor Grammar School site when the school is moved to the Gransha Road, Bangor. (AQW 5255/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní leis an Roinn Oideachais an suíomh atá in úsáid ag Scoil Ghramadaí Bheannachair agus, dá thairbhe sin, oibreoidh an Roinn i gcomhpháirtíocht leis an scoil maidir leis an suíomh a chur de láimh nuair a bheas an scoil lonnaithe ar a suíomh úr.

The Department of Education does not own the site occupied by Bangor Grammar School and thus disposal of the site will be managed in conjunction with the school once it relocates to its new site.

Ballywalter Primary School

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the provision of a new school building for Ballywalter Primary School. (AQW 5412/08)

The Minister of Education: A necessary step before a project to replace a building can be considered eligible for capital funding, is that there is an approved economic appraisal between the Department and the relevant authority. The timescale for a scheme is also dependent on the availability of funding.

De réir mar a thuigim, tá sé ar intinn ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt (BOLOD) measúnú geilleagrach athbhreithnithe a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne sna seachtainí amach romhainn i ndiaidh dó aiseolas a fháil ón Roinn ar leagan a cuireadh isteach ní ba luaithe.

I understand that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is planning to submit to the Department for consideration a revised economic appraisal within the next few weeks following comments on an earlier version from the Department.

Ballywalter Primary School

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to account for the delay in providing a new school building for Ballywalter Primary School. (AQW 5413/08)

The Minister of Education: A necessary step before a project to replace a building can be considered eligible for capital funding, is that there is an approved economic appraisal between the Department and the relevant authority. The timescale for a scheme is also dependent on the availability of funding.

De réir mar a thuigim, tá sé ar intinn ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt (BOLOD) measúnú geilleagrach athbhreithnithe a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne sna seachtainí amach romhainn i ndiaidh dó aiseolas a fháil ón Roinn ar leagan a cuireadh isteach ní ba luaithe.

I understand that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is planning to submit to the Department for consideration a revised economic appraisal within the next few weeks following comments on an earlier version from the Department.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 4713/08, to name who her department consulted on the Middletown Centre for Autism, and where, when and in what form this consultation took place. (AQW 5464/08)

The Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an Chomhalta ar fhreagraí a thug mise ar cheisteanna (AQWs) a cuireadh cheana. Soláthraíonn na freagraí sin sonraí den chomhairliúchán ar fad atá déanta ag an Roinn maidir le hIonad Uathachais Choilidh Chanannáin.

I would refer the member to my replies to previous AQWs which provide details of all consultation carried out by the Department regarding the Middletown Centre for Autism. These are AQW 29/08 – published 28 September 2007; AQW 777/08 – published 26 October 2007; AQW 778/08 & AQW 779/08 – published 2 November 2007. All of these AQWs were tabled by the Member for South Down, John McCallister.

Allegations Against Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of instances of pupils making allegations against teachers in each of the last five years; and (ii) the number of cases in which these allegations were proved to be false or unfounded. (AQW 5471/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not hold the information sought.

This information is held only by schools. A special exercise would be required to collect data on all

allegations made against teachers by pupils and those subsequently deemed to be false or unfounded. This information once collected from schools would then need to be collated for presentation. There are no plans to undertake such an exercise.

Cuirtear comhairle ar an Roinn i gcás go gcuirtear múinteoir ar fionraí mar réamhchúram de bharr líomhna ina (h)aghaidh. Is féidir múinteoir a chur ar fionraí ar chúiseanna éagsúla, áfach, seachas imscrúdú a bheith ar bun mar go ndearna dalta líomhain.

The Department is advised when an allegation against a teacher has led to a precautionary suspension. However, such a suspension may be imposed for reasons other than the active investigation of an allegation made by a pupil.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each Education and Library Board area, (i) the number of classroom assistants by gender; and (ii) the number of male and female classroom assistants who are on permanent and temporary contracts respectively. (AQW 5580/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh leagtha amach sa tábla thíos. Chuir na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlann an t-eolas sin ar fáil maidir le cuiditheoirí ranga a bhí fostaithe ag na Boird ar 1 Eanáir 2008.

The information requested is set out in the table below and has been provided by the Education and Library Boards in respect of classroom assistants employed by the Boards at 1 January 2008.

As some classroom assistants can have more than one contract, the figures are based on the number of contracts rather than the actual number of classroom assistants which total approximately 6,500.

NUMBER OF CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS CONTRACTS IN THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS AT 1 JANUARY 2008 (BROKEN DOWN BY GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT TYPE)

BELB				WELB				NEELB				SEELB				SELB			
Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T
12	35	370	643	7	12	1015	417	5	19	833	566	9	8	994	419	3	10	856	1226
47		1013		19		1432		24		1399		17		1413		13		2082	
1060				1451				1423				1430				2095			

Key

BELB: Belfast Education and Library Board, **WELB:** Western Education and Library Board, **NEELB:** North Eastern Education and Library Board
SEELB: South Eastern Education and Library Board, **SELB:** Southern Education and Library Board, **P:** Permanent contract, **T:** Temporary contract

Religious Education

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers employed in primary schools who hold a certificate in religious education recognised by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 5586/08)

The Minister of Education: Thug Príomhfheidhmeannach Chomhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil le fios go bhfuil teastas san Oideachas Réiligiúnach ag 3610 múinteoir in Eanáil na Bunscolaíochta.

The Chief Executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has advised that there are 3610 teachers in possession of an RE certificate in the Primary Sector.

School Closure

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education if it is a legal requirement for the South Eastern Education and Library Board to fully consult with parents before deciding to recommend the closure of any school. (AQW 5596/08)

The Minister of Education: Any Education and Library Board proposing to close a school is required to publish a Development Proposal to support that intent. Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 is the primary statutory provision on the publication of development proposals. The publication of a Development Proposal initiates a two month consultation period on the proposal.

Sonraíonn Airteagal 24 de Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 an gá atá le comhairliúchán leis an Bhord Gobharnóirí,

le múinteoirí agus le tuismitheoirí na ndaltaí atá cláraithe ag an scoil áirithe; ní mór an comhairliúchán sin a dhéanamh sula bhfoilsítear a dhath.

Article 24 of the Education and Libraries Order 2003, specifies the requirement, prior to publication, for consultation with the Board of Governors, teachers and parents of registered pupils at the school concerned.

Priority Written Questions

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the length of time it has taken, on average, for her to answer two-day priority written questions. (AQW 5651/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó cineachadh cumhacht chugainn d'fhreagair Roinn s'agamsa 67 ceist scríofa a raibh tosaíocht dhá lá acu. Ghlac sé 10 lá ar meán chun na ceisteanna sin a fhreagairt.

Since devolution my Department has answered 67 two-day priority written questions. The average time taken to answer these questions is 10 working days.

Killard Special School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which the new build will commence for Killard Special school in Newtownards. (AQW 5667/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt an scéim chaipitiúil móroibreacha do Killard House ar athlár, go dtí go gcríochnófar an t-athbhreithniú reatha ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais, mar gur mian leo a chinntiú go bhfuil moladh s'acusan i gcomhréir le toradh an Athbhreithnithe.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has placed the proposed capital major works scheme for Killard House on hold, pending the outcome of the current review of special educational needs, as they wish to ensure that their proposal is consistent with the outcome of the Review.

Newtownbreda Primary School

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education to clarify the proposal to close Newtownbreda primary school in Belfast, given that amalgamation with other schools in the area could be an alternative to closure. (AQW 5688/08)

The Minister of Education: Newtownbreda is a controlled primary school within the remit of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB).

The Board has advised that amalgamation is an option that they are considering but they are only at an early stage of consultation and have not as yet made any firm proposals on the future of this school.

Bheadh tacaíocht i bhfoirm moladh forbartha foilsithe de dhíth ar aon mholadh a thiofais amach as an phróiseas seo. Beidh tréimhse reachtúil 2 mhí mar pháirt den phróiseas; is féidir le daoine teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an Roinn le linn na tréimhse sin le barúil a thabhairt nó le cur i gcoinne an mholta sula ndéanfar cinneadh.

Any proposal that does emerge from this process would require the support of a published development proposal. The process includes a statutory 2-month period during which comment or objection may be offered to my Department before a decision is made.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the mechanism for recruiting new independent board members to the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 5723/08)

The Minister of Education: General interest category board members are appointed through open competition. The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 requires that 3 of the general interest members must be teachers in grant-aided schools in the board area and 3 must have declared a specific interest in the public library service.

Athrinneadh Boird na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlann i 2005 agus ceapadh comhaltaí le haghaidh tréimhse 4 bliana; tá an tréimhse sin le críochnú i 2009.

Boards of Education and Library Boards were last reconstituted in 2005 with members appointed for a 4 year term; this is due to end in 2009.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of the Commissioners in the South Eastern Education and Library Board since July 2006. (AQW 5725/08)

The Minister of Education: Thug Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt le fios gurbh é £164,142 an tsuim iomlán, costais san áireamh, a d'íoc sé le Coimisiniéirí ó ceapadh iad ar 6 Iúil 2006 go dtí deireadh mhí Feabhra 2008.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that the total amount, including expenses, paid to the Commissioners since their appointment on 6 July 2006 until the end of February 2008 is £164,142.

Primary School Principals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) male; and (ii) female, primary school principals, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5907/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the following table.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Board	Gender	Numbers
BELB	Female	44
	Male	37
	Total	81
WELB	Female	110
	Male	69
	Total	179
NEELB	Female	102
	Male	100
	Total	202
SEELB	Female	56
	Male	92
	Total	148
SELB	Female	105
	Male	113
	Total	218

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Board	Gender	Numbers
BELB	Female	961
	Male	194
	Total	1155
WELB	Female	1203
	Male	251
	Total	1454

Board	Gender	Numbers
NEELB	Female	1569
	Male	248
	Total	1817
SEELB	Female	1369
	Male	278
	Total	1647
SELB	Female	1596
	Male	303
	Total	1899

Primary School Teachers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) male; and (ii) female, primary school teachers, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5909/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Board	Gender	Numbers
BELB	Female	44
	Male	37
	Total	81
WELB	Female	110
	Male	69
	Total	179
NEELB	Female	102
	Male	100
	Total	202
SEELB	Female	56
	Male	92
	Total	148
SELB	Female	105
	Male	113
	Total	218

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Board	Gender	Numbers
BELB	Female	961
	Male	194
	Total	1155
WELB	Female	1203
	Male	251
	Total	1454
NEELB	Female	1569
	Male	248
	Total	1817
SEELB	Female	1369
	Male	278
	Total	1647
SELB	Female	1596
	Male	303
	Total	1899

Statemented Children

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who have been statemented, broken down by Education and Library Board area.
(AQW 5943/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

Pupils with statements of Special Educational Need, 2007/08

School level	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Pre school	11	29	27	19	20	106
Primary (Year 1-7)	423	683	732	1,234	1,438	4,510
Post primary	456	744	738	994	1,231	4,163
Special	1,061	695	1,007	1,055	377	4,195
Total	1,951	2,151	2,504	3,302	3,066	12,974

Source: School census in the north of Ireland

Note: Figures for the pre-school sector include nursery and reception pupils in primary schools and children in nursery schools and in funded places in voluntary and private pre-school centres

Integrated Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to report on the viability criteria for integrated schools.
(AQO 3002/08)

The Minister of Education: Cé go bhfuil dualgas ar an Roinn Oideachais an t-oideachas imeasctha a spreagadh agus a éascú, le bheith i dteideal maoinithe phoiblí caithfidh gach scoil nua riachtanais reachtúla éagsúla agus riachtanais eile a shásamh.

While the Department of Education has a duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, in order to qualify for public funding, all new schools have to satisfy a number of statutory and other requirements. The viability criteria include:

Minimum pupil intake figures which are as follows:

- a 15-pupil intake in year 1 for new primary schools in Belfast and Derry;
- a 12-pupil intake in year 1 in primary schools elsewhere; and
- a 50-pupil intake in year 8 for secondary schools

A new integrated school must attract 30% of its pupils from the minority community, be that Protestant or Catholic, in the area where the school is situated.

Existing schools, transforming to integrated status, must demonstrate the ability to achieve a minimum of 10% of their 1st year intake drawn from the minority tradition within the school's enrolment and the potential to achieve a minimum of 30% in the longer term.

Under the criteria, September 2007 saw the recognition by the Department of Education of Rowandale Integrated Primary School, and the transformation to integrated status of Ballycastle Primary School, Tyrella Primary School and Crumlin High School.

In addition I approved the establishment of Blackwater Integrated College with effect from September 2008. This scheme sees the amalgamation of Down Academy, a transformed integrated school, and Rowallane Integrated College, an independent integrated school. It demonstrates the flexibility of the criteria and the imaginative approaches being taken to the development of the integrated sector.

Single Education Authority

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she intends to inform the Assembly of her decision on the future role of local councillors in relation to the proposed Single Education Authority.
(AQO 2973/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo Roinn ag cur bailchríche ar an chéad Bhille de dhá Bhille le hAthbheithniú an Riaracháin Phoiblí san oideachas a chur i bhfeidhm.

My Department is currently finalising the first of two Bills to implement the Review of Public Administration in education. I intend to bring the first Bill forward before the summer recess.

In finalising the Bill there are a number of matters that I wish to give careful consideration to. These include:

- Equality.
- Local democratic accountability, in terms of both the membership of the Education and Skills Authority, and its working relationships with local councils and other public bodies;
- The employing authority role of the ESA in relation to staff in schools, and

The RPA is the most significant reform of education administration in over 30 years, and I want to be satisfied that the new arrangements will deliver the necessary strategic changes in education, whilst underpinning local democratic accountability. I also want to take the opportunity to ensure that the promotion of equality is mainstreamed into all aspects of the education system.

I intend to make a decision on these matters in the very near future. At that point I will advise the Education Committee, and offer the Committee an opportunity to comment on the draft legislation before taking it to the Executive.

Modern Languages

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps she is taking to increase the uptake of modern languages at GCSE level. (AQO 3022/08)

The Minister of Education: Is maith a aithním an tábhacht atá le foghlaim teanga. Creidim go dtig le foghlaim na dara teanga cuidiú lenár n-aos óg a bheith ina ndaoine cruthaitheacha, muiníneacha agus deaslabhartha a fhéadann páirt iomlán a imirt sa tsochaí agus a fhéadann barr a gcumais a bhaint amach.

I very much recognise the importance of language learning. I believe that learning a second language can help our young people to become creative, confident and articulate individuals, able to play their full part in society and to achieve to their full potential.

We are living in an increasingly diverse society across the island of Ireland and competing in a global marketplace. We know from experience in other European countries, and our own Irish-medium sector,

that an early start to learning a second language is a key way of ensuring success.

I believe that, if we engage young people in language learning from an early age, they will develop greater confidence and enjoyment in their language skills and this can only encourage more young people to want to continue learning a language at post-primary level and seek qualifications at GCSE level and beyond.

There is good work already happening in our primary schools in teaching modern languages. To support more primary schools in delivering this, I am putting a programme in place from this school year, providing peripatetic tutors to support those primary schools who wish to offer Spanish and Irish. Tutors have been recruited and will be starting to work in schools from the summer school term. I am pleased to report a high level of interest among primary schools and very positive feedback from the awareness-raising events held for teachers in March.

At post-primary level, schools are encouraged to offer a wider range of modern languages and the revised curriculum provides them with greater flexibility to do so. Instead of being limited to offering 1 of only 5 languages as previously, schools are now able to choose any of the languages of the 27 EU member states to meet the minimum requirement, and any other additional languages they wish. The introduction of the Entitlement Framework will facilitate greater choice across a range of subject areas such as languages, including through collaboration among schools and with FE colleges. Improved careers advice and guidance will also support our young people when deciding which GCSE subjects they should take.

In addition to this, I am expecting recommendations shortly from the joint University of Ulster-Queen's University Belfast Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies on a languages strategy for the North. This work is looking at ways of promoting language learning in primary and post-primary schools, promoting the uptake of a wider range of languages and language learning, teaching and assessment at post-primary level. Another key area this will consider is the language of newcomers who can have a positive impact in extending languages across communities. I look forward to receiving the Centre's recommendations.

Dickson Plan

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to outline the representations she has received (i) for; and (ii) against, the retention of the Craigavon-based Dickson Plan for education for schools in the area in which it operates. (AQO 2989/08)

The Minister of Education: Mar a bheadh súil leis, fuair mé comhfhreagras mór maidir le socruithe aistrithe iarbhunscoile sa todhchaí.

As one might expect I have received a great deal of correspondence on the issue of future post-primary transfer arrangements. This correspondence has included the whole range of opinions on this subject including support for and opposition to the system that operates in the Craigavon-based Dickson plan. There has also been substantial research into the performance of the Dickson plan – most recently the study produced by the Southern Education and Library Board. In addition to this, my Department's discussions on future post-primary transfer arrangements, in the wake of my December 4, 2007 statement, have included representatives of all schools.

I made clear in that statement that 14 should be the key decision point in terms of matching provision to children, and outlined a possible system of informed election at 14 to educational pathways which will be facilitated through the implementation of the Entitlement Framework and could be accommodated within a number of different structural options:

- Access within an 11-19 school;
- Transfer to an alternative 11-19 school;
- Access through an 11-19 school or a post 14 school which provides access in collaboration with other schools, FE Colleges or other providers working within a learning community;
- A local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools, followed by specialism and diversity in 14 plus provision.

Models of transfer similar to the Dickson Plan therefore remain a possibility, but without academic selection which I consider unjust and unnecessary to achieve academic excellence. The optimum arrangement of provision within an area will be considered over the coming months by the area planning groups which I announced on 4 March 2008, to facilitate transition to post-primary education and delivery of the Entitlement Framework.

Numeracy and Literacy Strategy

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she intends to commence consultation on her numeracy and literacy strategy. (AQO 2953/08)

The Minister of Education: Is é mo bharúil go bhfuil leasú ó bhonn de dhíth ar struchtúir iarbhunscoile anseo má táimid leis an dul chun cinn sa litearthacht agus san uimhearthacht a fheiceáil a ba mhaith linn uilig a bheith againn.

It is my view that radical reform of post-primary structures here is needed if we are to make the gains that we all want to see in literacy and numeracy. The revised Literacy and Numeracy strategy will therefore be rolled out in a much reformed educational landscape, principally as a result of my decision to end the unfair system of academic selection from later this year.

Work to develop the revised strategy is nearing completion and a draft strategy will issue shortly for public consultation in both English and Irish.

Our intention is to issue the strategy for consultation in June 2008 with the consultation period straddling the summer holidays and running until 31st October 2008. This is to ensure that schools, in particular, have sufficient time to consider its proposals.

In advance of publication of the consultation document, we will also be setting out and testing the thinking behind the strategy with key stakeholders, which I hope will include the teaching unions as well as school governors, education support professionals and parents.

Demographic Decline

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education to detail how demographic decline has affected (i) grammar schools; and (ii) secondary schools. (AQO 3045/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain scoile naoi déag nócha a sé/a seacht bhí an líon daltaí céad tríocha míle, cúig chéad seasca a trí. Sa bhliain dhá mhíle a sé/a seacht bhí sé céad fiche a trí mhíle, seacht gcéad seachtó a hocht; sin titim de níos mó ná cúig faoin chéad.

The 11-16 pupil population in the 1996/7 school year was 130,563. In 2006/7 it was 123,778, representing a fall of over 5%.

Despite this decline, the numbers of pupils in grammar schools has remained static at approximately 46,000. However, the profile of this 46,000 has changed and is changing further with each annual intake:

- Approximately 9,000 pupils are admitted to grammar school each year. For the 1996/7 intake, when the size of the transferring cohort was at its most recent peak, there were no more than 6,714 A-grade applicants for the 9,000 grammar places. In 2006/7, there were no more than 6,041 A-grade applicants, representing a 10% drop in A-grade applicants;
- In 2007/8, Grades B2, C1&2 and D represented at least one third of intake in 26 grammar schools. 7 schools exclusively admitted A-grade applicants;

So far, in relation to total intakes the demographic decline has been felt almost exclusively in the non-grammar sector. For instance, in the non-grammar sector

- In 1996/7, the 11-16 population was 84,063. In 2006/7 it was 77,789. Only 15 out of 159 non-grammars were over-subscribed in 2007/8. A quarter of non-grammar schools was more than 25% under-subscribed.

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to outline how she plans to spend the £25 million for the implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Inclusion review. (AQO 3039/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá mé sásta gur aimsigh mé fiche a cúig mhilliún punt leis na tograí polasaí deiridh a chur i bhfeidhm don oideachas riachtanaí speisialta agus don Chuimsiú.

I am pleased to have secured £25m to implement the finalised policy proposals for SEN and Inclusion.

The draft policy proposals which have emerged from the review will issue for formal consultation in the autumn term.

Once the policy proposals are finalised, it will be determined how this £25m will be spent.

Autism: Post-Primary Children

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to outline how the Western Education and Library Board addresses the educational needs of post-primary school children with autism. (AQO 2944/08)

The Minister of Education: Dúirt Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair liom go gcuireann Seirbhís Taca agus Comhairle Uathachais an bhoird, atá bunaithe san Ómaigh, seirbhís uathachais ar fáil ar fud cheantar Bhord an Iarthair.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board that their Autism Support and Advice Service, which is centrally based in Omagh provides an autism service across the Western Board area. The Advice Service currently employs two specialist post-primary teachers. An Assistant Advisory Officer and two Autism Intervention Officers may also support pupils in this age group when demand is high.

Further support is available to post-primary schools, pupils and families in the area through a

telephone advice and information service, which provides support on general matters relating to autism.

The Board provides a range of in-service autism-specific training for Board and school staff, which is aimed at promoting the development of a range of relevant skills and tailored to their individual needs. The Board also provides training for parents and families of children with autism, which hopes to promote the development of relevant support skills that can be used in the home. Training in life skills, transfer arrangements and a tool kit for educational professionals are examples of the type of training provided by the Board.

The Board provides specialist teaching support on an individual basis for children in schools in the area, which varies depending on the level of need.

Area Planning Groups

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the date(s) on which she wrote to the Chief Executives of each of the Education and Library Boards outlining her proposals for area planning groups. (AQO 2987/08)

The Minister of Education: Ar an dóú lá d'Aibreán dhá mhíle a hocht scríobh mé chuig Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus leag mé amach mo chuid pleananna do ghrúpaí pleanála atá bunaithe sa cheantar agus id'iarr mé ainmniúcháin do na grúpaí seo.

I wrote to the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards setting out my plans for area-based planning groups and seeking nominations for representation on these groups on 2 April, 2008.

Transport: Budget

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Education to detail the proportion of her department's transport budget that is spent transporting children to grammar schools outside their own locality. (AQO 3056/08)

The Minister of Education: Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil san fhormáid a iarradh agus níorbh fhéidir é a chur ar fáil ach ar chostas díreireach.

The information requested is not available in the required format and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, in 2006/07 transport assistance was provided to 26,503 voluntary grammar school pupils at a cost of £15.8 million. (Separate figures are not available for controlled grammar schools.)

I should add that assistance is normally only provided where a child is unable to obtain a place in a suitable school within the statutory walking distance of 3

miles of the parents' home or where no such suitable school exists within that distance.

Extra Curricular Activities

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps she is taking to promote pupil uptake in extra curricular activities and schemes across the entire school estate. (AQO 2976/08)

The Minister of Education: Is cuid thábhachtach de shaol scoile iad gníomhaíochtaí seach-churaclaim, cuma cé acu tacaíocht staidéir, spórt, foghlaim teaghlaigh iad nó más gníomhaíochtaí caitheamh aimsire nó fóillíochta iad.

Extra-curricular activities are an important aspect of school provision whether they are in the form of study support, sport, family learning or based on hobby or leisure activities. It is worth acknowledging that most schools offer activities of at least one kind or another. Advice and support for schools in planning activities is available from Education and Library Boards and there is also a web-based toolkit containing some helpful pointers.

Given the strong link between social disadvantage and educational outcomes I consider it particularly important that disadvantaged children have access to extra curricular activities. Schools with the majority of pupils drawn from disadvantaged communities will therefore continue to receive additional resources under the extended schools programme to help in the provision of these activities and we have been encouraging schools, in planning their activities, to not only work together but also engage with other organisations and agencies in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

I have recently written to the Finance Minister outlining the extent of the impact that the reduction in funding will have on the Extended Schools programme and requesting that further funding be made available.

Newbuild Schools

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail progress on the new builds in the Craigavon area, in particular those at (i) St Michael's Grammar School; (ii) Portadown College; and (iii) St Theresa's Primary School, Lurgan. (AQO 2940/08)

The Minister of Education: Is cuid de athbhreithniú atá na hÍontaobhaithe agus Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil ag déanamh ar sholáthar iarbhunscóile sainchreidmí sa Lorgain Scoil Gramadaí Naomh Mícheál; clúdaíonn sé

Ardscóil Shóisearach Naomh Pól agus Ardscóil Cailíní Naomh Muire fosta.

St Michael's Grammar School is included in a review by the Trustees and the CCMS of denominational post primary provision in the Lurgan area, and also involving St Paul's Junior High School and St Mary's Girls' High School. A new building scheme for St Michael's would need to await the outcome of that review.

Portadown College has received funding approval for a replacement school though planning of this project has not yet got underway. The Southern Education and Library Board has submitted a revised Economic Appraisal to the Department for consideration. The appraisal had to be revised because a proposed new road layout will impact on the existing school site which means that the new build plans had to be revised to set the school further back on the site.

The position at St Teresa's Primary School is that final design drawings and costs have been submitted and are under consideration.

There are several other schools in the Craigavon area for which capital funding has been approved. Final design drawings and costs have recently been submitted for Tannaghmore Primary School and are being considered. Construction work on Waringstown Primary started in August 2007 and is due to complete in September 2008.

The planning of for a project for Lurgan College have not yet got underway as the Southern Education and Library Board have recently submitted a revised Economic Appraisal to the Department for consideration.

North/South Educational Projects

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Education to detail the new North/South educational projects she has introduced since taking up office. (AQO 3018/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi choimirce na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas tá comhoibriú oideachais ann cheana féin ar ábhair éagsúla: páistí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu; an tearc-ghnóthachtáil san oideachas; cáilíochtaí múinteoirí agus cúrsaí aoisliúntais; agus malairtí scoileanna, óige agus múinteoirí.

Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council there is existing education cooperation across a specified range of issues: education for children with special needs; educational underachievement; teacher qualifications and superannuation issues; school, youth and teacher exchanges.

I met with Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education and Science, in Dublin in November last year to review progress in these areas and to initiate further

work on the full range of matters. We agreed to develop proposals to tackle educational underachievement, including ongoing work by the Literacy and Numeracy Working Group, and to undertake a formal review of co-operation on educational exchanges and supporting mechanisms, including the North South Exchange Consortium. Following the significant progress made so far to establish a Centre of Excellence for Autism at Middletown, we endorsed the plans to provide training, advisory and research services and education, learning and support services once building work is complete. Other joint projects are currently underway in the field of special education needs, such as the “Cross Border School and Parent Community Partnership Programme” and a major conference on autistic spectrum disorders (“Autism Through the Spectrum”). This event took place in Croke Park, Dublin, on 15 April, having been planned jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science. It gave parents, professionals and the voluntary sector the opportunity to hear about developments in educational provision across the island of Ireland and to share models of good practice across the age range. Both Minister Mary Hanafin TD and I addressed the conference. Through the Teachers Qualifications Working Group, progress is being made on improving teacher mobility.

In December 2007, Conor Lenihan TD, the Irish Minister for Integration and I jointly launched a Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School sector. The Toolkit will develop cross-border collaboration to assist children whose language, culture and ethnicity are not Irish and to allow us all to benefit from this rich diversity. Last October I accompanied Edwin Poots, MLA, Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, to a meeting of the North South Language Body to discuss issues relating to Irish and Ulster Scots.

As part of my desire to raise awareness of the important role science and technology in our schools, I have supported the all-Ireland BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibitions, attending the formal opening of the most recent event in Dublin in January with Micheál Martin, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I will be hosting the next North South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral format in Downpatrick on 28 May and will, of course, report back to the Assembly on progress made on these and other issues.

Academic Entrance Criteria

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the legal rights of a school to set its own academic entrance criteria for post primary transfers. (AQO 2988/08)

The Minister of Education: Coscann an creatlach dlí do iontrálacha (an tOrdú Oideachais 1997) ar scoileanna a úsáideann critéir iontrála acadúla a dteist féin a cheapadh agus tugann sé orthu an Teist Aistrithe a úsáid.

The current legal framework for admissions (Education Order 1997) prohibits schools using academic admissions criteria from developing their own test and requires them to use the Transfer Test. When this legal framework lapses (for Transfer 2010), its successor, which I am currently seeking to establish, will define permitted admissions criteria practises. If, however, no new legal framework can be established there will neither be laws nor regulations permitting or prohibiting academic admissions criteria or proscribing the way such criteria should be used or what assessment mechanism(s) should support them.

Pupil Behaviour Management

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Education to outline the training teachers receive in relation to pupil behaviour management. (AQO 2972/08)

The Minister of Education: Cuireann gach ceann de na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne oiliúint múinteoirí in-seirbhíse ar fáil. Tuigim ó na Boird go bhfuil cuid mhór oiliúna ar fáil do mhúinteoirí maidir le bainistíocht iompar daltaí.

In-service teacher training is provided by each of the education and library boards. I understand from Boards, that there is a significant amount of training available for teachers in relation to pupil behaviour management.

Each education and library board has a behaviour support Team to provide a school-based service to meet the needs of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. One of its key business objectives for those teams is to provide high quality advice and training to school staff, parents and representatives of other relevant support services and agencies.

The behaviour support teams offer advice to schools on appropriate behaviour programmes, and in certain cases, short term support for individual pupils; general advice on developing whole school approaches and teachers classroom management skills; and immediate advice on action in response to serious incidents.

Each multi-disciplinary team has experienced practitioners in the areas of psychology, educational welfare, youth service and teaching. These practitioners provide expert advice and on-the-job training for teachers in relation to individual pupils and/or incidents at a school's request.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Financial Burden

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps he is taking to ease the financial burden on families with more than one dependant in further or higher education. (AQW 5647/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): A range of student support measures exist for students in further or higher education which are available to all eligible students regardless of the number of students in the household. In terms of higher education, fee deferral arrangements are particularly beneficial for households with more than one dependant in higher education since prior to AY 2006/2007 there was a requirement to pay fees up front.

Households with incomes in excess of £39,780 are required to make a financial contribution to the maintenance loan entitlement. In order to mitigate against the impact of this for families with more than one student in higher education, this contribution is split where there are two or more eligible students in the household.

Sustainable Employment Project

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) to detail the amount of funding the Northern Regional College offered the sustainable employment project put in place by the North West Lifelong Learning Association and Community Focus Learning; and (ii) for his assessment of the appropriateness of this offer. (AQW 5672/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand that Northern Regional College has not offered funding to either of these organisations.

I can confirm, however, that Community Focus Learning (CFL) has been liaising with Northern Regional College, to discuss the possibility of collaboration, under the terms of the Department's Further Education third party funding regulations.

Educating for a Sustainable Future Project

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the Educating for a Sustainable Future project put in place by the North West Lifelong Learning Association and Community Focus Learning, and to detail the support he is providing to this project. (AQW 5673/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department is not aware of this project. Accordingly, the Department has not offered assistance to the North West Lifelong Learning Association (NWLTA) or Community Focus Learning (CFL) in this regard.

However, I understand that NWLTA has been in contact with North West Regional College to discuss opportunities for collaboration and that the College has since offered to provide match funding of £5,000 for an alternative EU funded project to be taken forward by the Association.

I am also informed that CFL has been liaising with the Northern Regional College, to discuss the possibility of collaboration, under the terms of the Department's Further Education third party funding regulations.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the planned investment in the Bangor, Ards and Ballynahinch campuses of the South Eastern Regional College and timescales for commencement and completion. (AQW 5701/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A capital build programme valued at £20.6m is planned for the Bangor, Ards and Ballynahinch campuses of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC).

The £13m, design and build, Bangor project, which will include a Technology Innovation and Performing Arts Centre, is currently at design stage. A planning application has been lodged and, subject to the achievement of this, construction is expected to commence March 2009 with an estimated completion date of August 2010.

The £4.9m project at the Ards Campus, also design and build, will see a new Motor Vehicle Workshop and a Construction Centre to include Electrical, Plumbing, Carpentry, Wood Machining and Brickwork Workshops. Full planning approval was achieved in April 2007; design development has continued and construction is due to commence at September 2008, with an estimated completion date of September 2009.

The South Eastern Regional College has also recently signed a Public Private Partnership contract which will provide new facilities at, Downpatrick, Newcastle and Ballynahinch. The Ballynahinch campus will be a replacement new build, with a capital value of £2.7m. Now that the contract has been signed construction will commence immediately. The phasing of the development over the three sites is such that the Ballynahinch campus is scheduled for completion by May 2011.

Language Courses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the English as a Second Language Courses provided by Further and Higher Education colleges, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5740/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I would refer the honourable member to my response to his Assembly Question (Written) 5494/08 below:

The number of courses and enrolments relating to English as a foreign language, that are provided by further and higher education colleges in each of the last five years are detailed below:

Academic Year	Number of Courses	Total Enrolments
2002/03	25	1583
2003/04	84	1991
2004/05	211	4579
2005/06	385	8032
2006/07	360	8532

Source: Further Education Statistical Record (FESR)

Young People

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people aged 16 to 18 not in employment, who are not participating in Government training schemes or in full-time education. (AQW 5789/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The latest figures from the October-December 2007 Labour Force Survey estimate that there were 9,000 persons aged 16-18 in Northern Ireland not in employment, participating in government training schemes or in full-time education.

European Globalisation Adjustment Fund

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the efforts he has made to secure assistance from the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund for workers in Seagate, Limavady, as set out in the report of the European Commission Northern Ireland Task Force. (AQW 5790/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following a meeting with officials from the European Commission on the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, Departmental officials have been working with the Department for Work and Pensions to clarify the process and information required to make an application in respect of Seagate. An

application cannot be considered until redundancy notices are issued and it is clear that eligibility criteria have been met.

Institute of Professional and Legal Studies

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the course fees charged for the Institute of Professional and Legal Studies for 2006/07 and 2007/08; and (ii) the proposed fees for 2008/09. (AQW 5827/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information provided by Queen's University shows that:

- (i) Course fees charged in 2006/07 were £6,750, and £6,925 in 2007/08.
- (ii) The proposed fees for 2008/09 are £7,400.

Postgraduate Courses

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail discussions he or his officials have had in relation to capping the level of fees charged for postgraduate courses. (AQW 5828/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Unlike full-time undergraduate fee levels which are determined in regulations made under the Higher Education Order 2005, fee levels for postgraduate courses are unregulated and a matter for the institutions to determine. No discussions have taken place regarding the capping of postgraduate fees since my Department has no powers to regulate these. My Department does, however, provide assistance towards fee support for eligible postgraduate courses at Queen's University and the University of Ulster which, for Academic Year 2008/2009, is a non-means tested award of £3,300.

Postgraduate Policy and Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail progress made on the review of Postgraduate Policy and Funding. (AQW 5830/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The contract for the Review of Postgraduate Policy and Funding was awarded to FGS McClure Watters in February 2008 and the first Steering Group meeting held on 5 March 2008. A Project Initiation Document has been drafted by FGS McClure Watters and is to be finalised following comments from the Steering Group. Initial meetings between the consultants and the universities are due to be held week commencing

21 April 2008, with the draft Final Report to be completed by the end of July 2008.

Potential Investment

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the plans his department has to address the gaps in skills, particularly in relation to the potential investment in the financial services and social economy sectors. (AQW 5880/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Success through Skills, the skills strategy for Northern Ireland, remains the key overarching strategy in my Department, bringing together and focusing all of our efforts to ensure the necessary skills and workforce development required by the economy.

My Department has recognised the strategic importance of the Financial Services industry and has consequently designated the sector as a Priority Skills area. A Financial Services Future Skills Action Group, with membership drawn from the industry and government is developing short, medium and longer-term plans to ensure an adequate supply of appropriately qualified staff.

A number of programmes have been developed to support individuals to gain nationally recognized qualifications from the Securities and Investment Institute. These include the Investment Administration Qualification (IAQ) and IAQ certificates in, Introduction to Securities & Investment and FSA Regulatory Environment. The Financial Services Action Group will work to promote greater collaboration across industry, professional bodies, and education to develop greater work readiness skills for the sector.

The Social Economy sector covers a very wide range of business types and consequently, skills areas. My Department continues to work to ensure that social enterprises can access all of our programmes for businesses. As an example, over half of the expenditure on the Management and Leadership Development bursary programme is spent on the voluntary and community sector.

Teacher Training Colleges

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of people currently in teacher training colleges for primary education that are (i) male; and (ii) female. (AQW 5910/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of male and female student enrolments in 2006/07 at NI teacher training colleges for primary education are shown in the table below;

	Number of student enrolments
Male	155
Female	1,010
Total	1,170

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and do not sum to the total due to rounding. The latest available data are for 2006/07.

Dentistry Students

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students in each undergraduate year, currently studying dentistry at Queen's University Belfast. (AQW 5933/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of student enrolments for each undergraduate year, in dentistry at Queen's University Belfast in 2006/07 is shown below;

Year of programme	Number of enrolments
Year 1	45
Year 2	40
Year 3	40
Year 4	40
Year 5	40

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Note: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. The latest available data are for 2006/07.

Dentistry Graduates

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of dentist graduates leaving university in 2007; and (ii) the number of those graduates that are currently working as dentists in Northern Ireland. (AQW 5934/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) There were 40 students gaining dentistry qualifications from the Queen's University of Belfast in 2006/07.
- (ii) Destination information for 2006/07 graduates will not be available until August 2008. However, as a proxy, the 2005/06 data show that of those students that qualified in dentistry at the Queen's University of Belfast, 62% of those who returned destination information (approximately six months after graduation) to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) were employed as dentists in Northern Ireland.

Student Intake

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, for the 2008-09 academic year, (i) the student intake numbers for St Mary's University College; (ii) the student intake numbers for Stranmillis University College; and (iii) the funding arrangements for both colleges. (AQW 6053/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Initial teacher education (ITE) intakes for St Mary's and Stranmillis University Colleges are determined by the Department of Education on the basis of a range of data, including the Teacher Demand Model, which takes account of factors such as demography, and the existing supply of teachers. The Department for Employment and Learning is responsible for determining the overall student numbers which the University Colleges can recruit to their non – ITE courses. In the case of St Mary's this is the BA Liberal Arts and for Stranmillis, the BA in Health and Leisure Studies and the BSc in Early Childhood Studies.

Based on the information supplied to my Department by the Department of Education, Initial Teacher Education intakes for each University College for academic year 2008/09 are as follows.

	St Mary's University College	Stranmillis University College
B Ed (undergraduate) - Primary	70	70
B Ed (undergraduate) – Post – Primary	40	40
Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	-	15
PGCE (Irish Medium)	15	-
Total	125	125

Source: the Department of Education.

Since 1999, the University Colleges have been permitted by my Department to diversify into non – ITE provision. Each College was allocated 200 places and these places were filled between 1999 and 2002. Since 2005, as ITE intakes have declined, my Department has considered annually whether a corresponding increase in diversified provision should be granted. In July 2007 my Department wrote to the University Colleges advising that the intake could be increased for academic year 2007/08. The letter also advised that this was the last year that approval would be given to increase diversified places. The total diversified places at each University College is therefore capped at approximately 260. Based on current enrolment data supplied by the University Colleges this results in intakes for academic year 2008/09 of 58 for Stranmillis and 33 for St Mary's.

In relation to funding arrangements, I wrote to my Executive colleagues in August 2007 setting out the arrangements for funding of the University Colleges in the 2007/08 academic year and advising that my officials would be undertaking work to develop a revised funding methodology. The existing block grant arrangement is simply not fit for purpose: not only does it fail to reflect the outcomes delivered by the University Colleges in terms of student numbers, it also contains the anomaly that as student numbers fall, block grant increases. My officials have now developed a proposed revised methodology which is reactive to student numbers and have sought the views of the Colleges on this. The details of the proposed model are still to be finalised although it will be in place for the start of the 2008/09 academic year.

Flags and Emblems

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to (a) promote good relations in the further education sector; and (b) ensure that further education colleges are neutral and free from displays of flags and emblems. (AQO 3024/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

My Department has taken a number of steps to help Further Education colleges ensure that all their students are taught in a harmonious and welcoming environment. This has included financial support for pilot programmes in Cultural Diversity and Good Relations in three Colleges, followed by further funding amounting to some £300,000 to enable the lessons of these pilot programmes to be disseminated across the whole FE sector. This initiative has been very successful and, indeed, the former Armagh College achieved a national Beacon Award, in recognition of excellence in the sphere of 'Community Relations' and, more recently, the Queen's Anniversary Prize for higher and further education, for their community relations course 'Challenging Prejudice and Discrimination'.

Further Education Colleges determine their own policy in matters relating to flags and emblems but must comply with any legislation in respect of this matter.

Careers Advice

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the support provided to post-primary schools offering careers advice to enable school leavers to transfer into the labour market. (AQO 2945/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

My Department's Careers Service offers support to

all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland through individual Service Level Agreements. Services include one-to-one interviews, group sessions, class talks, individual assessments and providing labour market information.

Up to date careers information and impartial advice and guidance is provided to pupils by professionally qualified Careers Advisers.

The work of the Careers Service supports the school Careers Education Programme which includes the development of employability skills and opportunities for work related learning.

Early Retirement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the incentives his department offers to lecturers wishing to take early retirement.

(AQO 2952/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

My Department does not offer any incentives to (FE) lecturers wishing to take early retirement. College employers have access to the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme to implement redundancies, where lecturers are aged 50 or over. The Scheme, which is undergoing change, is a management facility through which employers can introduce organisational changes, using the incentive of early retirements to give effect to those changes.

Apprenticeship Courses

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people who have completed apprenticeship courses in each of the last three years.

(AQO 2990/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of people awarded Modern Apprentice certificates in each of the last three years are:

2005/06	1,492
2006/07	1,594
2007/08	1,811

Lecturers Dispute

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide details of the steps he is taking to (a) resolve the ongoing further education lecturers dispute; and (b) address the disruption this dispute is having in further education colleges. (AQO 3025/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

My Department sought to facilitate a resolution to the pay dispute by appointing Sir Joseph Pilling to broker an agreement on a pay deal between the College employers and unions. While this deal was accepted by the employers and unions, it was rejected in a ballot of the wider union membership.

There is no scope to improve the substance of this offer within the constraints of pay policy. It is now up to the college employers and unions to work together on the details of the package to reach an agreement which is acceptable to all concerned.

I understand that College employers are taking all possible steps to minimise any disruption to students' education.

Seagate, Limavady

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps that have been taken to offer training advice and assistance to the employees of Seagate, Limavady. (AQO 2937/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Senior officials met in November and December 2007 with Seagate management and the Employee Forum to offer a range of services including on-site information, advice and guidance services. My Department engaged the North West Regional College to undertake a Training Needs Analysis in January 2008. Provision of services including pre-redundancy notice, during the period of notice and post-closure are being agreed with Seagate management and presented to the Employee Forum later this month.

Labour Relations Agency

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if a new chair has been appointed to the Labour Relations Agency. (AQO 2965/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Mr Jim McCusker was appointed Chairman of the Labour Relations Agency for a three year period with effect from 1 March 2008. This was announced by way of a press release on 4 March 2008.

Lecturers Dispute

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on the ongoing Further Education lecturers 'dispute'. (AQO 3009/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department sought to facilitate a resolution to the FE lecturers' pay dispute by appointing Sir Joseph Pilling

to broker an agreement on proposals for a pay deal between the College employers and unions. While this deal was accepted by the employers and unions, it was rejected in a ballot of the wider union membership.

There is no scope to improve the substance of this offer within the constraints of pay policy. It is now up to the college employers and unions to work together on the details of the package to reach an agreement which is acceptable to all concerned.

Training for Success

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an assessment of his department's performance in monitoring the management of contracts awarded to Carter and Carter in relation to the Training for Success programme and the timeframe in which serious concerns were identified by officials; and to confirm the amount paid or due to be paid to Carter and Carter in relation to contracts from September 2007 to February 2008. (AQO 3029/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following the award of the Training for Success contract my officials liaised on an ongoing basis with the management of Carter and Carter and as a result of a contract compliance monitoring visit in December 2007 the Department asked the Education and Training Inspectorate to undertake an assessment of the training undertaken for the period September 2007 to January 2008, the first quarter of the contract.. Although the Inspectorate reported strengths in the standards of training in certain areas, they also reported deficiencies in others. Collectively these deficiencies represented a breach of the Company's contract with the Department. The Company was asked to remedy these deficiencies by 1 March. The Company informed the

Central Procurement Directorate on 28 February that it could not give the assurances and guarantees required to continue with the provision and as such the contract with the Company ended on 1 March. No payments have been made, or are due to be made, to Carter and Carter under the terms of the Training for Success contract.

Student Representation

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to secure student representation on the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council. (AQO 3000/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The future role, membership and function of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council

(NIHEC) is currently under review. Any decision on the appointment of a student representative to the Council will be subject to the outcome of that review.

Deloitte, the consultants appointed to undertake the review, has been advised to consult the National Union of Students/Union of Students in Ireland (NUS/USI) to ascertain its views as part of the review of the Council.

Titanic Quarter

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to ensure that skills are matched with employment opportunities provided by the Titanic Quarter. (AQO 3004/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department continues to be in discussion with Harcourt Construction, the Titanic Quarter developer, individual companies based in the Titanic Quarter and Invest NI regarding their current and future skills needs to ensure that we are in a position to assist employers recruit people with the specific skills they require.

The Department encourages those companies choosing to use our recruitment services to actively consider Employment Service clients who may be long-term unemployed and/or are deemed economically inactive.

In addition to this, the Department's Bridge to Employment programme continues to work with employers to offer bespoke pre-employment training to enable unemployed people to avail of the employment opportunities offered by that company. For example, the Department funded the training of eight people who were subsequently offered employment with Citi, which is located in the Titanic Quarter. The recruitment for a second cohort of 30 people for Citi will commence in late April 2008.

It is anticipated that Belfast Metropolitan College, one of the largest education providers in the Belfast region, will move to the Titanic Quarter in 2010.

PhD Awards

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm (i) if there has been agreement with Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster on the distribution of PhD awards following the final Budget allocation; and (ii) what progress has been made in relation to participation in the All Ireland Science Foundation. (AQO 3007/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: (i) Each year the Department makes available funding to

both universities for research and for certain approved courses of study leading to higher degrees (Masters and PhDs). Under existing arrangements the Department currently funds a total of 495 PhD places (3 X 165) per annum. However, through the Programme for Government, DEL is committed to increasing the number of PhD research students it funds by 300 by 2010. The Department is currently finalising the respective allocations, including the distribution of the first 100 additional places from Academic Year 2008/09, on the basis of the existing funding formula. The additional places must be targeted at areas of economic relevance. The universities will be advised of their allocations by the end of April 2008.

(ii) Officials from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Employment and Learning are in discussion with the Republic of Ireland's Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and of Education and Science in order to agree the most appropriate mechanisms to allow Northern Ireland's Higher Education Institutions to participate fully and productively in all-island collaborative research. Science Foundation Ireland programmes are being considered as part of those discussions.

Training of Interpreters

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has received any representations from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People in relation to the training of interpreters. (AQO 2971/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I met recently with representatives of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) to discuss the provision of training for sign language interpreters. My officials also meet with representatives of the RNID on a regular basis.

I am pleased to inform you that my Department has secured funding through the Skills and Science Fund, enabling Belfast Metropolitan College to restart the NVQ Level 4 course, Introduction to Sign Language Interpreting, in partnership with the RNID. I am hopeful that this will begin to address the shortage of interpreters in Northern Ireland (NI).

Kircubbin Campus

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the South Eastern Regional College's decision to close the Kircubbin campus. (AQO 3028/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the case of the Kircubbin outreach centre, I understand

that a reduction in enrolments, coupled with the impact of the college mergers, meant that South Eastern Regional College could no longer sustain provision at this location. I have been informed that the College carried out a detailed analysis of its provision on the Ards Peninsula and, following feedback, it has been decided to base the provision in Portaferry and Glastry, in addition to the existing centre in Ballyboley. The college is currently in discussion with Exploris and Market House in Portaferry, and Glastry College to provide viable locations.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Departmental Land

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land that is set aside (i) for inward investment; and (ii) to facilitate the expansion plans of indigenous companies, in the East Belfast constituency; and to confirm if he intends to provide land for this purpose. (AQW 5588/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Invest NI holds 2,779 acres of land across Northern Ireland. Its policy is to intervene where there is evidence of market failure in the industrial property market. Invest NI has no land holding in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency area. However, there is a significant amount of land, which is zoned for industrial use, owned by the private sector.

Invest NI works closely with Planning Service in the Area Plan process to ensure that adequate land is zoned for the needs of its client companies. The East Belfast parliamentary constituency area is subject to the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) that has zoned 102 acres of new industrial land, a large proportion of which is at Titanic Quarter. This is in addition to the significant amount of land already zoned for industrial use in the constituency that includes 188 acres in the Harbour Estate between Titanic Quarter and Holywood Exchange.

All Invest NI sites are equally available to indigenous and external clients. The final decision as to where a company purchases a site rests solely with the investment decision makers within that organisation.

Regulation for Business

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he has taken

to minimise the burden of regulation for business.
(AQW 5624/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
My Department co-ordinates the Northern Ireland Better Regulation Strategy, which underpins the arrangements to ensure that regulatory burdens on Northern Ireland business are kept to a minimum.

In the second half of 2006, DETI carried out a review of the Strategy. Recent Better Regulation developments in the rest of the UK were examined. These included simplification plans, improved regulatory impact assessment arrangements, implementation of EU legislation without gold plating and improvements to the sanctioning system. In each case we examined the Northern Ireland position to ensure that all necessary steps could be taken to ensure we were not falling behind. Representatives of the main business organisations were consulted and ideas and concerns put forward by them were taken into account.

The review concluded that the existing Northern Ireland Strategy should continue, but that a number of steps should be taken to strengthen it. These included:

- all Northern Ireland Departments to include an objective to encourage better regulation in their Corporate and or Operating Plans;
- regular communication of better regulation developments to all stakeholders through Departmental websites and meetings with representative groups;
- reviews by all Departments of legislation impacting on business, forms in use and enforcement arrangements; and
- all Northern Ireland Departments to check the Northern Ireland position in relation to the simplification plans of their Whitehall equivalents.

It was also agreed that DETI would publish a Better Regulation Annual Report with input from all Departments and their NDPBs. The Report for 2006/07 has been placed in the Library and can be found online at <http://www.detini.gov.uk/cgi-bin/downdoc?id=3545>

Accommodation: East Derry/Londonderry

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action being taken to increase the number of hotels and other sources of accommodation in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency, particularly in light of the demolition of most of Portstewart's hotels. (AQW 5650/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Invest NI has a comprehensive range of support available to the tourism accommodation sector in Northern Ireland including advice and support for

strategic and process improvement (capability) and financial support for product development (capital).

Invest NI can provide Capital Support including loans, 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 accommodation developments that are in support of the NITB Signature projects or Winning Themes.

Since its inception in April 2002, Invest NI made thirteen offers for capital assistance of £1,341,068 against total project costs of £7,838,021 in the East Londonderry constituency.

Five of these projects have yet to proceed with their developments. Invest NI has actively encouraged these projects but the timing of any investment is a commercial decision for the promoter.

Invest NI would welcome further applications from the area and will consider the merits of any proposed accommodation project based on its ability to satisfy stated support policy.

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>

Reconnect Grants

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm if there were adequate funds to meet the demand for Reconnect grants up to 31 March 2008 and if not, will additional funds be made available to meet all applications received before the deadline. (AQW 5684/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
There were adequate funds available to meet the demand for Reconnect grant claims up to 31 March 2008. DETI is considering options to increase its budgetary provision in 08/09 to maximise the number of applications supported, through reprioritisation of the Department's capital budget.

Northern Ireland Electricity

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will require Northern Ireland Electricity to become a carbon net zero company within the next two decades as part of a planned transition to a low-carbon economy. (AQW 5685/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The term "carbon net zero company" was coined recently by the Irish Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is understood to have the same meaning as the

more commonly used term “carbon neutral”. Unlike the ESB, NIE is precluded from owning any power generation plant in Northern Ireland, and so no direct comparison can be made.

In line with Government policy to encourage the efficient use of all resources and particularly energy, DETI encourages all companies in Northern Ireland to reduce their carbon output.

NIE operates within legal and regulatory frameworks which recognise the importance of minimising carbon emissions, and the company has been focused on contributing to the process of meeting national targets through the introduction of various carbon reduction initiatives. These include a carbon reduction action plan for all manned NIE sites, a recycling and landfill reduction programme for NIE waste management, an array of electricity generating photovoltaic panels at NIE’s Ballymena offices, and the NIE Smart programme which funds a range of micro-generation and large scale renewable projects, thus helping to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

Historical Tourism

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the contact he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to enhance opportunities for historical tourism. (AQW 5692/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have not met with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland on the subject of enhancing opportunities for historical tourism.

Heritage – houses, castles, gardens and museums, historic landscapes and monuments, industrial and Christian heritage all form part of the rich historical mix that is of interest to visitors. The Walled City Signature Project is enhancing the tourism potential in and around the city walls to meet visitor expectations of Londonderry as a unique, inspirational destination within Northern Ireland. Phase one of this project which is complete and Phase two which is underway addressed historical themes through such projects as the refurbishment of the Tower Museum, the Armada Exhibition and the Museum of Free Derry. The Built Heritage programme includes a capital project renovation of the First Derry Presbyterian Church; St Columb’s Cathedral; Aras Colmcille; the Playhouse; Apprentice Boys Memorial Hall and the Guildhall. The Lighting Strategy will illuminate the Craigavon Bridge, city walls and key buildings.

The North West Gateway Initiative, set up by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, provides a focus on the development needs of the North West and encourages a more co-ordinated approach to its development on a cross border basis.

Tourism initiatives include Destination North West (a cross border tourism project with a range of funders) and the North West Air Access Consortium which is also cross border and was established as access was identified as a major constraint to tourism growth. Derry City Council and Donegal Tourism are also working on an initiative to promote short break activity in the Great Britain market.

NITB’s website www.discovernorthernireland.com carries information about the city, its heritage trail and things to do as does the Tourism Ireland website. There are also links to other websites including that of the Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau which provides detailed information on the city.

Invest NI Schemes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the monies allocated to Republic of Ireland-registered businesses under Invest Northern Ireland schemes in the past five years. (AQW 5694/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below provides an analysis, by financial year, of the value of investment planned by Irish Republic-registered businesses supported by Invest NI during the five year period 2002/03 to 2006/07. Also included is the number of offers and the amount of financial assistance offered to these projects by Invest NI.

In total over £27m was offered in support of Irish Republic-owned projects, which plan to invest almost £150m in the Northern Ireland economy. These clients will have been engaged in business formation, expansion and innovation activities within Northern Ireland.

INVEST NI ASSISTANCE OFFERED TO REPUBLIC OF IRELAND-OWNED BUSINESSES (2002/03 – 2006/07)

Year	Number of Offers	Total Assistance (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
2002/03	7	5.1	22.1
2003/04	32	1.7	12.3
2004/05	38	6.4	27.5
2005/06	31	4.5	34.7
2006/07	32	9.6	51.3
Grand Total	140	27.2	147.8

Note: Figures may not add due to rounding.

Business Meetings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW

5022/08, to detail the geographical breakdown of business meetings, conferences and seminars funded by Invest NI, as follows; (i) continental European Union; (ii) non-EU European nations; (iii) British Isles nations; (iv) Northern America; (v) other American; (vi) Middle Eastern; (vii) other Asian; (viii) African; and (ix) Australasian. (AQW 5695/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Geographical Area	International Investment	IRTD	Food	Engineering & Business	Life Sciences	Trade	TCT	Total
EU	16	1	1	1		9	1	29
Non EU Nations						1		1
GB & ROI	69					13		82
North American	126				2	9		137
Other American								
Middle Eastern						4		4
Other Asian	2	1		1		5		9
African								
Australasian								
Number	213	2	1	2	2	41	1	262

Social Economy Sector

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the amount of money spent by Invest NI in supporting the social economy sector in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) the number of jobs that currently exist in that sector. (AQW 5736/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Government remains committed to developing the social economy and social economy/community enterprises in Northern Ireland and recognises the important role the social economy has to play in the context of the economic development of Northern Ireland as a whole.

The amount of money spent by Invest NI in supporting the social economy sector in each of the last three years was as follows:

2007/2008	2006/2007	2005/2006
£363,762	£270,000	£106,000

In July 2007 DETI published the findings from the first survey of Social Economy Enterprises (SEEs) in Northern Ireland with the main aim of collecting

for the first time information on the size of a known group of SEEs in Northern Ireland. The research was designed to provide baseline data on an identified sub group of SEEs within the wider sector which would increase understanding of the profile of this type of enterprise and enable future monitoring of change. The survey identified that the total number of paid employees in this sub group was 6683. The survey database has been transferred to the Social Economy Network (NI) Ltd, the representative body of the sector, to help grow its membership and develop products and services for the sector

Departmental Support

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the support he is giving to Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council in promoting their areas for small and medium enterprises and foreign direct investments. (AQW 5788/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has only limited scope to influence the spatial distribution of projects. The assistance provided by Invest NI is largely demand-led by businesses which can demonstrate the potential for growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

However, Invest NI's Southern Regional Office is active in both council areas promoting various initiatives and events to assist the development of all small and medium enterprises throughout the Southern Region.

Invest NI's regional office network works closely with local stakeholders, including Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council, to encourage the development of regional propositions which can help ensure that the offering for their area is maximised to attract visits by potential investors. Working with existing overseas investors in each area is also a key function.

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to ensure that all departmental policies are rural-proofed. (AQW 5800/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment recognises rural proofing as an integral part of the policy development process and uses DARD's rural proofing guide and checklist to ensure that any rural implications are taken fully into account.

Freehold Disposal Programme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) Invest NI's policy on land disposal following the discontinuation of the Freehold Disposal Programme; (ii) the amount of land sold since this programme was ended; and (iii) the amount of money received from the sale of lands under its new policy. (AQW 5807/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) Invest NI's policy in relation to freehold disposal was reviewed in April 2007. The policy now states that, subject to those freehold disposals agreed at that time, Invest NI will retain the freehold to its lands. Invest NI land sales are by way of a highly restrictive 999 year lease to its client companies only.
- (ii) Under the new policy Invest NI has not agreed to any further freehold sales. However, in support of Invest NI client company projects, since April 2007, 132 acres has been sold by way of 999 year lease.
- (iii) Invest NI's policy is to retain its freehold land therefore, no money has been received from the sale, as distinct from lease, of lands under its new policy.

Freehold Disposal Programme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the amount of public land disposed of under the Industrial Development Board's Freehold Disposal Programme; and (ii) the amount of money received by his department through the sale of this land. (AQW 5832/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Industrial Development Board ceased to exist on 31 March 2002. Its last freehold disposal took place in 1995. Under Public Record Office NI (PRONI) guidelines, public bodies are not required to retain records beyond 7 years in relation to financial matters. Invest NI does not hold this information.

Departmental Support

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the support his department is providing to (i) Banbridge District Council and (ii) Craigavon Borough Council, in promoting their areas for (a) small/medium enterprises; and (b) foreign direct investment. (AQW 5838/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has only limited scope to influence the

spatial distribution of projects. The assistance provided by Invest NI is largely demand-led by businesses which can demonstrate the potential for growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

However, Invest NI's Southern Regional Office is active in both council areas promoting various initiatives and events to assist the development of all small and medium enterprises throughout the Southern Region.

Invest NI's regional office network works closely with local stakeholders, including Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council, to encourage the development of regional propositions which can help ensure that the offering for their area is maximised to attract visits by potential investors. Working with existing overseas investors in each area is also a key function.

Area of Economic Disadvantage

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to define 'an area of economic disadvantage' as outlined in the targets in the Programme for Government, in relation to securing new foreign direct investment projects and land acquisition; and to detail all areas of economic disadvantage. (AQW 5902/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

An 'area of economic disadvantage' refers to those areas identified on the disadvantaged area maps developed by DETI. Based on data from the income and employment domains of the 2005 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, the current DETI maps identify Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown, Newry and Mourne, Dungannon and Derry Council areas, together with pockets of Belfast, as the focus for Departmental policies and programmes which can contribute towards tackling disadvantage. The detailed maps are available on the DETI website at www.detni.gov.uk.

Economic Inactivity

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate compares with other regions of the United Kingdom. (AQW 5989/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The latest seasonally adjusted working age economic inactivity rate in NI is estimated at 26.9% for the period December 2007- February 2008 and is the highest of the UK regions. The latest rates for each of the UK regions are shown in the table below.

**SEASONALLY ADJUSTED ECONOMIC ACTIVITY RATE,
DECEMBER 2007- FEBRUARY 2008**

Region	Working Age ¹ Economic Inactivity rate (%)
North East	24.4
North West	22.5
Yorkshire & the Humber	22.2
East Midlands	19.4
West Midlands	21.5
East	18.2
London	24.1
South East	17.2
South West	17.9
Wales	24.8
Scotland	19.4
N Ireland	26.9
United Kingdom	20.9

¹ The term working age refers to females aged 16 to 59 and males aged 16 to 64.

Staff Stress

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of staff in his department that were absent due to stress for more than (i) 5 days; (ii) 10 days; (iii) 15 days; (iv) 20 days; (v) 25 days; (vi) 30 days; (vii) 35 days; and (viii) 40 days, broken down by grade.

(AQW 6014/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
DETI Staff absent from work due to work related stress for more than:-

Year	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
5 days					
10 days	1 EO2			1 EO1	
15 days		1AO		1 EO2	
20 days	1 AO *(1AO)		1 EO2		
25 days		1EO1			
30 days					1 AO
35 days					1 AO *(1 EO1)
40 days			1 AO	1 DP 1 EO2 1AO	

*(HSENI figure in brackets)

Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of staff in his department who, since 8 May 2007, have (i) received official warnings; and (ii) faced disciplinary procedures. (AQW 6041/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) Since 8 May 2007, 28 members of staff in the Department (including 1 in the Health and Safety Executive NI) received an official warning for inefficiency and or conduct; and
- (ii) of the 5 who received warnings for conduct, all 5 faced disciplinary procedures.

Rose Energy Consortium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5499/08, to detail his department's proposals to consider committing funding for Rose Energy Consortium. (AQW 6052/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Pursuant to my answer to AQW 5499/08 I can report that Invest NI continues to have ongoing commercial dialogue with the Rose Energy Consortium regarding their proposal. The promoters continue to explore the operational model, funding structure and stakeholder involvement and these issues must be agreed ahead of funding being committed by my Department to the project

Maze Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of money spent by his department to date on proposals to have a Multi Sports stadium built at the Maze/Long Kesh site.

(AQW 6157/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

To date, my Department has spent no money on proposals to have a Multi Sports stadium built at the Maze/Long Kesh site.

Entrepreneurs

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps Invest Northern Ireland is taking to assist (i) social; and (ii) rural entrepreneurs. (AQO 2961/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

My Department acknowledges the distinctive

economic development role played by social entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland, particularly in terms of their impact on local communities and areas of economic disadvantage.

Invest NI's Social Entrepreneurship Programme offers a range of assistance to help both new and existing social enterprises to develop and grow into sustainable and viable businesses. Since its launch in September 2006, this programme has been used to assist 71 new social enterprises.

The Invest NI draft Corporate Plan 2008/11 also reiterates the commitment to assist in the growth of the Social Economy through a new Enterprise Strategy. That strategy will see a continuance of the Social Entrepreneurship Programme, with indicative budgets for the new Corporate Plan period reflecting annual allocations of around £400k.

The full range of Invest NI support is also available to those living in rural areas. In particular, the Start a Business Programme can provide helpful start up support.

In addition, Invest NI works closely with DARD on a variety of joint events to encourage higher levels of rural entrepreneurship. A brochure targeted at this group, with the title 'A look at opening your business to new prospects,' provides some very useful practical guidance and signposts potential rural entrepreneurs to various sources of professional advice.

Regional Investment

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what action he is taking to ensure that balanced regional investment is implemented in North Belfast. (AQO 3050/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The work of my Department and its agencies is underpinned by the principles of equality of opportunity and social inclusion. The Executive is fully committed to the development of a balanced regional economy as set out within the Programme for Government targets and DETI's policies and programmes will, of course, make a major contribution to the achievement of this objective.

In particular, Invest NI will continue to play an important role in supporting businesses in the North Belfast parliamentary constituency area, where it has a strong track-record.

Between 2002 and 2007, Invest NI made 396 offers of assistance, valued at £21m, to companies in the constituency. This leveraged total investment of £110m. In addition, 414 offers have been made to people wishing to start their own business. Under the Renewing Communities Programme, a range of

initiatives were also recently successfully piloted aimed at encouraging more people in North Belfast to explore pathways to enterprise.

It is important to emphasise that Invest NI assistance is largely demand-led and that it has only limited scope to influence the spatial distribution of projects.

Recent inward-investment projects in Belfast, by companies such as Mformation Technologies, Tech Mahindra, Firstsource Solutions and Citi, although largely city centre-based, are in close proximity to North Belfast and clearly offer employment opportunities to those living in all parts of the city and beyond.

International Trading

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the competencies identified by his department as being necessary for the future export and international trading-related industry in each of the main development hubs. (AQO 3068/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A successful business is dynamic and ambitious, has a strong focus on pursuing business growth in export markets, and strives, through innovation, to increase productivity and become internationally competitive.

Invest NI's 2008 - 2011 Corporate Plan focuses on three key areas: realising client potential through helping them become better at growing profitability; shifting the sectoral focus towards higher value added activities primarily through attracting FDI in target sectors such as financial services and ICT, and; concentrating on the development of frontier technologies at the leading edge of R & D.

Invest NI works with any manufacturing and tradeable service business in Northern Ireland with the potential to improve productivity and become more internationally competitive. In the next three years the short-term priority in respect of productivity improvement will be to realise the potential of existing businesses across all sectors.

Invest NI assists companies to develop these characteristics through a portfolio of programmes such as Passport to Export, Design and Development and Start a Business. Additionally, a broad range of Business Improvement interventions are available to help companies address the development of management and workforce capability.

Economic Investment Conference

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the actions his Department and

Invest NI are taking to publicise the upcoming Economic Investment Conference in May. (AQO 3061/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

There has been extensive and ongoing work to publicise the Conference.

I myself have taken an active and personal involvement in the promotion of the event. I have hosted visits to Northern Ireland by Ambassadors Foley and Dobriansky and have made several trips to the US where I have met with senior business leaders and government officials to promote and encourage their attendance.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have also been heavily involved in efforts to attract CEOs and senior Executives of US companies to the Conference. They have made four trips to the United States within the past three months and met a number of CEOs to encourage them to attend. They also took the message to President Bush when they met him on 7th December and the deputy First Minister reiterated this message when he met him on St Patrick's Day.

Most recently, the First Minister visited the East Coast of the USA during the week commencing 7th April to further promote and encourage participation.

As a result of these efforts, I am pleased to announce that over 80 delegates, representing 50 high-profile corporations have indicated that they plan to attend. This significantly surpasses the target of 30 to 40 CEOs and senior Executives which I announced earlier this year.

Coach Tourism

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he has taken to promote coach tourism. (AQO 2956/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Tourism Ireland works closely with coach operators in all relevant major markets to promote travel to Northern Ireland. Activities include placing features in coach tourism publications and producing coach tourism supplements; promoting to the coach tourism sector at key trade fairs and events e.g. the British Travel Trade Fair; direct marketing to key coach tourism contacts; and familiarisation visits to Northern Ireland for key influencers in the coach tourism business.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been working with the coach industry in Northern Ireland to help develop the sector. NITB has met the Confederation of Passenger Transport in Northern Ireland to discuss visitor servicing issues and the development of the coach industry.

The Confederation and Translink, also participated in the 2007 Northern Ireland Visitor Servicing Conference.

Energy Market

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to ensure the sustainability of the energy market. (AQO 2962/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Department works with its counterparts in Great Britain and also with the Irish Republic within the All-island Energy Market Framework to ensure a sustainable energy market for Northern Ireland consumers.

Natural gas flowing via Great Britain is the principal, low carbon, fuel for power stations in Northern Ireland with diversity of supply provided by AES Kilroot's coal powered station. A joint North South natural gas storage and Liquefied Natural Gas study has just been completed, which assesses our supply and demand needs in the short to longer term. This will help inform policy on future measures to sustain the gas supply.

In view of Northern Ireland's dependency on imported gas and the need to improve the sustainability of the market from economies and efficiencies of scale and security of supply, the two Regulatory Authorities in Northern Ireland and The Irish Republic are considering the potential benefits that might be secured from harmonised arrangements for gas transmission and competition on an all-island basis.

The Department is also keen to enhance the use of local sources of renewable energy to improve security and sustainability of electricity supply. The recent joint all-island Electricity Grid Study points to how a significantly increased use of renewable energy may be harnessed for power generation. Looking further into the future, the Department is working with the Scottish Executive and the Irish Republic to explore the potential for an off shore electricity grid network to exploit marine energy, primarily wind, wave and tidal.

All these measures will help ensure the long term sustainability of energy for Northern Ireland.

Regional Tourism Partnerships

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the support that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is giving to the regional tourism partnerships. (AQO 3041/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has discussed

core service level agreements with all four of the Regional Tourism Partnerships. These will cover services required by NITB and funding for 2008 to 2009. Arrangements for subsequent years will be the subject of further discussion.

In addition, £2 million per annum is being set aside to support the key product areas proposed in NITB's draft Corporate Plan covering the period 2008 to 2011. RTPs will be able to bid for additional funds from this source.

RTPs also have the opportunity to apply for selective financial assistance under NITB's Tourism Development Scheme.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the strategies he has in place to ensure that the tourist industry in Northern Ireland benefits from the 2012 Olympic Games.

(AQO 2978/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The 2012 Olympic Games offer an opportunity to market Northern Ireland as a tourist destination to a global audience. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will seek to use this opportunity to increase visitor numbers and revenue, pre and post games, and to generate positive press coverage for Northern Ireland.

NITB is represented on the Northern Ireland Regional Committee for the Olympics. Alongside Tourism Ireland and VisitBritain, NITB will work to use the games as a hook to attract visitors to Northern Ireland. Key activities will include:

- working with industry partners to develop a range of innovative packages and products aimed at maximising visitor potential in the run up to, during and after the games, including the development of a Cultural Olympiad of themed/branded events;
- increasing PR activity to promote Northern Ireland as a destination of choice within easy access from London;
- increasing the Northern Ireland content at key Visit Britain and Visit London Tourist Information Centres, and online to maximise the Gateway potential of London to international visitors;
- continuing to develop the skills and capabilities of Northern Ireland tourism industry to ensure world class service and delivery for visitors. There will also be potential to develop specific Olympic related content closer to 2012; and
- working with a range of stakeholders to ensure that the Titanic experience will be an integral part of Northern Ireland's tourism product by the centenary in 2012.

Invest NI

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the work of Invest NI.

(AQO 3054/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Invest NI's recently published Performance Information Framework Report 2002/03 to 2006/07, which can be found in the Publications section of its website, demonstrates a highly creditable range of achievements.

In its first five years, Invest NI has delivered investment commitments of over £2 billion, secured in excess of 23,000 jobs, and promoted the creation of over 10,000 new start-up businesses. There have been notable inward investment successes such as that from Citi, the world's largest financial services company, which is acting as the catalyst for the development of a vibrant financial services sector in Northern Ireland; investment in 18 Centres of Excellence promoting increased commercialisation of research and development; and the development and implementation of the Accelerating Entrepreneurship Strategy which has resulted in a positive cultural shift in entrepreneurial attitudes.

This has all been achieved against a backdrop of challenging efficiency targets and a requirement to maintain high standards of corporate governance, transparency and accountability. The agency has reduced its headcount since 2002 by over 21%, significantly lowered its non-staff overheads, disposed of surplus assets, and reduced levels of staff absenteeism to well below the public sector average.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the liaison undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive with local councils to enhance the work of the agency.

(AQO 2951/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

While HSENI is the lead body responsible for policy development, standard setting and the promotion and enforcement of health and safety at work standards in Northern Ireland, it shares its enforcement role with the District Councils. In order to ensure effective liaison, the Health & Safety Executive Local Authority Enforcement Committee for Northern Ireland, HELANI, which has membership drawn from both organisations, provides strategic oversight and leadership. This is supported by HSENI's Local Authority Unit which deals with day to day operational issues. During 2008/09, HSENI plans to take forward, in conjunction with DETI, planning for the establishment of a Fuel Oils Liaison Unit to liaise

with District Councils and other enforcement agencies in relation to petroleum licensing.

Electricity

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the sales of electricity to the Republic of Ireland over the last five years; (ii) the estimated benefits of the new interconnector in terms of increased capacity and sales to the Republic of Ireland; and (iii) the anticipated increase in demand for electricity in Northern Ireland over the next three years. (AQO 2984/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Net exports of electricity to the Republic of Ireland over the North South interconnector were: -

Year	Gigawatt hours (GWhr)
2003	4,630
2004	6,260
2005	8,244
2006	7,028
2007	5,257 *

* (1 January to 31 October 2007 figure only available due to new trading arrangements for Single Electricity Market from 1 November 2007).

The proposed second interconnector is designed to double transfer capacity in both directions by 2012 and improve competitive opportunities in the Single Electricity Market by approximately 1000 MW (Megawatts), subject to network reinforcements. Based on information from the System Operator NI (SONI) it is expected that generation of energy in Northern Ireland will grow by 1.6% per annum from 9368 GWhrs in 2008 to 9831 GWhrs in 2011 in response to anticipated demand.

Renewable Energy

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps he will take, along with his colleague in the Republic of Ireland, to set up a subvention programme which would allow for cross-border trade in renewable energy. (AQO 3063/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Under the Single Electricity Market, SEM, wholesale electricity is already traded on an all-island basis through a mandatory pool which includes measures to facilitate electricity generated from renewable sources. In addition, the legislation supporting the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation has been amended to ensure its continued effective operation under the SEM.

Harmonisation of the renewable electricity support systems of the two different member states presents very real practical difficulties and there are no plans at present to adopt a single approach to encouraging renewables development across the island.

Natural Gas

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the implications of opening the natural gas market to competition outside the greater Belfast area. (AQO 2986/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Under their licence conditions, Firmus Energy, the company responsible for taking gas to the towns along the route of the North West and South North gas transmission pipelines, has been granted a timelimited period of exclusivity to develop the gas market in these areas. Phoenix Natural Gas had a similar exclusivity period when it was first developing the market in its licenced area. It is considered inappropriate to open the market to competition outside the greater Belfast area at this time, but the matter will be kept under review by the Department and the Utility Regulator.

Economic Investment Conference

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the number of invitations sent to, and accepted by, companies for the Economic Investment Conference in May. (AQO 3060/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Almost 600 invitations have been issued to CEOs, senior executives, VIPs and advocates with over 80 acceptances received to date.

Many of those who have registered to attend have asked that their attendance remain confidential at this point but I am able to confirm that Mayor Bloomberg of New York, the CEOs and senior Executives of the New York Stock Exchange, Independent News and Media, Allstate, Nortel, and Caterpillar have accepted invitations.

ENVIRONMENT

Tree Preservation Order

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the powers planning officers have to gain access to a site to enforce a Tree Preservation Order. (AQW 5447/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

Powers permitting rights of entry to land to Planning Officers are set out in primary legislation in Article 121 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Rights of entry for enforcement are also set out in Articles 84A – 84C of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 which were introduced by Article 13 of the Planning (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

By virtue of this legislation, Planning Officers have the power to enter a site for the purposes of serving an enforcement notice. Where trees have been removed in contravention of a Tree Preservation Order (TPO), Planning Officers also have the power to enter a site for the purposes of surveying it to assist with potential prosecution.

Contravention of a TPO is an offence punishable by the Courts.

Mary's Style at Shrigley

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to fund the erection of a plinth for Mary's Style at Shrigley, Killyleagh, similar to that erected for the Cist Stones at Mountstewart.

(AQW 5616/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is important to note that this monument is not in the care of the State, through DOE/EHS, however, the main Church ruin, boundary wall and St Mary's Style is a listed building. I understand that Down District Council may be the owner.

The Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) can provide funding through its Historic Buildings Grant-aid Scheme for the repair and maintenance of the historic fabric of listed buildings. However, it cannot provide funding for new structures, such as the proposed plinth. In any event, from a recent EHS visit, it appears that the current masonry plinth is in reasonable condition, although the sign that it supported has been vandalised, and is now illegible. Nevertheless, the EHS Archaeologists can provide guidance and information on interpretive material, on the archaeological context of the Church and its surroundings and will be happy to work with the owners in doing so.

With regard to assistance for the 'plinth' for the Cist Stones at Mountstewart, the Department is prepared to provide up to £500 contribution in that case for the production of an information panel. Part of this contribution may be 'in kind' using the services of our graphics expertise, so that the graphic design cost of such interpretation may be reduced. It is important to note that the Department did not undertake to actually erect a sign at Mountstewart.

Planning Policy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if any changes to the 'Test of Abandonment' will be applied through all rural policy areas, including (i) countryside policy and (ii) green belt policy, in the new planning policy for single dwellings in the countryside. (AQW 5623/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The work of the Executive Subcommittee, as set out in the paper on the findings emerging from the review of draft PPS 14, has included consideration of a more relaxed test for the replacement of single dwellings which would allow some dwellings currently regarded as "abandoned", and therefore not currently eligible for replacement, to be replaced. The Subcommittee has not yet completed its task. We have to finalise our views and make recommendations to the full Executive Committee, who will make the final decision about this policy.

Single Houses in the Countryside

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, per district council area, the number of outline and full applications for single houses in the countryside that were applied for after 16 March 2006; and the number approved in (a) 17 March 2006 to 17 March 2007; and (b) 18 March 2007 to 18 March 2008. (AQW 5638/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of planning applications received and approved from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 for single rural dwellings are:-

- Applications received in 2006/07 – 2338
- Applications approved in 2006/07 – 5138

These are broken down by district council area as follows:-

	Received	Approved
Londonderry	51	71
Limavady	57	107
Coleraine	72	213
Ballymoney	48	141
Moyle	36	69
Larne	33	20
Ballymena	92	202
Magherafelt	155	248
Cookstown	64	274
Strabane	118	215

	Received	Approved
Omagh	108	606
Fermanagh	163	955
Dungannon	97	636
Craigavon	87	90
Armagh	168	264
Newry and Mourne	402	285
Banbridge	123	181
Down	140	185
Lisburn	126	121
Antrim	58	137
Newtownabbey	11	11
Carrickfergus	7	7
North Down	10	15
Ards	84	62
Castlereagh	23	20
Belfast	5	3
	2338	5138

The figures relate to full and outline applications for new builds or replacement single dwellings outside settlement limits. The figures for applications received and approved are not directly comparable as the approvals include applications received before 1 April 2006.

Data outside the 2006/07 period is not available at present due to the new statistical reporting system outlined in my letter to Members in December 2007. It is anticipated that this data will be available in October 2008.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to give a timescale within which the Planning Appeals Commission decision on the Ards and Down Area Plan will be fed into the present planning process in Downpatrick. (AQW 5663/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that the Department has now received the PAC report on the Ards and Down Area Plan Public Inquiry. Planning Service is currently considering the implications of the report in consultation with key consultees and will shortly provide guidance on a possible date for adoption. This depends on the nature of the PAC recommendations on each objection. We cannot provide a firm indication on timescales at this stage but our intention is to complete the adoption stage as quickly as possible.

The PAC report can only be made available by the Department when it completes the adoption process and publishes the adopted plan, with or without modifications and its content is confidential until that time.

In conjunction with progress toward the adoption of the Plan, the Department is also considering the implications of the report for individual applications on a case by case basis.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps being taken to ensure that the Planning Appeals Commission completion of the Ards and Down Area Plan is considered for current planning decisions at Downpatrick. (AQW 5664/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that the Department has now received the PAC report on the Ards and Down Area Plan Public Inquiry. Planning Service is currently considering the implications of the report in consultation with key consultees and will shortly provide guidance on a possible date for adoption. This depends on the nature of the PAC recommendations on each objection. We cannot provide a firm indication on timescales at this stage but our intention is to complete the adoption stage as quickly as possible.

The PAC report can only be made available by the Department when it completes the adoption process and publishes the adopted plan, with or without modifications and its content is confidential until that time.

In conjunction with progress toward the adoption of the Plan, the Department is also considering the implications of the report for individual applications on a case by case basis.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the provision that exists for out-of-hours service for the Planning Service to deal with those who have felled trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders. (AQW 5714/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department does not currently operate a formal out-of-hours service, mainly for resource reasons, although in practice local staff have visited sites straightaway if contacted.

Officials from my Department will monitor the situation regarding protected trees being felled outside of office hours and will continue to react as swiftly as possible. The key to this issue is prevention before the event rather than reaction after destruction is

underway. The public are therefore encouraged to contact my Department at an early stage.

Septic Tanks

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the impact of septic tanks on the environment. (AQW 5718/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The rural population of Northern Ireland is highly dispersed and relies mainly on septic tanks for wastewater treatment. It is difficult to quantify the impact of these systems on water quality and their contribution to nutrient loadings.

Limited research indicates that many tanks may be inadequately maintained or poorly sited.

The Department acknowledges that there are issues with septic tanks and the Environment and Heritage Service has initiated research to consider aspects of septic tanks. The research will determine the impact of Northern Ireland's dispersed population on water quality. The recommendations and scientific evidence produced will be used to support a review of the consenting and regulatory policies, in line with current best practice and will provide support to government policy on rural development and the associated impacts on water quality. It is likely that this work will take up to two years to complete.

Phosphate Pollution

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm, given that 12% of the phosphate pollution entering Lough Erne comes from septic tanks, if she will introduce legislation covering sewage treatment systems to deal with the impact of new dwellings on rural waterways. (AQW 5719/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Eutrophication is considered to be the most widespread threat to water quality in Northern Ireland. All effluent discharges from domestic (and non-domestic) premises, which are not connected to the public sewer, require the consent of the Department of the Environment, where discharge to waterway or underground stratum is proposed.

Discharge consent will include conditions relating to the quality and quantity of the effluent discharge.

My Department considers that the current legislation adequately regulates discharges to waterways or underground strata. However, this will be kept under continual review.

The Department however acknowledges that there are environmental issues associated with septic tank

discharges and Environment and Heritage Service has initiated research to examine these. (AQW 5718/08 refers).

The research will determine the impact of Northern Ireland's dispersed population on water quality and will provide support to government policy on rural development and the associated impacts on water quality.

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to ensure that all departmental policies are rural-proofed. (AQW 5796/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Officials throughout my Department continue to consider rural proofing as an integral part of the policy making process and are advised to use the Rural Development Council checklist contained within the Rural Proofing Annual Reports published by DARD.

My Department will continue to be represented at a senior level on the Inter-Departmental Rural Proofing Steering Group, chaired by DARD and continue to contribute to DARD's Rural Proofing Annual Report listing policies which have been rural proofed and those which have been identified for rural proofing each year.

Planning Applications

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of planning applications that have been granted for (i) new; and (ii) replacement dwellings in the Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay areas. (AQW 5871/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In the Crawfordsburn area in 2006/07:

- 10 applications were approved for new dwellings
- 2 applications were approved for replacement dwellings
- In the Helen's Bay area in 2006/07:
- 5 applications were approved for new dwellings
- 2 applications were approved for replacement dwellings.

Data outside the 2006/07 period is not available at present due to the new statistical reporting system outlined in my letter to Members in December 2007.

Planning Policy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if the implementation of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14, in its interpretation of planning

policy, has been stopped; and if so, to detail the date this occurred. (AQW 5883/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Draft PPS 14 was implemented on 17 March 2006, reissued on 25 October 2007, continues to apply and has not been stopped.

Driving Test Examinations

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for each of the last 3 years, (i) the number of; and (ii) results from, driving test examinations at each driving test centre, broken down by gender. (AQW 5921/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The figures at Annex 1 represent the volume of all driving tests conducted in Northern Ireland, by DVA, for each of the last three years broken down by result, test centre and gender. Annex 2 represents the same information for category B (car) tests for the same period.

Climate Impact Assessment

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to identify the Government departments that subject their departmental policies to a Climate Impact Assessment. (AQW 5927/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no stand alone climate impact assessment tool that is applicable to government policy.

Under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (Statutory Rule 2004 No. 280), plans and programmes of public bodies including government Departments, are subject to a strategic environmental assessment. Strategic environmental assessments include consideration of climate change impacts.

There is currently no central database of strategic environmental assessments undertaken by government Departments.

Planning Service

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of planning applications for (a) housing; and (b) commercial developments, currently awaiting a decision from the Ballymena division of the Planning Service; and (ii) the average length of time taken for a decision to be made. (AQW 5931/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Applications received which have not been decided in the Ballymena Division as at 31/03/08.

- (a) Residential - 1455

- (b) Commercial - 150

Caveat

These figures have been extracted from a live dataset which is continuously updated and validated. They should therefore be regarded as indicative only at this point in time and should not be compared with any previous figures published by the Agency.

- (ii) Decisions are categorised into major, intermediate and minor types of planning applications, based on the development and type of land use. In 2006/07 Ballymena Division issued decisions or applications were withdrawn for major planning applications within 27 weeks, intermediate planning applications within 31.8 weeks and minor planning applications within 12.2 weeks, on average. Planning applications refer to full or outline applications only and exclude reserved matters, various consents including consent to display and certificates of lawfulness.

Special Responsibility Allowances

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 664/07, to detail the reasons why there is no statutory requirement for local councils to adhere to her department's directive on Special Responsibility Allowances. (AQW 5941/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Following consideration of the recommendations contained in the report of the Councillors' Remuneration Working Group (June 2006), subordinate legislation was made to implement some of the changes. The outstanding recommendations relating to the distribution of Special Responsibility Allowance are for an independent remuneration panel to consider further and may require primary legislation.

My Department has not issued a directive on Special Responsibility Allowance. However, guidance issued last year encouraged councils to consider voluntarily adopting good practice in the interim.

Tree Removal

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if her department intends to prosecute the individuals responsible for the removal of trees at Myrtle Lodge, Bryansford Road, Newcastle, between 26 March and 28 March 2008. (AQW 5978/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It would be inappropriate to make detailed comment on the case until such times as the matter has either been before

the court or the Department has determined that no case can be taken.

Water Treatment Works

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if there are health risks associated with swimming within a one mile radius of Newcastle water treatment works located at Dundrum Bay. (AQW 6004/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Monitoring by the Environment and Heritage Service has shown that the Newcastle bathing water has failed, in 2 of the last 3 years, to meet the minimum standards set out in the EC Bathing Waters Directive.

World Health Organisation studies have shown that bathing waters that fail to meet these standards can be linked to an increased risk of gastrointestinal illness.

There are plans however to improve standards at the Newcastle Waste Water Treatment Works and in the sewerage infrastructure in the area. These improvements must be in place by 2013.

Illegal Dumping

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cases of illegal dumping of construction waste in coastal areas being dealt with by the Environment and Heritage Service. (AQW 6007/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is currently dealing with 283 cases involving construction waste. EHS logs incidents involving the illegal deposit of construction waste by date and area, but no distinction is made as to whether or not the area may be regarded as coastal.

Boundaries Commission

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of the Environment when the Boundaries Commission will provide final recommendations on the new boundaries for the 11 councils. (AQW 6019/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My intention is that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will be appointed by 1 July 2008. The appointment will be for a fixed term and the Commissioner is expected to report, with final recommendations, by 30 June 2009.

Road Tax

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people fined for non-payment of road tax, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 6023/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the number of people fined in Northern Ireland for non-payment of road tax in the last 3 years are set out in the table below. The table also shows the number of people who paid penalties to avoid prosecution in court. Records of convictions or penalties paid are not kept by parliamentary constituency or by any other geographical division.

Year	Number of Convictions	Value of Fines Awarded	Number of Penalties Paid	Value of Penalties Paid
2005/06	2,029	£451,775	8,811	£882,513
2006/07	2,218	£505,349	10,128	£1,036,272
2007/08	2,109	£461,190	11,255	£1,105,692

Malone Conservation Area

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action her department is taking to protect the character of the Malone Conservation area in South Belfast. (AQW 6024/08)

The Minister of the Environment: All planning applications for development, within the Malone Conservation Area are assessed against published policy guidance which in this case is principally provided by Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage. Policy BH12 specifically deals with new development in a Conservation Area and policy BH14 covers the issue of demolition in a Conservation Area. In addition, Policy QD1 of Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7): 'Quality Residential Environments' seeks to ensure that housing proposals maintain or enhance the distinctive character and appearance of Conservation Areas.

Planning Service will also have regard to the Malone Conservation Area draft Character Appraisal that was published on 15 October 2004, and afforded substantial weight by the Interim Statement of 18 August 2006.

In addition to the published policy guidance Planning Service are required in dealing with development proposals within the Malone Conservation Area to consider all the relevant material considerations, including representations received from third parties. Consultation with adjacent neighbours and advertisement

in the local press form an integral part of the planning application process.

Illegal Dumping

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action Environment and Heritage Service enforcement has undertaken against illegal dumping of building waste adjacent to Newcastle harbour, County Down. (AQW 6030/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service is in the process of investigating a report of the illegal deposit of a substantial amount of construction waste in the Newcastle harbour area. I am unable to provide more detail at this stage. However I will write to you when the results of the investigation are available.

Planning Officers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the average age of planning officers (i) within the planning department; and (ii) in Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick. (AQW 6034/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The average age of Planning Officers within the planning department is –

Technical staff 35.9

The Average age of Planning Officers in Rathkeltair House is –

Technical staff 35.4

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that there are enough qualified assessors in place to prevent delays in issuing Energy Performance Certificates. (AQW 5749/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Department cannot control the number of qualified assessors available to produce Energy Performance Certificates as this will be driven by market forces. The Department's role is to raise awareness by ensuring that sufficient information is made available to the industry and all interested parties. To this end, it has embarked on an information campaign to publicise the requirements of the Energy

Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008. This includes a series of information seminars, meetings with the main stakeholders, a dedicated website and a press campaign. The seminars organised by the Department include an exhibition at which accredited training and software providers are given the opportunity to promote their services and products.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the budget of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency is determined. (AQW 5888/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The budget for the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is reviewed and set through the annual Northern Ireland Budget processes and refined in the course of the in-year monitoring rounds. NISRA's budget allocation in the current period has been set in order to enable it to deliver a number of priority and statutory services. A proportion of NISRA's costs are recouped through charges for services provided to the public, other Departments and organisations in line with Government fees and charges policies.

Senior Civil Servants

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of senior civil servants in post in each of the last ten years. (AQW 5961/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of senior civil servants in the eleven Departments and their Agencies, from 1999 to 2008 are set out in the table below.

Year	NI Depts
1999	207
2000	209
2001	217
2002	227
2003	218
2004	225
2005	237
2006	226
2007	227

Year	NI Depts
2008	209

Resource Underspend

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to estimate the level of resource underspend for 2007-2008. (AQW 6028/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Actual provisional outturn figures for 2007-08 are currently being compiled by departments. However, most recent departmental forecasts suggest that the level of resource underspend by departments will be in the region of £130 million or 1.5% of allocations. I anticipate that actual provisional outturn figures from departments will be available in June 2008.

Maze Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of money spent by his department to date on proposals to have a Multi Sports stadium built at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQW 6156/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: While the Department of Finance and Personnel has, in the normal course of business, had a role in considering the proposals for a multi-sports stadium built at the Maze / Long Kesh site, it has not incurred any additional expenditure in order to do so.

Public Spending

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the (i) total; and (ii) per capita, level of public spending, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 6258/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Public Expenditure is not recorded at the sub-regional level for Northern Ireland. Therefore the information requested is not currently available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

However, sub-regional data is available for some specific spending programmes. For example, the Strategic Resources Framework, published by DHSSPS, sets out Health and Social Care Expenditure Plans by locality.

Rates Collection Agency

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the arrangements that are in place to facilitate the payment of rates bills in cash to the Rates Collection Agency. (AQW 6259/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: From 1st April 2007 Land and Property Services (LPS) is responsible for the billing and collection of rates.

Ratepayers can pay their rate bills in cash in a number of different ways:-

- At a Post Office, using either a rate payment card or the giro slip attached to the rate bill,
- At a bank or building society, or
- At local shops or garages displaying the Payzone network logo. The ratepayer will require a rate payment card to pay at Payzone.

Public-Sector Jobs

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the current location of public sector jobs, broken down by parliamentary constituency; and (ii) the consideration his department is giving to the decentralisation of public sector jobs. (AQW 6260/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: (i) The number of employee jobs in the public sector at September 2005 by Parliamentary Constituency Area is given in the attached table.

(ii) An independent review on the policy on the location of public sector jobs was established in December 2007. The Review and the terms of reference were approved by the Executive and include a requirement 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

You will know that Professor Sir George Bain who is chairing the Review recently visited Londonderry as part of his public research. The forum in Londonderry was one of a series of events across Northern Ireland at which public opinion is being gathered. I understand that Professor Bain has also invited party leaders to meet on the issues. At this stage it is, therefore, too early to speculate on the outcome.

My department is awaiting the findings of the Review. I believe that it is an opportune time to consider the distribution of public sector jobs generally

in light of the Executive's clearly stated priority of growing the economy.

The review is due to report in the summer 2008 when the Executive will consider the findings and recommendations.

THE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR AT SEPTEMBER 2005 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA

Parliamentary Constituency Area	Number of public sector jobs	Number of full-time equivalent public sector jobs
Belfast East	13,386	11,784.5
Belfast North	15,609	13,496
Belfast South	32,183	28,383.5
Belfast West	16,629	13,589
East Antrim	5,171	4,033
East Londonderry	9,488	7,755.5
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	9,647	7,693.5
Foyle	14,721	12,419
Lagan Valley	10,707	8,637.5
Mid Ulster	6,174	4,610.5
Newry and Armagh	14,431	11,187.5
North Antrim	10,814	8,543
North Down	6,490	5,255.5
South Antrim	12,972	10,055.5
South Down	7,856	6,259
Strangford	10,715	8,699
Upper Bann	12,649	9,979
West Tyrone	9,761	8,051.5
Northern Ireland	219,403	180,432

Source: Northern Ireland Census of Employment

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Foreign Nationals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to outline the policy and guidelines issued to Health and Social Care staff for dealing with foreign nationals whose home country is not yet a member of the European Union; and (ii) to advise whether he has received any commitment from the Northern Ireland Office for additional financial

resources to meet the increased cost of treating such foreign nationals. (AQW 5491/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Access to health services in Northern Ireland for overseas visitors is governed by the Provision of Health Services to Persons not Ordinarily Resident Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The last guidance issued to Health and Social Care staff on the matter was contained in Departmental Circular HSS(PCD) 10/2000 – this guidance is currently being reviewed.

All funding for health social services and public safety in NI is provided by the NI Executive based on the overall funding allocated to the NI Block by Treasury through the operation of the Barnett formula. No additional funding has been received from NIO to meet the additional costs of treating foreign nationals.

Underage Drinking

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to conduct an audit of local schemes used by (i) District Councils; and (ii) the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to combat underage drinking, to ensure best practice is implemented across Northern Ireland. (AQW 5503/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD), which was launched in 2006, identified addressing underage drinking, with its associated physical and mental health implications and potential for anti-social or risk taking behaviour, as a key priority.

Underage drinking was therefore a substantial agenda item at the NSD Steering Group meeting I attended in December 2007. At the meeting it was agreed that there was a clear need for a cross-sectoral, integrated Action Plan to address this issue, and that this would have to focus on restricting access, improving education and training for both young people and their parents, and having effective treatment and support services in place for those who require additional help.

We are now beginning to develop this Action Plan, and as part of the development process my officials and I will engage and consult with a range of key stakeholders, including the local councils, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the local Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs), relevant professionals, other relevant Government Departments, and community and voluntary organisations who work in this area. This will allow us to learn from the local initiatives that are currently operating, including those that have been put in place by the local councils and the PSNI, to identify best

practice and to ensure a co-ordinated and evidenced based approach can be taken across Northern Ireland.

Bamford Review

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the actions (i) he has taken; and (ii) he is planning to take, to progress the implementation of the inclusion agenda, as outlined in the Bamford Report. (AQW 5522/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Progressing the inclusion agenda outlined by the Bamford Review involves a range of Departments, not just my own. Some of the recommendations will take time to address. I have established an inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability to oversee and drive forward the strategic changes required across Departments and ensure that issues that require inter-Departmental co-operation are taken forward in a co-ordinated manner.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why the Agenda for Change process for speech and language therapists in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area has not been completed. (AQW 5530/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process for implementing Agenda for Change for all staff groups including Speech and Language Therapists has been agreed with Health Service Trade Unions. This process is being implemented in partnership by Health and Social Care employers and local staff side representatives. Speech and Language Therapists in a number of the Health and Social Care organisations have received their new rates of pay. I have instructed Health and Social Care employers to have all staff on Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of June 2008 and I expect them to meet this target.

Lurgan Hospital Dermatology Unit

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress in the relocation of the Lurgan hospital Dermatology Unit to Craigavon Area hospital. (AQW 5535/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The dermatology unit will begin its move to the site of the current psychiatric unit at Craigavon Area Hospital in June 2008, with the last transfer of functions expected to take place by March 2009. The move is necessary as the existing Lurgan

site is not at a level required to deliver a modern service.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has prepared a business case for the relocation, which has been the subject of a public and patient consultation exercise including a workshop that was held on 31st March 2008. As a result of the workshop, a user forum has been established to meet quarterly during 2008/09 to enable current and former patients to shape and influence the implementation of the new service.

Trust Board approval will be sought for the review proposals at the April 29th Trust Board meeting.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action his department is taking to use townland names, where applicable, in view of the resolution passed by the first Assembly on 1 October 2001. (AQW 5545/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Civil Servants in my Department are encouraged to reply to written communications using the address supplied to them by correspondents.

Vioxx

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients still suffering from the side effects of the drug Vioxx. (AQW 5594/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information regarding the number of patient numbers who are still suffering from the side effects of Vioxx is not held, however, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 people have been prescribed Vioxx in the UK, 500 of whom are reported to be continuing to seek compensation for the health effects of the drug on themselves or a family member.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an assurance that there will be no further 'no warning' shutdowns of the Accident and Emergency Unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. (AQW 5628/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The early closure of A&E at the Mid-Ulster Hospital on the 4th, 5th and 6th April was necessary because of the absence of appropriately skilled medical staff.

It is anticipated that recent action taken by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to recruit staff grade doctors for the A&E Department at the Mid-Ulster will provide the medical cover required to maintain its normal level of service.

Ambulance Call Outs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of ambulance call outs in the Mid-Ulster Hospital catchment area on the weekend of 4 April to 7 April 2008; and (ii) the ambulance response times for those call outs. (AQW 5629/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) responded to 42 emergency ambulance calls in the Mid Ulster Hospital catchment area (defined as the Magherafelt and Cookstown local government districts) from 12.00 am on 4 April to 12.00 pm on 7 April 2008. Nine of these calls were diverted as a result of the closure of the Mid Ulster Hospital and of those nine calls only 2 were in category A i.e. requiring an ambulance service response within 8 minutes.

Details of the response times of the 42 calls are presented in the following table:

Time taken to respond	Number of calls
Within 8 minutes	22
8 to 15 minutes	8
15 to 25 minutes	12

Pre-Senile Dementia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the services available for the diagnosis and management of pre-senile dementia (i.e. dementia occurring in patients under 65 years of age) in the current Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 5630/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Initial assessment of the possibility of early onset dementia is usually made by the person's GP, who would refer the patient for a specialist assessment, either by a consultant psychiatrist or at a Memory Clinic. As there are only 400 people diagnosed with early onset dementia in Northern Ireland, it would not be feasible to sustain a dedicated service specifically for this client group. Prompt diagnosis is particularly important in this age group, and this will be assisted by increased awareness training for GPs and other healthcare professionals, in line with the Bamford recommendations

For those who already have or do develop early onset dementia, of whatever variety, I would expect to see care provision and support which is geared directly to the particular problems and circumstances of the individuals concerned, and which is sensitive to their age group and likely circumstances. There are a wide range of services in place, both statutory and independent, to help support people with dementia, and any support arrangements should only be made after close consultation with the individuals and their families.

Mental-Health Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to respond to the gap in child and adolescent mental health services with respect to the provision of service, training and support to Accident and Emergency departments and to medical and surgical wards within acute hospitals. (AQW 5632/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts are currently working to strengthen and expand their CAHMS liaison services to ensure that children or young people who have mental health problems, and who have been admitted for emergency, surgical or medical treatment, are quickly identified, assessed and provided with appropriate treatment and support from mental health services. It would not be feasible to attempt to sustain a dedicated CAMHS liaison team in every acute hospital, and Trusts have developed a range of approaches within their available resources. All acute hospital psychiatric liaison services, however, have access to CAMHS specialists. The general expansion and improvement of CAMHS services, now being driven forward as part of the Bamford programme, will see more CAHMS specialists trained or recruited, which will increase the capacity of Trusts in this area.

Psychotherapists and Counsellors

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he has taken towards implementing his commitment to the statutory regulation and registration of psychotherapists and counsellors. (AQW 5633/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Work on the statutory registration and regulation of psychotherapists and counsellors is being led by the Department of Health in London, on a United Kingdom-wide basis. My Department is involved in this, but the introduction of such regulatory measures is still some time away.

As an interim measure, my Department has produced and consulted on draft Standards of Good Practice for Counselling Services in Northern Ireland. Officials are working to finalise and issue these Standards to statutory and independent stakeholders and providers of counselling and psychotherapy.

Psychotherapists and Counsellors

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any communication he has had with the professional bodies for psychotherapy and counselling to progress its commitment to the statutory regulation and registration of psychotherapists and counsellors as outlined in the national 2006 consultation on standards. (AQW 5634/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In November 2006, my Department issued for consultation draft Standards of Good Practice for Counselling Services in Northern Ireland. Responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders, including a number of professional bodies involved in counselling and psychotherapy.

In finalising these Standards for issue, discussions will be held, if necessary, with relevant professional bodies.

Psychotherapists and Counsellors

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to ensure public safety in the professional activities of counselling and psychotherapy. (AQW 5635/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is involved in the ongoing United Kingdom-wide work, on which the Department of Health in London is leading, on the statutory registration and regulation of counselling and psychotherapy services. However, the introduction of such regulatory measures is still some time away.

As an interim measure, my Department has produced and consulted on draft Standards of Good Practice for Counselling Services in Northern Ireland. Their objective is to protect the public by ensuring that counsellors and psychotherapists provide a proficient, efficient and safe service.

Two of the Standards' over-riding principles are commitments by counsellors and psychotherapists to avoid harm to their clients and to promote their well-being. Officials are working to finalise and issue these Standards to statutory and independent stakeholders and providers.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the actions taken to reduce the incidents of Clostridium difficile in the Causeway hospital. (AQW 5646/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Guidelines for the prescribing of antibiotics within Causeway Hospital and by GPs have been reviewed and disseminated with a view to reducing the use, as far as possible, of those antibiotics associated with a higher risk of causing Clostridium difficile. Monitoring of the implementation of these guidelines within Causeway Hospital is underway to ensure good compliance with them.

All staff have been updated on the importance of full adherence to infection control procedures. Information has been given to patients and visitors to the hospital about good infection control practices.

Enhanced cleaning procedures have been put in place at Causeway Hospital including the use of new cleaning agents, increased frequency of cleaning, a programme of intensive cleaning of ward areas and regular checking of cleaning by supervisors.

All new cases of Clostridium difficile identified are being reviewed to determine what factors can be identified that may have contributed to the infection developing in that individual. Action will then be taken to address any issues arising out of these reviews.

Drugs Awareness Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total expenditure on drugs awareness projects targeted at schools and young people in each of the last five years. (AQW 5676/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the last five years my Department has allocated a total of £5,335,305 to projects targeted at young people which either exclusively, or in part, address drug awareness both within and outside the school environment.

The breakdown by financial year is as follows –

Year	2007/08	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
Amount	1,370,748	963,173	978,520	971,503	949,361

Autism

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he intends to take to provide the necessary facilities for people with autism and to address the current

regional imbalance that exists within this sector.
(AQW 5689/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I launched an independent review of autism health and social care services last September, the report is expected to become available shortly. The report will include advice on the levels of service needed across Health and Social Care Trusts, and will help inform decisions on the provision of consistent levels of service for all individuals and families affected by autism. The information provided in the report will inform the development of plans for improved health and social care services to those with autism.

Irish Travelling Community

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to enhance the ability of the Irish travelling community to access health services.
(AQW 5690/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The All Ireland Travellers' Health Study was launched in June last year and is a joint Study between my Department and the Department of Health and Children. The Study will quantify the position on Travellers' health, providing important baseline information for the future planning of health and social care services for Travellers.

Minor Injuries Unit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people treated at the Minor Injuries Unit at Ards Hospital since its inception.
(AQW 5702/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people treated at the Minor Injuries Unit at Ards Hospital since its inception on 1st December 1997 is outlined in the table below.

Year	First Attendance	Follow up Attendance	Total Attendance
01/12/97 to 31/03/98	2,555	246	2,801
1998/99	7,345	883	8,228
1999/00	6,879	1,023	7,902
2000/01	6,742	1,159	7,901
2001/02	6,970	1,232	8,202
2002/03	7,203	1,259	8,462
2003/04	7,764	1,556	9,320

2004/05	7,983	1,361	9,344
2005/06	8,581	1,443	10,024
2006/07	8,971	1,231	10,202

Source: South Eastern HSC Trust and Departmental Return KH09 (Part2)

Data for the financial year 2007/08 are still being compiled.

Agenda for Change

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain why Health Trusts are applying the Agenda for Change in different ways, and can he confirm that banding is done on an individual basis as opposed to group banding of entire sections such as secretarial.
(AQW 5704/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care organisations are not applying Agenda for Change in different ways. There is an agreed implementation process which is being implemented in partnership by Health and Social Care employers and local staff side representatives. The Agenda for Change banding is dependant on the job description in operation at 1 October 2004. All staff working to the same job description within an organisation will be given the same Agenda for Change band.

Agenda for Change

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to account for the discrepancy, under the Agenda for Change, in secretarial grades awarded between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom; and (ii) to detail the requirements to reach the grade 4 Medical Secretary Band.
(AQW 5705/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Agenda for Change grades are agreed by Health and Social Care employers in partnership with staff representatives and are awarded on the basis of the job description in operation at 1 October 2004 when these arrangements were introduced. Within the medical secretary roles in the HSC there is a mixture of Band 3 and Band 4 jobs; this is similar to other parts of the United Kingdom.

(ii) A Medical Secretary would require a minimum job evaluation score of 278 to achieve a Band 4 grading. To achieve this score the individual would be required to carry out non-routine work which requires an intermediate level of experience, to act independently and may be responsible for the day to day supervision of other support secretaries. These

duties are in addition to providing secretarial support to a Medical Consultant which involves organising workloads and communicating with patients.

Off-Road Bike Accidents

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of people treated in hospitals following accidents involving off-road bikes (such as quads and scramblers) in the last five years. (AQW 5712/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available on the number of people treated for accidents involving off-road bikes. However, the number of admissions to hospital for injuries due to accidents involving all-terrain or off-road motor vehicles is available.

The table below provides figures on the number of admissions to acute hospitals in Northern Ireland for people with a primary or secondary diagnosis of injuries due to accidents involving all-terrain or off-road motor vehicles, for each of the last five years for which data are available.

Year	Number of *Admissions
2006/07	95
2005/06	110
2004/05	100
2003/04	80
2002/03	91

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

* Discharges and Deaths are used as an approximation for 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.

Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale within which the proposed Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park, Derry/Londonderry, will progress; and to confirm if he will seek additional funds from the monitoring rounds to advance the project. (AQW 5737/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This project is included in the Primary & Community Care Infrastructure Programme (PCCI), having been identified by the Western Health and Social Services Board and the Western HSC Trust as one of a number of such schemes to be implemented

as part of the PCCI Programme in the Western Trust area.

The capital funding allocation for my Department in the present Budget period 2008 – 2011 has unfortunately placed constraints on the level and pace of investment for the PCCI programme. I will however continue to explore every opportunity to meet current budget shortfalls. All projects will however be subject to business case approval before funding can be confirmed.

I am therefore unable to confirm at this time when the Creggan Burn Park Health and Care Centre project specifically will commence, but I can assure you that this particular development remains a high priority for the Western HSC Trust.

Departmental Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 3 years, (i) the number of (a) Anti-Drugs Groups; and (b) Family Support Groups, that have been funded by each of the Health and Social Care Trusts; and (ii) the funding provided to each group. (AQW 5747/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The answer refers only to those organisations which primarily provide alcohol and drug education, prevention and family support services.

Northern Board	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
(a) No. of Anti-Drug Organisations	5	11	19
(b) No. of Family Support Groups	3	4	3

Southern Board	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
(a) No. of Anti-Drug Organisations	8	14	16
(b) No. of Family Support Groups	1	0	1

Eastern Board	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
(a) No. of Anti-Drug Organisations	6	17	25
(b) No. of Family Support Groups	0	1	1

Western Board	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
(a) No. of Anti-Drug Organisations	20	6	6

Western Board	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
(b) No. of Family Support Groups	0	1	1

- (ii) Many of the Anti-Drug Groups, set out above, also provide family support services. Therefore it is not possible to disaggregate the funding in the format requested in the question.

Departmental Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the additional support, financial or otherwise, his department will provide to (i) Anti-Drugs Groups; and (ii) Family Support Groups, for families that have suffered through illegal drug use. (AQW 5750/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD), which was launched in 2006, seeks to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse in Northern Ireland. A total of £6.8 million was allocated to the implementation of the NSD in 07/08.

The allocation of funding to local alcohol and drug misuse projects, and local groups that support families affected by substance misuse issues, is the responsibility of the Health and Social Services Boards, through the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs). The DACTs have therefore developed, and are implementing, local Action Plans.

The DACTs were allocated a total of £4.8 million in 07/08 to implement their Local Actions Plans. I understand that the majority of the projects which received funding from the DACTs in 2007/2008 will continue to be funded in 2008/2009. The DACTs will be reviewing their Action Plans during this year.

Drug Misuse

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his departments plans to introduce new measures to address drug misuse. (AQW 5751/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011 (NSD) was launched in 2006, with the aim of reducing the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse in Northern Ireland. A total of £6.8 million was allocated to the implementation of the NSD in 07/08. The implementation of the NSD will remain a key priority for my Department.

In support of the NSD's outcomes and key priorities, the Department is currently in the process of developing Action Plans to address emerging issues around hidden harm (i.e. supporting the needs of children born to, or living with, substance misusing parents or carers), underage drinking, and cocaine misuse.

The Department bid for additional resources to support the implementation of these Action Plans through the CSR process but we did not receive all the funding we bid for.

At the local level, the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs) have developed, and are implementing, local Action Plans in response to local need and in support of the overarching outcomes in the NSD. The DACTs will be reviewing their Action Plans during this year.

24-Hour Scanner Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to introduce a 24-hour scanner service in all hospitals for stroke victims. (AQW 5761/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 29 November 2007 I issued Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland for full public consultation. The consultation ended on 28 March and my Department is now collating and analysing the responses received.

Until I have had the opportunity to consider the responses received it would be inappropriate for me to comment in relation to any of the specific recommendations. I would expect to be in a position to publish a final strategy document in the summer.

Blockbusting Drugs

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to introduce blockbusting drugs for strokes in all hospitals. (AQW 5762/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 29 November 2007 I issued Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland for full public consultation. The consultation ended on 28 March and my Department is now collating and analysing the responses received.

Until I have had the opportunity to consider the responses received it would be inappropriate for me to comment in relation to any of the specific recommendations. I would expect to be in a position to publish a final strategy document in the summer.

Stroke Unit at Downpatrick Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to create a stroke unit at Downpatrick Hospital. (AQW 5763/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 29 November 2007 I issued Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland for full public consultation. The consultation ended on 28 March and my Department is now collating and analysing the responses received.

Until I have had the opportunity to consider the responses received it would be inappropriate for me to comment in relation to any of the specific recommendations. I would expect to be in a position to publish a final strategy document in the summer.

Stroke Unit at Coleraine Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to create a stroke unit at Coleraine Hospital. (AQW 5764/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 29 November 2007 I issued Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland for full public consultation. The consultation ended on 28 March and my Department is now collating and analysing the responses received.

Until I have had the opportunity to consider the responses received it would be inappropriate for me to comment in relation to any of the specific recommendations. I would expect to be in a position to publish a final strategy document in the summer.

Assaults on Staff

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of assaults on staff, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5765/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Violent attacks against healthcare staff have been formally monitored by my Department since April 2004 and are recorded on a 6 monthly basis. The figures provided in the table below detail the recorded number of physical attacks on all healthcare staff since 2004 in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

Location: Health and Social Care Trust Area	Number of Physical Attacks reported on Healthcare Staff			
	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008 ¹
Belfast HSC Trust	1,419	1,304	1,295	774
Northern HSC Trust	675	655	810	474
Southern HSC Trust	384	401	406	172
Western HSC Trust	479	496	869	281
South Eastern HSC Trust	792	695	822	483
Total	3,749	3,551	4,202	2,184

¹ Figures only available for the first six month reporting period from 1 April 2007 to 30 September 2007

Clostridium Difficile

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a detailed breakdown of the number of Clostridium difficile sufferers in each Health Trust area, and the strain of Clostridium difficile for each case. (AQW 5784/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cases of active cases Clostridium difficile in each Health Social Care Trust as at 16 April 2008 is as follows;

Trust	No. of active cases at 16 April 2008
Belfast HSC Trust	10
Northern HSC Trust	36
Southern HSC Trust	10
South Eastern HSC Trust	3
Western HSC Trust.	3

Trusts do not routinely ribotype specimens unless there are clinical indications to do so. Specimens are randomly tested through a regional network. In regard to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, the recent outbreak has resulted in ribotyping of active cases. Of the 36 active cases at 16 April 2008, 23 patients are awaiting ribotype. Of the remaining 13 patients, 7 are 027 ribotype, 4 are 001 ribotype, 1 is 020 ribotype and 1 is 106 ribotype.

Community Psychiatric Nurses

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Community Psychiatric nurses currently working in North Belfast. (AQW 5785/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available in the form requested. The North Belfast area is serviced by the Belfast Trust and partly by the Northern Trust. The Belfast Trust reports that there are 66 community psychiatric/mental health nurses (63.73 whole-time equivalent) working in the old North & West Belfast Trust area. The Northern Trust reports that there are 11 community psychiatric/mental health nurses (9.4 whole-time equivalent) working within their Whiteabbey teams.

Card Before You Leave System

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any plans he has to introduce the 'card before you leave' system for people who leave Accident and Emergency Departments after intervention or mental health support. (AQW 5786/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently no plans to impose a standard system for onward referral for those people who have attended Accident and Emergency Departments and who have been seen by the hospital's psychiatric liaison service. Their condition will have been assessed by the psychiatric liaison service and they may have received some intervention or support from mental health specialists while in the A&E. They will also have been advised on or directed towards the services which would be available to them when they leave the A&E unit. Each Trust will have developed their own onward referral arrangements, which are tailored to the particular structure of mental health services operating within the Trust's area.

Counselling Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the counselling services for vulnerable young people available in Foyle parliamentary constituency, and to give his assessment of the adequacy of such services. (AQW 5791/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The counselling services available to young people within the Foyle parliamentary constituency are set out below. Not all services are contracted by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, but do provide valuable services to meet specific needs.

- Opportunity Youth provide advice and guidance for young people who are experiencing crisis.
- Zest provides counselling services around young people who deliberately self-harm.

- Divert is a partnership developed by the Western Drug and Alcohol Team to provide services for young people who abuse substances particularly marginalised groups.
- DAYSE is the drug alcohol youth service and is a partnership arrangement between the Trust and Northlands Centre.
- Threshold provide Tier 1, Tier 2 counselling in relation to children's mental health in the Strabane area and some children from the Foyle constituency may benefit from this service.
- NEXUS provide counselling to survivors of sexual abuse and rape.
- Parents Advice Centre provide signposting services to families who require support with their children/young people.
- CRUSE offer bereavement counselling to young people as determined appropriate.
- Newpin also provide counselling services to young people.
- DHSSPS are currently funding a pilot programme managed by NSPCC in the Foyle area which provides group work/counselling for families who live with domestic violence. If successful it may be rolled-out regionally.

All counselling, befriending and listening ear services should meet the standards as set out by the NI Counselling Review 2002.

In addition, staff within the Western Trust's Social Services Teams and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service Teams provide counselling to their clients, as required, and also signpost to relevant complementary services.

While no service provision will ever be perfect, I am satisfied that young people in the Foyle area have access to a varied and robust counselling service.

Banbridge Community Health Village

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2880/08, to confirm if the appraisal of the business case for Banbridge Community Health Village has been completed; and to provide a timescale within which the construction of the centre will begin. (AQW 5837/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Banbridge Community Health Village is an ongoing development on the former Banbridge Hospital site. The current proposals are for a new Health and Care Centre along with a new Learning Disability Day Centre within the Banbridge community health village.

The business case for this project, as part of the wider Primary and Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) programme of investment is currently being appraised following recent clarification by the Southern HSC Trust on a number of points and the Department will continue to work with the Trust to further refine these proposals. A decision on approval cannot be taken until this appraisal process has been completed which is now estimated should be by August of this year. It is anticipated that procurement of the first phase of projects should begin during 2008/09 with the earliest start for construction work during 2009/10.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the Health Boards, the number of dentists who carried out Health Service work in each of the last four years. (AQW 5954/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in table 1 below:

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF DENTISTS¹ WHO CARRIED OUT HEALTH SERVICE WORK² BY BOARD

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
EHSSB	335	355	368	373
NHSSB	198	204	204	206
SHSSB	145	159	165	174
WHSSB	121	130	137	130
Northern Ireland ³	747	788	817	837

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

1. Figures include Principal dentists only - excludes assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners.
2. Dentists who carried out Health Service work is defined as dentists who submitted claims for NHS work to the Central Services Agency during the financial year. It should be noted that the figures quoted do not show the number of dentists at a particular point in time, as they include all dentists who have submitted a claim during the year. They therefore include dentists who were not practicing for the full year, for example, those who have retired during the year or newly qualified dentists who started practicing during the year.
3. Dentists may work in more than one Health Board, therefore the total for all Health Boards may not equal the Northern Ireland figure.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will cease recouping perceived overpayments to Speech and

Language Therapists until a full consultation has been carried out with all stakeholders to assess the impact of this action. (AQW 5968/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The assimilation of staff to Agenda for Change has resulted in an increase of pay in the majority of cases. As part of the assimilation process to Agenda for Change the rate of pay was protected as at 1 April 2005. Subsequent increases above the agreed Agenda for Change rates must be recouped in order to avoid a loss to the taxpayer. This process of recouping excess payments is governed by the Government Accounting (NI) Rules. To suspend or cease the recoupment process would not only result in a loss to the taxpayer but it would also hold up the Agenda for Change implementation process.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that no financial payback will be sought from Speech and Language Therapists due to the length of time taken to implement the Agenda for Change and the financial implications of this delay for Speech and Language Therapists. (AQW 5969/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would refer the member to my previous answer about the rules governing the recoupment of excess payments. I am not in a position to provide any form of compensation for the delay in the implementation of Agenda for Change rates of pay.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the Northern Ireland Financial Act 1971 is being used to recoup perceived overpayments to Speech and Language Therapists despite the Agenda for Change process not being completed for them. (AQW 5970/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Finance Act is not being used to recoup overpayments. The recoupment of an excess payment from public funds is governed by the Government Accounting (NI) rules. The calculation of an excess payment is done on an individual basis. In the case of Agenda for Change this calculation is a necessary part of the assimilation process and is carried out at the time when staff are actually moved on to the Agenda for Change rates of pay.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to undertake an immediate review as to why the Agenda for Change process has not been completed for Speech and Language Therapists. (AQW 5971/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set a target date of 30 June 2008 for Health and Social Care employers to have all staff on Agenda for Change rates of pay. Health and Social Care employers are working towards this deadline and I expect them to meet this target for all staff including Speech and Language Therapists.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will stop the recouping of perceived overpayments to Speech and Language Therapists until the Agenda for Change process has been completed. (AQW 5972/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Excess payments must be recouped in order to avoid a loss to the public purse. To stop the recoupment process would not only result in a loss to the public purse but it would also hold up the Agenda for Change implementation process.

Shellfish from Dundrum Bay

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if shellfish from Dundrum Bay is safe for human consumption. (AQW 6002/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently not aware of any incidents of foodborne disease associated with eating shellfish from Dundrum Bay.

Out-of-Hours Doctors

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of out-of-hours doctors available for call out within the greater Armagh area; and (ii) the doctor/patient ratio for Armagh City and District. (AQW 6250/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Southern Area Urgent Care Services, supplied by Southern Health and Social Care Trust, provides an urgent GP Out of Hours (OOH) service to the whole of the Southern Health and Social Services Board area. This service includes central telephone triage for all patients, as well as the opportunity for face-to-face

consultation with a GP at the Out of Hours centres in Armagh, Craigavon, Dungannon, Kilkeel and Newry, and home visits should these be necessary.

There is one GP on call in the Armagh OOH Centre from 7pm – 11pm, Monday to Friday and 9am – 11pm on Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays. Outside these times GP services can be provided from either of the Craigavon, Dungannon or Newry OOH Centres where there are two GPs on call, in each centre, up to 12 midnight every day and one GP, also in each centre, after 12 midnight every day.

(ii) As of 1st April 2008, within the Armagh Local Government District there are 9 GP practices, with 35 GPs and 52,898 registered patients (all of whom may not be resident in the area), which equates to 6.6 GPs per 10,000 registered patients. There are, however, 60,946 people resident in the area (all of whom may not be registered with a GP within the area), which would equate to 5.7 GPs per 10,000 resident patients.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that (i) low pressure in the water system in the Donemana area will be addressed; and (ii) the second stage of the Bredagh sewerage works will commence, following the commitments made to customers by the Water Service before it became Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 5497/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it plans to upgrade approximately three kilometres of water main on Loughan Road and Rousky Road, Donemana by the end of the current 2008/09 financial year. This work aims to resolve low water pressure problems and to provide continuity of water supply for residents in the area.

Bready Wastewater Treatment Works was newly completed in 2004 and is currently complying with the effluent discharge standards laid down by the Environment and Heritage Service. There are no current plans to upgrade the Works. However, Northern Ireland Water is currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to assess the treatment capability of its wastewater treatment works based on the most up to date demographic information and planning projections. This exercise, which will identify works that need upgraded to cater for future development, is scheduled for completion during 2008. The Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water will write to you when the full assessment of Bready Wastewater Treatment Works is complete.

Traffic Congestion

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's plans to reduce traffic congestion at (i) the York Road; and (ii) the junctions of the (a) M3; (b) M2; and (c) Westlink. (AQW 5509/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Westlink/York Street junction is a key link in the Strategic Road Network that presently connects the Westlink, M2 and M3 motorways through a complex arrangement of traffic signals. Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that when the current improvement works on M1/Westlink are completed, in March 2009, this junction will be the only signal-controlled 'at-grade' junction remaining on the motorway network.

I am aware that the completion of the improvements to the M1/Westlink will deliver traffic to the Westlink/York Street junction more quickly. While the existing York Street junction is expected to be able to cope in the short to medium term, it is recognised that the junction will eventually come under increased pressure from traffic and in preparation for this Roads Service has developed preliminary proposals for a grade-separated junction at York Street that would provide direct links and greatly improve access between Westlink and the M2 motorway and from Westlink to the M3.

I can confirm that proposals to improve this junction are included in my Department's recently published Investment Delivery Plan for Roads. This envisages the works being delivered between 2013/14 and 2017/18. However, construction of the new junction will be dependent upon the successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures, a detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary process.

A3 Road Upgrade

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on his plans to upgrade the A3 road from Portadown to Armagh. (AQW 5534/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service published a consultation document listing proposals to expand the Strategic Road Improvement Programme in July 2006. The schemes included were selected based on the five key criteria set for considering transportation projects, namely environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration. The proposed schemes included the construction of a dual carriageway on the most

heavily trafficked section of the A3, from Portadown to Richhill.

The responses received to the consultation document have now been considered and I can confirm that my Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, published on the Department's website at the start of April 2008, includes a proposal to dual the A3 between Portadown and Richhill. Roads Service will be appointing consultants this year to commence the work of assessing route options for this major road scheme.

Comber Bypass

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4826/08, to confirm if the Planning Appeals Commission's Inspector's report into the final phase of the Comber bypass has now been received; and to detail the recommendations contained in that report. (AQW 5552/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In my response to AQW 4826/08, I advised that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Inspector's report into the draft Ards and Down Area Plan 2015, was expected before the end of March 2008 and that Roads Service will consider any recommendations the inspector makes in relation to Phase 3 of the Comber By-Pass.

Officials in my Department's Roads Service have recently been advised that the Department for the Environment's Planning Service has now received the PAC Report. Planning Service is currently considering the implications of the report and will shortly commence consultation with key consultees, including Roads Service, about its content. Planning Service will also provide guidance on a possible date for adoption. However, this will depend on the nature of the PAC recommendations on each objection. Therefore, Planning Service cannot provide a firm indication on timescales, at this stage, but hope to complete the adoption stage as quickly as possible.

The PAC Report can only be made available by the Department for the Environment when it completes the adoption process and publishes the adopted plan, with or without modifications. The content of the PAC Report is confidential until that time.

Sewerage Systems

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the improvements that have been made to the sewerage systems and waste water treatment works in (i) Newtownabbey; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Larne, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5585/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that during the past five years it has invested over £53 million in improvements to sewerage systems and wastewater treatment works in Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne. The details are as follows:

Year	Area	Project	Investment £000'S
2003	Newtownabbey	Doagh Road Foul sewer	10
2004	Newtownabbey	Ballyclare Wastewater Treatment Works (including Ballyrobert, Doagh, Kilbride, Straid and Ballynure)	11,372
	Newtownabbey	Corrs Corner Foul & Storm Sewer extensions	65
	Newtownabbey	Victoria Road, Ballyclare Foul Sewer	36
	Newtownabbey	Glenshesk Road Flood Alleviation	43
	Larne	Larne Wastewater Treatment Works (including Glynn, Drains Bay, and Ballygally)	15,883
2005	Newtownabbey	Whitehouse Wastewater Treatment Works	13,869
	Newtownabbey	Ballyclare Drainage Area Plan Flood Alleviation	1,428
	Carrickfergus	Carrickfergus Wastewater Treatment Works	8,886
2006	Newtownabbey	Ballyeaston Storm Sewer	65
	Carrickfergus	Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus Storm Sewer	244
	Carrickfergus	Carrickfergus Drainage Area Plan Flood Alleviation	551
2007	Newtownabbey	Doagh Road, Newtownabbey Foul Sewer	52
	Newtownabbey	Hightown Road, Glengormley Storm Sewer	127
	Newtownabbey	Roughfort Sewerage Scheme	337
	Larne	Coast Guard Road, Larne Sewers and Wastewater Pumping Station	281

M2 Widening Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what part the widening of the M2 from Sandyknowes to Greencastle will play in his department's policy of encouraging commuting by public transport. (AQW 5597/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should firstly explain that my Department's transport strategy is set out in the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002-2012, which was endorsed by the Assembly on 3 July 2002. The RTS is a balanced strategy that provides a range of both strategic highway and public transport initiatives across the North. Implementation of the RTS is through 3 Transport Plans.

The RTS recognises the need to remove structural deficiencies (bottlenecks), where lack of capacity causes undue congestion on the strategic road network, while the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015 (BMTP) includes several measures to encourage commuting by public transport.

The M2 Improvement scheme is primarily designed to remove a bottleneck on a key section of the strategic road network. The increased carriageway capacity will, however, improve journey times for all road users, including those travelling by bus and coach from Ballyhenry Road Park-and-Ride site and other destinations. The widening scheme will also improve access to the proposed Park-and-Ride site at Fortwilliam.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5064/08, to detail his department's policy on dealing with complaints about roadside memorials that have been erected illegally. (AQW 5601/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my 28 January 2008 reply to his AQO 1650/08 question.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5064/08, to detail the advice his department has given to Roads Service in relation to dealing with complaints about roadside memorials that have been erected illegally. (AQW 5603/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would point out that Roads Service is an Agency within my Department. As such, Roads Service is responsible

for developing its own operational policies. As explained in my reply to AQO 1650/08, Roads Service currently tolerates such memorials where they are not obstructing the road and do not constitute a danger to road users.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria by which roadside memorials are classified by his department as ‘troubles related’. (AQW 5604/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service does not have any specific criteria by which to classify different types of illegal roadside memorials. In trying to determine why any illegal memorial has been placed at a particular location, Roads Service officials can only assess whatever information is available on the memorial.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which Northern Ireland Water will upgrade the waste water system in Neillsbrook estate, Randalstown, to increase its capacity. (AQW 5605/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a recent Drainage Area Study which examined the capacity and structural condition of the sewerage system in Randalstown, identified no sewer deficiencies relating to the Neillsbrook Estate. Northern Ireland Water is therefore satisfied that the sewers in the area have adequate capacity to operate effectively under normal conditions.

Northern Ireland Water proposes to upgrade Neillsbrook Wastewater Pumping Station, which serves a section of the sewerage system in the area, to maintain its operational performance and efficiency. However, due to competing priorities this work will be subject to the availability of funding and it is not therefore possible, at this time, to confirm when the upgrade will commence. In the interim, the performance of the pumping station will be monitored closely and any necessary remedial work will be undertaken to minimise the risk of any problems occurring.

Roads: Adopted

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4821/08, to outline which of the roads are scheduled to be adopted within the next six months. (AQW 5612/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Developers are responsible for bringing their development roads up to the required standard for adoption by my Department. The rate of progress from development to roads adoption is related to many factors that are outside the control of my Department. However, based on progress to date, Roads Service expects the following roads to progress to adoption within the next 6 months:

Glebecoole Park, Carnmoney;
Sally Gardens, Ballyclare Road;
Ashford Lodge, Ballyclare Road;
The Beeches, Mallusk;
Huntingdale, Ballyclare;
Village Green, Ballyclare;
Greenvale Belmont Road Antrim (in part);
The Mews, Cidercourt Road, Crumlin; and
Ballytromery Avenue, Ballytromery Road, Crumlin.

Main Street, Glenavy

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4821/08, to outline the circumstances which resulted in the developer defaulting on the bond for Main Street, Glenavy. (AQW 5613/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following completion of the dwellings, Roads Service continued to liaise with the developer on a number of road defects that had to be addressed to enable the site to progress towards adoption. Despite repeated requests, the developer failed to satisfactorily complete all outstanding matters. In the absence of a response, Roads Service initiated enforcement action against the developer under The Private Streets (NI) Order 1980.

The initial enforcement notice issued in August 2007. As the developer did not respond satisfactorily to the notice within the specified 28 day period, Roads Service proceeded to appoint a contractor to carry out the work, funded by the developer's road bond. The work is presently on-going and should be completed by the end of April 2008. On completion of the works, the roads and footways will be formally adopted.

I would remind the Member that any further information he requires for a particular development can be obtained directly from my officials in Roads Service.

Public Transport

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development how he intends to encourage car commuters from South Antrim to Belfast to switch to public transport. (AQW 5639/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should firstly explain that my Department's transport strategy is set out in the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002-2012, which was endorsed by the Assembly on 3 July 2002. The RTS is a balanced strategy that provides a range of both strategic highway and public transport initiatives across the North. Implementation of the RTS is through 3 Transport Plans.

The BMTP proposes several park and ride sites for each of the six main transport corridors into Belfast. In total my Department is planning to provide over 6000 park and ride spaces for the greater Belfast area by 2015. People travelling into Belfast from south Antrim will benefit from these proposals, which will include a total of approximately 2100 spaces on the M2/M5 transport corridors, at 11 locations served by train or bus services to central Belfast.

A new rail halt, together with 650 Park-and-Ride spaces, is proposed at Ballymartin outside Templepatrick, to attract longer distance motorists from the M2 motorway. Another 750 space site at Fortwilliam will serve downstream motorists approaching Belfast on the M2 and M5 motorways. In addition, a 90 space site is proposed at Ballyhenry Road, Sandyknowes, served by existing bus services. Other smaller facilities will be provided at existing rail halts.

Traffic travelling from the Larne direction with a Belfast destination will be able to divert to the A57 at Ballynure and transfer to train at Ballymartin, therefore avoiding the delays and congestion associated with the A8(M) approaches to Sandyknowes.

Park-and-Ride and Park-and-Share facilities, aimed at encouraging drivers to use public transport, have also been provided at Drumderg Roundabout at the end of the A6 Toome By-pass, Dunsilly Roundabout at the junction of the M22 and A6, Paradise Walk Roundabout at Templepatrick at the junction of the A6 and A57, on the Ballymena to Belfast rail line at Antrim and Mossley West, and on the Belfast to Larne line at Yorkgate, Whiteabbey, Greenisland and Carrickfergus.

The introduction of new trains on the Ballymena to Belfast service has resulted in a significant increase in railway passenger numbers. Year on year comparisons have shown an 11% increase in rail passenger journeys in both 2006/07 and 2007/08. Translink have started

the process to purchase a further 20 new trains, which will be introduced to service from 2011. These will replace the old trains currently in service on the Belfast to Larne line and permit increased frequencies between Belfast and Ballymena.

My Department has also provided substantial funding to improve bus services across the region. In all, 937 new buses, costing some £126m, will have been purchased and introduced to passenger service over the period from 2003 to 2009.

It is hoped that with more modern and reliable buses and trains and enhanced facilities, more car users will be encouraged to use public transport.

The BMTP also includes proposals to encourage a modal shift from private cars to public transport, walking and cycling, which my Department is progressing through its Travelwise initiative. Over time these initiatives are expected to contribute to a reduction in private car travel for journeys to the city centre at peak times.

Customer Choice

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to provide customers with the opportunity to choose their water and sewerage service providers in the domestic market, similar to proposals for gas and electricity service providers. (AQW 5644/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am currently in consultation with my Executive colleagues about the recommendations in the Independent Water Review Panel second report (published in January 2008) on the governance and future business models of water and sewerage services. In particular, the Panel recommended that Northern Ireland Water (NIW) should continue as a Government-Owned Company for the next 5 years.

The Regulator has the lead role in facilitating competition and is currently monitoring the progress and benefits delivered to customers from the introduction of competition in the Scottish Water Industry and in England and Wales.

Carrickfergus Spine Road

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale for the completion of the Carrickfergus Spine Road (i) along its entire route; and (ii) in sections along the route. (AQW 5655/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the emerging Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015

(BMAP), the Carrickfergus Spine Road is one of a number of Non-Strategic Highway Network Schemes, which developers of the adjacent land that this road will serve, are expected to fund in full or in very substantial part.

The road is also identified in the Carrickfergus Area Plan 2001 as being one of a number of roads required to facilitate development within the Borough.

With the exception of a short section of road east of Broadlands, which is currently under construction, the Spine Road has been completed between the eastern development limit at Craiglands and North Road.

The section from North Road to Woodburn Road is a Key Site Requirement attached to zoning for housing.

The portion between Woodburn Road and Sloefield Road is not associated with any particular zoning. However, an indicative alignment is protected in BMAP Amendment No. 1, to ensure that any future development does not prejudice the delivery of this section of Spine Road.

As provision of the remaining sections of the road is directly linked to the future development of lands, the timescale for delivery rests with the relevant developer(s) and is outside the control of my Department.

Traffic Calming Schemes

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all traffic calming schemes in the Ards Borough Council area assessed by the Roads Service and to state where each ranks in terms of priority. (AQW 5658/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: All proposals for Traffic Calming schemes which might be undertaken by my Department's Roads Service are assessed, scored and prioritised within each Council area. Roads Service then draws up a two-year rolling programme, which is published each year in the Autumn Roads Service Report presented to Councils.

The committed schemes for the Ards Borough Council area in the 2008/09 year in priority order are:

- Abbey Road/Moss Road, Millisle;
- Ballywalter;
- Strangford Heights, Newtownards; and
- Ballyblack Road, Loughries.

The proposed schemes for the Ards Borough Council area in the 2009/10 year in priority order are:

- West Street, Newtownards;
- East Street, Newtownards;
- Whiteways/Mountain Road, Newtownards;

- Victoria Avenue, Newtownards; and
- Rubane Road.

This proposed list may be subject to change, depending on the assessed priority of new requests for traffic calming.

Road Bridge Constructions

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his answer to AQW 5053/08, to list all other road bridge constructions in which his department participated without having carried out either a traffic survey or cost benefit analysis. (AQW 5669/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Any new road bridge construction, which is funded and carried out by my Department's Roads Service, has incorporated traffic survey and cost benefit analysis work. However, the reinstatement of the Annaghroe and Knockaginny bridges, to which I referred to in my composite reply to AQW 5053/08 and AQW 5054/08, is being funded by the Southern Authorities and therefore no traffic survey or cost benefit analysis has been carried out by Roads Service.

I should explain that Roads Service is obliged to maintain its existing road bridge stock to meet current standards. To achieve this there is a programme of bridge strengthening work which requires bridges to be repaired or replaced in order to meet the required standards. The work is prioritised and carried out on the basis of risk assessment using a method recognised throughout the United Kingdom. One of the factors considered as part of a risk assessment, is the number of HGVs using the road, and a traffic survey is needed to ascertain this.

All major road works schemes have a cost benefit analysis carried out. In addition, any new bridges which are part of a minor works new road scheme, would also have a cost benefit analysis carried out. It should also be noted that Roads Service's policy on new bridges, or bridge strengthening schemes over £5 million, is that a full economic appraisal should be completed.

Road Bridges

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his answer to AQW 5053/08, to explain how he, environmentalists or planners could justify having four road bridges within 3.5 kms (2.17 miles) and an estimated average of 21 vehicles per hour using these bridges. (AQW 5670/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have already explained in previous answers that in the

past a number of cross-border roads were closed for security reasons. Due to the current enabling environment, and in recognition of the importance of cross-border road links, the then British Secretary of State in the North and the Taoiseach agreed that there was no longer a security justification for roads remaining closed.

While I appreciate you may have concerns over the expense involved in reinstating the Annaghroe and Knockaginny bridges, it is the case that all the bridge reinstatement costs will be paid by the Irish Government. The work is being taken forward jointly by Monaghan County Council and my Department's Roads Service. Preliminary meetings and preparation work started in April 2007 and the proposal is still at an early stage.

Both the British and Irish Governments are committed to ensuring that all border roads are reopened. The reinstatement of these bridges will re-establish the access levels which local communities enjoyed previously. The B45 Annaghroe Road represents the shortest route between Caledon and Glaslough. The re-opening of this route will reduce local journey times between the two villages, with subsequent reductions in greenhouse gases.

I also understand that Caledon Regeneration Partnership & Glaslough Development Association previously contacted Roads Service to point out that the absence of the Annaghroe Bridge is a major weakness in their tourism development plans for the Caledon, Glaslough, Tynan, Killylea and surrounding areas.

Information Evenings in Caledon and Glaslough

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his answer to AQW 5053/08, to confirm that information evenings in Caledon on 11 March and Glaslough on 13 March had no element of consultation and, if not, whether public views expressed on these occasions will be taken into consideration and those expressing views responded to by his department. (AQW 5671/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Two information evenings were held in Caledon and Glaslough to inform the local communities of the proposals to reinstate the Annaghroe and Knockaginny bridges and to explain the process for doing so.

The information evenings were consultation events in that comments in favour of, and against, the reinstatement of the bridges, and also on the type of bridge, were fully discussed at the time and then

recorded. Eighty-eight comments were recorded and it is not proposed to reply individually at this time.

A further opportunity for public consultation will arise when the bridge design proposals are submitted for planning approval.

Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he has taken or intends to take to improve road safety on the Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn. (AQW 5678/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service take many factors into account when considering the most appropriate traffic calming measures to try to influence driver behaviour and the speed of vehicles.

In rural situations, as in the case of Crawfordsburn village, traffic calming measures would normally take the form of village gateways. These include entrance features with signs to a village or town, along with the appropriate speed limit and local Council Logo. Coloured road surfacing may also be used, to highlight a change in environment to drivers. These measures have already been provided on all roads leading into Crawfordsburn village, one of which is Cootehill Road. There are no plans to provide any further measures.

Septic Tanks

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of operational septic tanks; (ii) the average cost of emptying a domestic septic tank; (iii) the cost of emptying all septic tanks; (iv) any plans to introduce charges for emptying septic tanks; and (v) the number of operational septic tanks in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 5679/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that while it offers a desludging service for septic tanks, its records relate only to around 70,000 customers who have requested the service in the past and not to all operational septic tanks. As its records are not broken down by Parliamentary constituency it is unable to provide details of septic tanks in the Strangford constituency. However, in 2006, the Valuation and Lands Agency advised Water Service that 113,980 properties were registered as using septic tanks, of which 6,883 were in the Down District Council Area.

During the 2007/08 financial year, Northern Ireland Water desludged approximately 28,000 septic tanks at a cost of £64.96 for each standard tank and a total

cost of approximately £2 million. This cost includes payment to the contractor, administration costs and other overheads.

Northern Ireland Water plans to introduce charges for emptying septic tanks when domestic charging is introduced in April 2009.

Level-Crossing Gates

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail why the level crossing gates on the Larne line at Jordanstown station are closed to road traffic for such a long period prior to the arrival of a train, thereby causing road traffic to back up.
(AQW 5686/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The primary factor affecting the length of time for which the level crossing gates are closed is safety. The Jordanstown crossing has been assessed as one with a high risk of user violation. It is therefore subject to an increased level of protection. However, delays are kept to the minimum necessary to ensure safety standards are met.

Flooding Problems

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to AQW 4282/08, would he consider changing the present criteria for gully cleaning for all roads with continuing flooding problems in the Ards and Strangford area.
(AQW 5707/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no plans, at present, to change the criteria for gully cleaning on roads with continuing flooding problems, including those in the Ards and Strangford area.

As I advised in my previous response to the Member (AQW 4282/08), Roads Service undertakes additional inspections and, if necessary, cleaning of gullies at locations that experience ongoing problems with blockages and recurrent flooding.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm (i) the completion date for the study to be commissioned by his department in relation to tackling greenhouse gas emissions; and (ii) if this study will be made available to Members.
(AQW 5727/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for

Environmental Research (SNIFFER) is currently carrying out a study into the measurement of greenhouse gas and carbon dioxide emissions in the north. That study is approaching completion and, when available, will be used by my Department to determine the next steps to be taken. That consideration will form part of the current review of the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Translink: Budget

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 5 years (i) the total budget allocation given to Translink by his department; and (ii) the underspend that has occurred.
(AQW 5733/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I enclose details below of the total budget allocations given to Translink by my Department over the last 5 years. The outturn for 2007/08 has not yet been finalised so the budget only has been included for that year. The under spends mostly relate to late slippages in capital projects which were then carried forward and included in budget figures for subsequent years.

Financial Year	Budget 0.0m	Outturn 0.0m	Under/Over Spend 0.0m
2003/04	67.4	60.8	6.6 underspend
2004/05	89.3	89.7	0.4 overspend
2005/06	95.5	92.9	2.6 underspend
2006/07	71.4	67.2	4.2 underspend
2007/08	85.6	N/A	N/A

Rural Proofing

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to ensure that all departmental policies are rural-proofed.
(AQW 5798/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Rural proofing is an integral part of the policy development process within the Department for Regional Development. I am committed to working with DARD to ensure that the Department continues to follow best practice in its assessment of the rural impacts of all new and reviewed policy proposals.

Translink Complaints

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of complaints received by Translink in relation to the service it provides, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5847/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that the information requested is not held by parliamentary constituency. To process the information into that format could only be done at disproportionate cost.

The following table shows the total number of complaints received by Translink over the last three years.

	2005	2006	2007
Number of complaints	4,359	5,297	6,856

Translink: Punctuality

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, (i) the punctuality of Metro buses operational in South Belfast; and (ii) how this compares with Translink target times. (AQW 5850/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Metro punctuality is not held for South Belfast. To process the information into that format could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Over the last 3 years Metro bus services in total have performed as follows against the punctuality target set in the Passenger's Charter:

Percentage of Metro buses arriving no more than 7 minutes late

	2005	2006	2007
Metro punctuality	93.5%	90%	93.5%
Target	95%	95%	95%

Tourist Signage

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action his department has taken to promote small village areas to tourists, particularly Ballycarry in the East Antrim constituency, by ensuring appropriate signage is erected. (AQW 5856/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that tourist signage (white on brown signs) constitute one part of the overall family of direction signs that have the purpose of reducing sign clutter and guiding visitors

to their desired destination, by the most appropriate route, at the latter stages of their journey. All direction signage, including tourist signs, are designed as an aid to safe and efficient navigation and are considered useful in complementing, but not necessarily replacing, the pre-planning of a journey.

In April 2004 Roads Service, with the agreement of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), developed policy to cover the processes and procedures to be followed to introduce tourist related signage. This policy, entitled 'The Signing of Tourist Attractions and Facilities', sets a framework whereby local councils develop an inventory of tourist attractions/facilities for their area, that tourists would wish to see, including premises that provide a service primarily for tourists. NITB assesses their eligibility and Roads Service decides entitlement for signage provision. This enables a consistent application of the policy across all areas, including villages such as Ballycarry.

Signing entitlement does not extend to tourist utilities which are places or services that tend to be more commercial in nature and which may be of use to tourists, but do not in themselves constitute an attraction.

The local Councils act as the primary point of contact with Roads Service, regarding the provision and funding of tourist signing. Roads Service determines all aspects of the practical implementation, including the type and extent of signing, and the integration of new signage within overall traffic management needs of an area. In general terms, where entitlement is agreed, signing will be provided only from the nearest A or B class road junction.

An example of this policy working in practice in the Ballycarry area is the signing of a scenic drive around Islandmagee and rationalisation of local signage, to indicate tourist attractions and facilities on that route.

Roads Service will continue to cooperate with local councils and NITB on the provision of local tourist signing, where eligible attractions and facilities are identified.

Northern Ireland Railways

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the projected investment in Northern Ireland Railways throughout the 2008-11 budget period. (AQW 5903/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Programme for Government announced in January 2008 that planned capital investment in the Railways for the years 2008-11 would be as follows.

2008/09	£36.7m
2009/10	£36.1m
2010/11	£64.3m

Further details on capital spending for these years can be found in the “DRD Investment Delivery Plan for Public Transport”, copies of which are available on the Department’s website: www.drdni.gov.uk/publications (search Investment Delivery Plans).

Passing Loop Rail

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how far advanced plans are for the passing loop planned between Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry to increase the frequency of service on this rail link. (AQW 6054/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As cited in my previous response to AQO 2738/08, following a meeting with Ministry of Defence officials last year, Translink have registered a formal interest in purchasing a strip of land at Ballykelly. Translink is currently undertaking a timetable modelling exercise to identify the requirement and best location for passing facilities on the Coleraine to Derry line. The exercise is expected to be complete in two to three months and the result will inform decisions on next steps.

Parking Schemes

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the estimated number of residents who will be affected by the proposed parking schemes in (i) Sandy Row; (ii) Donegall Pass; and (iii) the Markets (West) area. (AQW 6097/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department’s Roads Service have advised that on Friday 18 April 2008, parking consultation documents were sent to all residential and businesses properties in Sandy Row, Donegall Pass and the Markets (West) area.

The total number of documents sent to each area was as follows:

Sandy Row	935
Donegall Pass	781
Markets (West)	157

Unfortunately, Roads Service does not have details of the total number of residents living in these areas.

Parking Schemes

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of rolling out the proposed residents parking schemes in (i) Sandy Row;

(ii) Donegall Pass; and (iii) the Markets (West) area. (AQW 6098/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials have advised that the Business Case that was carried out for Residents’ Parking indicated that the annual cost of a permit should be set at £80. This cost was based on a high-level assessment of the anticipated costs of introducing a number of schemes at various locations throughout the North. Details of the specific costs associated with the 3 named schemes have not yet been compiled.

Parking Schemes

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the areas being considered for residents parking schemes in South Belfast in the next 12 months. (AQW 6099/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has plans for residents’ parking schemes in areas of South Belfast which are at different stages, as set out below:

The design and community consultation process has started in the following areas:

- Sandy Row.
- Donegall Pass.
- The Markets (West).

The initial parking surveys and design process has started in the following areas:

- The Markets (East).
- Lower Ormeau Road.
- Holylands / University.
- Lower Lisburn Road.
- Donegall Road.

Roads Service also plan to commence the initial parking surveys in the following areas:

- Lisburn Road.
- Lower Malone Road
- Stranmillis.

Upgrade Work

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the nature and completion dates of the proposed upgrade work to be carried out at Ballymena, Cullybackey, Ballymoney, Dhu Varren, Portrush, Castlerock and Derry/Londonderry stations and halts under Phase Two to ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. (AQW 6128/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The completion dates for the stations and halts to be upgraded under phase 2 in compliance with DDA are listed below:

- Ballymena – Mid June 2008
- Cullybackey – End of August 2008
- Ballymoney – End of May 2008
- Dhu Varren – Mid June 2008
- Portrush – Mid June 2008
- Castlerock – End of July 2008
- Derry – End of July 2008

The nature of the work being carried out at these locations was detailed in my response to AQW 5219/08 dated 14 April 2008.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Community Organisations

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of community organisations her department has provided with match funding, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5738/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The number of community organisations my Department has provided match funding in the 2007/08 financial year is 334. Details of this expenditure by parliamentary constituency are not recorded routinely and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

New Homes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many of the 5,200 new homes, referred to in her statement to the Assembly on 26 February, will be built in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5748/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The programme currently makes provision for 310 homes. As this programme is rolled forward each year to take account of changing circumstances, the total is subject to change.

Dungannon Housing Plan

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's expenditure for single improvement

schemes for the Dungannon Housing Plan 2008/2009 programme. (AQW 5806/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current 2008/09 Northern Ireland Housing Executive programme for Dungannon is as follows:

Work Category	Scheme	Estimated cost £	Projected start date
Improvement			
Single Element Improvement scheme	Eastvale/Charlemont Street Dungannon	787,528	Nov 08
Planned Maintenance			
External Cyclical Maintenance	Coalisland/Gortgonis	242,290	June 08
Kitchen Replacement	Cranebrook Crescent/Mullaghtinny	154,000	Sept 08
	Springfield Crescent/Bernagh	313,500	Jan 09

Co-Ownership Scheme

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how the Co-Ownership Scheme is currently supporting people; and (ii) the number of people that are currently part of the Co-Ownership Scheme, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5882/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association is starting the current financial year with a grant of £15m. The Association will use this grant and external finance to achieve the Programme for Government target of helping 500 people this year.

The final column in the table below details the number of properties that are part of the Co-ownership scheme, broken down by District Council area, as at 31 March 2008. It is not possible to give a break down by parliamentary constituency.

Council Area	Homes currently owned through co-ownership
01 Derry	239
02 Limavady	44
03 Coleraine	195
04 Ballymoney	53
05 Moyle	12

Council Area	Homes currently owned through co-ownership
06 Larne	74
07 Ballymena	104
08 Magherafelt	47
09 Cookstown	52
10 Strabane	39
11 Omagh	44
12 Fermanagh	41
13 Dungannon	29
14 Craigavon	233
15 Armagh	31
16 Newry/Mourne	89
17 Banbridge	81
18 Down	121
19 Lisburn	307
20 Antrim	104
21 Newtownabbey	323
22 Carrickfergus	173
23 North Down	458
24 Ards	285
25 Castlereagh	135
26 Belfast	530
	3,843

Benefit Take-Up

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development for her department's assessment of the trend in the take-up rate of (i) pension credit; (ii) housing benefit; (iii) disability living allowance; (iv) attendance allowance; (v) income support; and (vi) job seekers allowance, when establishing the spending allocation for her department in (a) 2008-09; (b) 2009-10; and (c) 2010-11. (AQW 5886/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The trend in benefit take-up rates was considered when preparing bids in the recent Budget process. Housing Benefit is primarily administered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and no significant changes in workloads are forecast over the planning period. Statistics supplied to the Social Security Agency by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency indicated no significant changes across the planning period in terms of the Agency's overall funding requirement.

However as a result of the Efficiency Review, the Agency is required to find 5% efficiencies each year of the Budget period. The Agency submitted a bid to re-instate this cut, but was unsuccessful and is therefore faced with a significant challenge in continuing to deliver the same volume of high quality services to its customers with less frontline resources.

Housing Associations

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by housing associations in (i) Groomsport; (ii) Rathgill; (iii) Willowbank/Balloo; (iv) Breezemount/Conlig; (v) Whitehill; (vi) Kilcooley; (vii) Bloomfield; (viii) Crawfordsburn; (ix) Helen's Bay; (x) Holywood; (xi) Donaghadee; (xii) Millisle; and (xiii) any other area in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5917/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is detailed in the undernoted table.

Area	Number
Groomsport	4
Rathgill	92
Willowbank/Balloo	0
Breezemount/Conlig	54
Whitehill	16
Kilcooley	7
Bloomfield	102
Crawfordsburn	0
Helen's Bay	5
Holywood	143
Donaghadee	137
Millisle	30
Other (Bangor Central Area)	388
Total	978

Housing Executive

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in (i) Groomsport; (ii) Rathgill; (iii) Willowbank/Balloo; (iv) Breezemount/Conlig; (v) Whitehill; (vi) Kilcooley; (vii) Bloomfield; (viii) Crawfordsburn; (ix) Helen's Bay; (x) Holywood; (xi) Donaghadee; (xii) Millisle; and (xiii) any other area in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5918/08)

The Minister for Social Development: At March 2008, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive owned the following properties in these areas:

Area	Total
Groomsport	61
Bloomfield/Rathgill/Willowbrook	691
Conlig/Breezemount	193
Whitehill	277
Kilcooley	759
Crawfordsburn	22
Helens Bay	31
Hollywood	
Loughview	299
Redburn	64
Spencer Street	67
Strand/Kinnegar	69
Woodlands	16
Donaghadee	417
Millisle	144
Other	
Churchill	31
Clandeboyne Road	56
Clanmorris	36
Lisnabreen	84
Total stock	3,317

Housing Executive Waiting Lists

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people currently on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting lists in (i) Groomsport; (ii) Rathgill; (iii) Willowbank/Balloo; (iv) Breezemount/Conlig; (v) Whitehill; (vi) Kilcooley; (vii) Bloomfield; (viii) Crawfordsburn; (ix) Helen's Bay; (x) Hollywood; (xi) Donaghadee; (xii) Millisle; and (xiii) any other area in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5919/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available in the format requested. The table below shows the waiting lists for the general allocation areas in the indicated areas at December 2007. The waiting list is a common waiting list covering both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Associations.

Settlement	Waiting List
Bangor Central	492
Hollywood Central	142
Hollywood Outer	201
Rural North Down	51

Settlement	Waiting List
Millisle	48
Totals	934

Newbuild Schemes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the identification of potential sites to accommodate new build schemes at Monkstown and New Mossley, to detail the stages of the process to develop these schemes that have been reached; and to confirm if a housing association has been involved in assessing these schemes for inclusion in its programme. (AQW 5947/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In order to establish and ensure the principle of development and allow for some certainty in the programme, the Housing Executive will be lodging an application for outline planning permission for the sites in Monkstown.

No specific site has yet been identified in New Mossley but the Housing Executive anticipates that a potential site or sites will be identified in the coming year. Following community consultation a planning application will be lodged by the Housing Executive. Due to its likelihood of being existing open space the PPS8 protocol will be applied to argue for an exception for social housing.

If development is permitted in Monkstown and/or New Mossley a Housing Association will be nominated to take each project forward.

Youth Workers

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of youth workers based in North Belfast who are funded by her department; and (ii) the organisations in which these youth workers are based. (AQW 5963/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department currently supports 27 youth worker posts based in the North Belfast Parliamentary Constituency. The posts are funded under the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, administered by the Belfast Regeneration Office and through the Community Capacity Building Programme which is administered by the North Belfast Community Action Unit. Although DSD has operational responsibility for the Unit, funding is provided by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Organisation	Posts Funded
New Life Counselling	1 Youth Counsellor

Organisation	Posts Funded
Marrowbone Community Association	1 Youth Development Worker
123 House	1 Youth Work Co-ordinator and 2 Youth work Assistants
Manor Street – Confident Cliftonville Community	2 Youth Workers
Star Neighbourhood Centre	1 Youth & Community Development Worker and 2 Youth Development Workers
Corner House Cross Community Family Centre	1 Youth Work Co-ordinator
Tar Isteach	1 Youth Worker
Carrick Hill Residents Association	1 P/T Youth Worker
Rathcoole Community Empowerment Partnership (CEP)	1 Youth Development Officer
Cliftonville Antrim Road CEP	1 Youth Development Officer 2 p/t Youth Outreach Workers
Upper North Belfast CEP	1 Youth Development
Ardoyne & Marrowbone CEP	1 Youth Development Officer 2 p/t Youth Outreach Workers 2 Youth Club Workers (funded from 1/4/08 – 30/6/08)
Greater Greencastle CEP	2 p/t Youth Development Workers
Greater New Lodge CEP	1 Youth Development Worker
Citizen Youth CEP	1 Youth Worker (funded 1/4/08 – 30/9/08).
Greater Ballysillan CEP	1 Youth Development Officer (post vacant)
Upper Ardoyne CEP	1 Youth Development Officer (post vacant)

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people who have lost entitlement to incapacity benefit (i) over the last 6 month; and (ii) between 6 and 12 months ago. (AQW 5996/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is normally obtained by the Department for Work and Pensions from scans of the Incapacity Benefit records held on computer. However due to the temporary suspension on the transfer of data between the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions the most recent information held is for the period to 31 August 2007. As a result it is not possible to provide the details requested for the last 6 months but the information is

available for the 6 months from 1 March 2007 to 31 August 2007 and this is set out in the table below.

CASES WHERE ENTITLEMENT TO INCAPACITY BENEFIT HAS ENDED: BY REASON FOR TERMINATION

Reason	Total 01/03/07-31/08/07
Closed certificate	3,668
Death of claimant	595
Award of Retirement Pension	1,149
At request of claimant	176
Failure to attend medical	481
Failure to provide information	266
Not Incapable: Own Occupation Test	11
Not Incapable: Personal Capability Assessment	3,037
Other	222
Return to work	157
Total	9,762

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current number of people claiming job seekers allowance, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 6055/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The numbers shown reflect the number of claims for Jobseekers Allowance where an amount of Jobseekers Allowance was in payment at 14 March 2008.

Belfast East	861
Belfast North	2,145
Belfast South	1,212
Belfast West	2,958
East Antrim	950
East Londonderry	1,535
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1,093
Foyle	2,892
Lagan Valley	855
Mid Ulster	791
Newry and Armagh	1,380
North Antrim	1,332
North Down	860
South Antrim	926

Belfast East	861
South Down	1,247
Strangford	923
Upper Bann	1,295
West Tyrone	1,729
Unallocated Postcode*	247
Total Claimants	25,231

Departmental Land in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any land sold by her department in the North Down constituency since 2002. (AQW 6121/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has not sold any land in the North Down constituency since 2002.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Reid Report

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm with whom Mr. John Hunter has been

meeting in advance of the proposed assessment of the implementation of the Reid Report by George Reid in April 2008. (AQW 5465/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Mr Hunter has held meetings with the Interim Clerk/Director General and members of the Implementation Team. In addition the Interim Clerk/Director General wrote to all Party Leaders, Deputy Party Leaders and Whips, and to the Chair of CLG, inviting them to meet John Hunter. To date, I understand that Mr Hunter has met with DUP and SDLP representatives. I understand that meetings are scheduled with the UUP and Alliance party representatives, the Chair of CLG and with officials from NIPSA.

Parliament Buildings Events

Mr Weir asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number of events that have been held in Parliament Buildings, Stormont in each of the last five months. (AQW 5677/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The attached table details the number of tours, functions and education events held at Parliament Buildings for each calendar year since January 1999 when records began.

NUMBER OF EVENTS AT PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS SINCE JAN 1999

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total to Dec 07
Functions Only	342	307	323	319	159	192	162	196	357	2357
Functions with Tours	171	92	91	62	31	58	75	103	60	743
Tours Only	848	1007	573	564	255	377	302	365	559	4850
Tours with Hospitality	36	275	512	479	200	258	182	205	264	2411
Ed. Programme	0	0	0	0	95	134	177	257	374	1037
Totals	1,397	1,681	1,499	1,424	740	1,019	898	1,126	1,614	11398

Bottled Water

Mr McFarland asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4751/08, to detail the prices of large bottles of still and sparkling water provided for evening engagements at Parliament Buildings. (AQW 5872/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): There is currently one size of bottled water (still or sparkling) provided for evening engagements at Parliament Buildings. The size of the bottle is a standard 250ml, and the cost per bottle is £0.94 inclusive of VAT.

Indexes

INDEX

PART I (BUSINESS)

- 2012 Olympic Games, WA91, WA270, WA295
24-Hour Scanner Services, WA310
A1 Road Intersects, WA151–2
A3 Road Upgrade, WA315
A5 Dual Carriageway, WA239
Abattoir in Downpatrick, WA264
Absenteeism, 37–8
Academic Entrance Criteria, WA280
Accident and Emergency Units, WA305–6
Accommodation: East Derry/Londonderry, WA288
Accommodation for Third-Level Students, 309–10
Acute Hospitals, WA72
Adjournment Debate
 Cancer Services in Foyle, 275–80
 Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 192–5
 Interfaces in North Belfast, 389–97
 Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, 105–11
Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305–7
Adoption Applications, WA142–3
Adoption Home Services, WA141
Adoption Home Studies, WA142
Adults in Further Education, 308–9
Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment, WA3
Affordable Social Housing, WA82
Agency Nurses, WA223
Agenda for Change, WA144, WA308, WA308–9
Agricultural Clauses, WA69
Alcohol Abuse, WA197
Alcohol Consumption, WA7, WA119, WA120, WA163
Alcohol Purchase, WA159
Allegations Against Teachers, WA271–2
All-Island Policy: Disadvantaged Areas, 145
Ambulance Call Outs, WA306
Ambulance Cover, WA228
Ambulance Response Times, WA147
Anaerobic Digestion, 313–14
Ancillary Staff, WA39
Anglers: Facilities, WA91
Animal Exports, WA260
Annual Costs to the Taxpayer, WA4
Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, WA130
Anti-Poverty Strategy, WA165
Apartment-Style Developments, WA210
Apprenticeship Courses, WA285
Architectural Heritage, WA130
Ards and Down Area Plan, WA298
Area of Economic Disadvantage, WA291
Area Planning Groups, WA278
Armagh Observatory, WA186, WA268–9
Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31–2
Armed Forces Veterans, WA73–4
Arts and Culture Funding, WA184
Asbestos in Schools, WA98–116
Assaults on Staff, WA311
Assembly Business, 197, 281, 365
Assembly Jobs, WA83, WA83–4, WA84, WA248, WA248–9, WA249, WA249–50, WA250–2
Assembly Paintings, WA82–3
Assembly Questions, WA4, WA16, WA90, WA121, WA270
Assisting the Fishing Industry, 226–8
Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 231–2
Attacks on Hospital Staff, WA143
Attorney General for Northern Ireland, WA3
Autism, WA307–8
 Post-Primary Children, WA278
Autistic Spectrum Disorder, WA11
Autistic Spectrum Disorders, WA195
Back Garden Development, WA216
Ballywalter Primary School, WA271
Bamford Review, WA13–14, WA170, WA171–2, WA185–6, WA203, WA305
Banbridge Community Health Village, WA312–13
Banbridge Town Centre, WA80
Bangor Grammar School, WA271
Bed Blocking, WA148, WA149
Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, WA210
Belfast Regeneration Office, WA247
Benefit Take-Up, WA325
Biofuels, WA180–1
Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall, WA78
Bill of Rights, WA8
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 178–92
Binge Drinking, WA149
Biodiversity Protection, WA216
Blackwater Integrated College, WA15–16
Blockbusting Drugs, WA310
Blood Transfusion Service, WA224
Bloomfield Primary School, WA197–8
Bluetongue, WA182, WA183
Bonuses Paid, WA224–5, WA225
Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, WA51
Book Spending, WA183
Booking Procedure, WA254
Bottled Water, WA328
Boundary Commission, WA213–14
Boundaries Commission, WA301
Braidside Integrated Primary School, WA15
Breezemount School, WA197
Bridges Across the River Blackwater, WA75–6, WA76
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 241–6
British Olympics Association, WA189
Budget Bill [NIA 10/07]
 Royal Assent, 1
Budget Overspend, WA25
-

Building Regulations, WA220
 Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07], CS1–7, CS9–14, CS17–28, CS35–40, CS43–49
 Bulk Buying Fuel, WA176
 Bulls Imported, WA262–3
 Bunscoil an Traonaigh, WA12
 Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil, WA196–7
 Business Meetings, WA289–90
 Byron Report, WA171
 C2K Infrastructure, WA11
 Campbelltown to Ballycastle Ferry Service, WA206
 Cancelled Clinics, 253–64
 Cancer Cases, WA224
 Cancer Services in Foyle, 275–80
 Capital Investment Plans, WA57
 Capital Realisation Programme, WA70
 Capital Realisation Task Force's Report, WA1
 Cappagh Burn, WA265–6
 Caravan Owners, WA242
 Carbon Footprints, WA211–12, WA212
 Card Before You Leave System, WA312
 Careers Advice, WA284–5
 Carer's Allowance Bill [NIA 13/07]
 First Stage, 50
 Car Ferry Service, WA237
 Car Parking Spaces, WA232
 Carrickfergus Spine Road, WA318–19
 Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], CS15–16, CS29–33, CS41
 Chicken Waste Incinerator Plant, WA217
 Chicken Waste Plant, WA125, WA130
 Childcare Places for Civil Servants, WA133
 Childminder Registration, WA136, WA136–7, WA137, WA143
 Child Poverty, WA171, WA172–3
 Child Support Agency, WA80–1
 Children Adoption, WA139
 Children's Fund, WA96–7
 Children's Play: Support 25–6
 Christian Ethos in Schools, WA193
 Civic Forum, WA88, WA172
 Civil Service Disability, WA221
 Civil Service Employment in South Down, WA135
 Civil Service Vacancies, WA53–5
 Clandeboy Primary School, WA198
 Class Sizes, WA195
 Classroom Assistants, WA272
 Clean Neighbourhoods and Environmental Act, WA50
 Climate Change, 29–30, WA172
 Climate Change Committee, WA128
 Climate Change Commitments, WA51–2
 Climate Impact Assessment, WA300
 Clostridium Difficile, WA307, WA311
 CO2 Emissions, WA47, WA258
 Coach Tourism, WA294
 Coast Protection, WA49
 Code for Sustainable Homes, WA55, WA69–70
 Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, WA222
 College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, WA90
 Combating Underage Drinking, 80–93
 Combating Violence, WA6
 Comber Bypass, WA315
 Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill [NIA 12/07]
 First Stage, 15
 Accelerated Passage, 16–24, 39–47
 Second Stage, 63–79
 Consideration Stage, 161, 364–5
 Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA258
 Commissioner's Expenses, WA195–6
 Committee Business
 Salary for the Holder of the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General, 49
 Statutory Committee Membership, 49
 Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of Europe, 199
 Committee of the Regions, WA167–8
 Committee Stages
 Committee for Finance and Personnel
 Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07], CS1–7, CS9–14, CS17–28, CS35–40, CS43–49
 Committee for Social Development
 Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], CS15–16, CS29–33, CS41
 Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act, WA134
 Community and Voluntary Sector, WA221–2
 Community Houses, WA246
 Community Organisations, WA324
 Community Pharmacy Contracts, WA225
 Community Psychiatric Nurses, WA311–12
 Community Relations, WA5
 Conlig Primary School, WA40
 Constituency Visits, WA38, WA50
 Construction Industry Deaths, WA207
 Construction Industry Jobs, 328–40
 Consultancy Fees, WA131
 Consultancy Firms, WA32–34
 Controlled Sector: Christian Ethos, WA116
 Co-ownership Housing, WA242
 Co-ownership Housing Scheme, WA156, WA160
 Co-ownership Scheme, WA244, WA324–5
 Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn, WA320
 Corkey Road/Lough Road Junction in Loughgiel, WA231
 Corporate Services, WA72
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, WA41–2
 Counselling Services, WA312
 Countryside Visitors, WA217
 Craigavon Area Hospital, WA228
 Crawfordsburn Village, WA237
 Crumlin Glen Project, WA92, WA189
 Cullycapple Primary School, WA12–13
 Culverts, WA154
 Customer Choice, WA318
 Cycling Trips, 140–1

Data Protection Review, WA70
 Deloitte and Touche Research, WA258
 Demographic Decline, WA277–8
 Dental Care Provision, WA146
 Dental Practices, WA228–9
 Dental Services, WA137–8, WA138, WA139, WA140–1, WA141
 Dentistry Graduates, WA283
 Dentistry Students, WA283
 Departmental Demographics, WA58–62, WA63–69
 Departmental Funding, WA186–7, WA267–8, WA268, WA309–10, WA310
 Departmental Land, WA207–8, WA208, WA287
 Departmental Land in North Down, WA328
 Departmental Publications, WA188
 Departmental Support, WA290, WA291
 Departmental Underspending, WA219
 Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast Inter-City Rail Service, WA153
 Developing Better Services, WA141–2, WA222
 Developing Dog Racing, 233
 Developing Football Stadia, 234
 Development Control Section, Roads Service, 136–7
 Devolved Legislatures, WA7
 Dickson Plan, WA276–7
 Disability Discrimination, WA150
 Disability Discrimination Act, WA240
 Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005, 222–3
 Disability Living Allowance, WA155, WA243
 Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
 Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, WA232
 Disciplinary Procedures, WA258–9, WA269, WA292
 District Council Funding, WA125, WA205
 District Council Lending, WA214–15
 Dog Fish Quotas, WA174
 Domestic and Commercial Valuations, WA134
 Domestic Violence, WA143
 Draft Rural Planning Policy, WA218
 Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 198–9
 Driving Test Examinations, WA300
 Drop-Out Rates, WA202
 Drug Addicts, WA144
 Drug Misuse, WA310
 Drugs Awareness Projects, WA307
 Drugs Education Programme, WA35
 Dualling of the A26, 135–6
 Dungannon Housing Plan, WA324
 Eames/Bradley Consultative Group, WA4
 Early Retirement, WA194–5, WA285
 East/West Co-operation, WA18
 Economic Appraisal, WA40
 Economic Growth, WA134
 Economic Inactivity, WA291–2
 Economic Investment Conference, 316–17, WA293–4, WA296
 Educating for a Sustainable Future Project, WA281
 Education and Skills Authority, WA11–12, WA42
 Education Decisions, WA40
 Education Task Force, WA41
 Educational Psychologist, WA117–18
 Educational Psychologists, WA193–4, WA270–1
 Efficiency Savings, WA70–1
 Elder Abuse, WA226, WA226–7
 Electricity, WA296
 Electricity Generation, WA43
 Electricity and Gas Providers, WA206
 Eleventh Night Bonfires, WA240
 Emergency Calls, WA139
 Emergency Fund, WA81
 Emerging Findings Paper, WA127–8
 Employer Liability Cover, WA201
 Employment and Equality Legislation, WA168
 Employment Support Allowance, WA161
 Empty Homes in the New Lodge Area, WA157
 Endangered Species, WA212
 Energy Efficient Homes, WA246
 Energy Initiatives, WA134–5
 Energy Market, WA294
 Energy Performance Certificates, WA302
 Energy Saving Trust, WA52–3
 Entrepreneurs, WA 292–3
 Environmental Audit, WA201
 Environmental Improvement, 144–5
 Environmental Protection Agency, WA51
 Environmental Protection Directorate, WA51
 Epilepsy Medication, WA142
 Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death, WA218–19
 Equality Impact Assessment, WA5, WA173
 Equality Impact Assessments: Training, 28–9
 Ethnic Minority Groups, WA166
 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, WA188
 European Funding: Scotland, 138–9
 European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, WA282
 European Union Gender Directive, WA8
 European Union Goods and Services Directive, WA2
 European Waste Directives and Regulations, WA216
 Events in Parliament Buildings, WA253–4
 Event Sponsorship, WA254
 Executive Committee Business
 Budget Bill [NIA 10/07]
 Royal Assent, 1
 Commission for Victims and Survivors
 Bill [NIA 12/07]
 First Stage, 15
 Accelerated Passage, 16–24, 39–47
 Second Stage, 63–79
 Consideration Stage, 161, 364–5
 Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises

and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 198–9

Local Government (Boundaries) Bill [NIA 14/07]
 First Stage, 281
 Accelerated Passage, 282–98
 Second Stage, 341–63

Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07]
 Further Consideration Stage, 113
 Final Stage, 281

Taxis Bill [NIA 4/07]
 Final Stage, 162–4
 Royal Assent, 341

The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 48

Executive Office in Brussels, WA169

Executive Subcommittees, 26–7

Extra Curricular Activities, WA279

Fallagh Road, Gortin, WA241

Falling Pupil Numbers, WA120

Farm Machinery Thefts, WA177

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, WA261

Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone, 225–6

Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225

Farming and Fishing Figures, WA264

Farming Industry, WA260

Féile an Phobail Funding, WA188

Financial Burden, WA281

Fire Appliances, WA139–40

Fire Stations, WA147

Fisheries Council, WA173

Fisheries Fund, WA173–4

Fishery Harbours Authority, WA174

Fishing Fleet, WA174, WA175

Fishing Industry, WA176, WA179, WA261, WA263–4

Fishing Industry: Fleets, WA179–80

Fishing Vessels: Registered in Northern Ireland, WA176

Flags and Emblems, WA284

Flash Flooding, WA257

Flood Plains, WA209

Flood Protection Measures, WA261–2

Flooding, WA154

Flooding Problems, WA321

Fly-Posting, WA51

Food from Britain, WA90–1

Football Grounds, WA269

Football (Offences) Act 1991, 232–3

Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 192–5

Foreign Direct Investment, WA122, WA122–3

Foreign Languages, WA36

Foreign Nationals, WA222–3, WA304

Forest Parks, WA176–7

Forest Service, WA260

Forest Service Staff, WA259

Forkhill Military Site, 113–27

Former Military Sites, 213–19, 235–40

Foundations for the Future, WA125–6

Freedom of Information, WA168

Freehold Disposal Programme, WA291

Free Travel Fares, WA240

Free Travel for Over 60s, WA153

Free Travel Passes, WA237

Fuel Smuggling, WA220

Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 127–30, 149–60

Gaelic Language Links, WA8–9

Gaelscoil an Chaistil's LMS Budget, WA93

GCSE and A-Level Grades, WA198

Gender Inequality, WA169

Gender Pay Gap, WA6, WA8

Generating Energy, WA259–60

Genetically Modified Crops, WA218

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre, WA50–1

Global Warming, WA215

Golden Handshakes, WA223, WA223–4

Good Relations Indicators, WA1

Good Relations Strategy, WA170

Good Relations Working Group, WA254

Government Contracts, WA71

Government Departments, WA220–1

Government Procurement, WA72

Graduated Driving Licensing, 366–79

Graduated Driver Licensing Scheme, WA127

Grain Shortage, WA177–8

Green Economy, WA52

Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA321

Gritted Roads, WA150, WA151

Groomsport Primary School, WA40

Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park, WA309

Health and Safety Executive, WA295–6

Health and Social Care Trusts, WA222

Health Service Dentists, WA313

Herceptin Treatment, WA74

Hillhall Road, 139–40

Historical Tourism, WA289

Homelessness, WA161

Hostel Beds, WA155

House Fires, WA247

House Numbers, WA244, WA245

Housing Associations, WA245, WA325

Housing Association Applications, WA157–8

Housing Benefit Claimants, WA156–7

Housing Contracts, 142–3

Housing Executive, WA81, WA157, WA242, WA243, WA244–5, WA245, WA247, WA325–6

Housing Executive Properties, WA156

Housing Executive Waiting Lists, WA326

Housing Potential, WA211, WA212, WA212–13, WA213

Housing Waiting Lists, WA241–2

ICAN Speech and Language Facility, WA199

Illegal Dumping, WA48, WA301, WA302

Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131–2

Incandescent Bulbs, WA205–6

Incapacity Benefit, WA243, WA327

Indigenous Species and Habitats, 33–4

Information Booklets, WA255

Information Evenings in Caledon and Glaslough, WA320
 Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, WA282
 Integrated Development Fund, WA257
 Integrated Schools, WA11, WA275
 Interfaces in North Belfast, 389–97
 International Development, 93–104
 International Development Fund, WA159–60
 International Trading, WA293
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, WA165
 Invest NI, WA295
 Invest NI Schemes, WA289
 Irish Cattle Breeds, WA178
 Irish Hockey Union, WA189
 Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, WA191
 Irish Language Translation, WA231–2
 Irish-Medium School in Dungannon, WA116–17
 Irish-Medium Schools, WA119, WA197
 Irish Translation, WA25
 Irish Travelling Community, WA308
 Job Losses, WA160
 Jobseeker's Allowance, WA155–6, WA327–8
 Katesbridge Farm Raid, WA260
 Kilcooley Primary School, WA198
 Killard Special School, WA273
 Killyclogher Burn, WA266
 Kircubbin Campus, WA287
 Labour Relations Agency, WA202–3, WA285
 Land and Property Services, 34–5
 Land Registry, WA221
 Language Courses, WA282
 Language Needs, WA15, WA16–17
 Lá Nua Newspaper, WA93
 Larne Draft Area Plan, WA128–9
 Larne Lough Water, WA210–11
 Learning and Skills Commission: NI Representative, 310–11
 Lecturers Dispute, WA285, WA285–6
 Legahory Travellers' Site, WA162
 Legal Advice to the First Minister, WA169
 Leisure Funding, WA91
 Level-Crossing Gates, WA321
 Library Services, WA192
 Library Spending, WA10–11, WA190
 Light Rail System, WA153
 Lisanelly Army Site, WA165–6
 Local Government (Boundaries) Bill [NIA 14/07]
 First Stage, 281
 Accelerated Passage, 282–98
 Second Stage, 341–63
 Locally Produced Food, 200–12
 Locally Sourced Products, WA183
 Locum Doctors, WA145
 Lough Neagh Tourism, WA204–5, WA205
 Loyal Orders, WA266–7
 Lurgan Hospital Dermatology Unit, WA305
 M2 Widening Scheme, WA316
 Main Street, Glenavy, WA317
 Major Capital Investment Projects, WA87
 Malone Conservation Area, WA301–2
 Mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme, 143–4
 Mary's Style at Shrigley, WA297
 Omagh Town Centre: Masterplan, WA159
 Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration, WA3
 Maze Stadium, WA269, WA292, WA393
 Medical Secretaries, WA137, WA225, WA227
 Meetings with MLAs, WA91
 Members' Expenses, WA119
 Mental-Health Clients, WA135–6
 Mental-Health Facility, WA228
 Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
 Mental Health of Pregnant Women, WA227–8
 Mental-Health Services, WA306
 Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, WA17, WA37, WA38–9, WA97, WA116, WA118, WA271
 Mid-Term Breaks, WA34
 Mid-Ulster Hospital, 147–9, WA144, WA144–5, WA146
 Midwife Support, WA146
 Milburn School, WA197
 Ministerial Drivers, WA132
 Ministerial Statement
 British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 241–6
 Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU), 246–53
 Review of Public Administration, 1–15
 Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA2–3
 Minor Injuries Unit, WA308
 Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland:
 Intercultural Education, 219–20
 MLA Co-option, WA215
 Mobile Classrooms, WA15
 Modern Languages, WA276
 Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings, WA264–5
 Mortgage Rescue Schemes, WA162
 Motorcycle Drivers, WA48
 Motor Tax Evasion, WA53
 Movilla High School, WA16
 MRI Scan Waiting Times, WA147
 Museums, WA188
 Music Therapy, WA73
 Musical Traditions in Ireland, WA117
 National Joint Council Pay Award, WA219
 National Pay Agreements, WA199
 National Stadium, WA166
 Natural Gas, WA296
 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA55–7, WA79–80, WA124, WA266
 Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, WA247
 Neonatal Death, WA57–8
 Newbuild Schemes, WA326
 Newbuild Schools, WA279
 New Homes, WA324
 New National Stadium, 230–31
 Newspaper Expenditure, WA55
 Newtownbreda Primary School, WA273

-
- Night Classes, WA42
 - NJC Pay Increase, WA58, WA193
 - No Drinking Areas, WA244
 - Non-Access-Related Housing Adaptations, WA149
 - Non-Teaching Staff, WA198
 - North/South Co-operation, WA161
 - North/South Educational Projects, WA279–80
 - Northern Area Plan, WA214
 - Northern Corridor Railway Development, 164–78
 - Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 224–5
 - Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 24–5
 - Northern Ireland Electricity, WA288–9
 - Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 312–13
 - Northern Ireland Events Company, 233–4, WA185, WA189–90
 - Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, WA1
 - Northern Ireland Produce, WA175
 - Northern Ireland Railways, WA322–3
 - Northern Ireland Science Park, WA207
 - Northern Ireland Screen, WA191–2
 - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, WA302
 - Northern Ireland Trade, WA124
 - Northern Ireland Water, WA234–5, WA235, WA235–6, WA314, WA317
 - Northwest Independent Clinic, WA73
 - Nuisance High Hedges, WA48
 - Numeracy and Literacy Strategy, WA277
 - Official Visits, WA69, WA135, WA167, WA178
 - Off-Road Bike Accidents, WA309
 - Olympic Centres of Excellence, WA190
 - Olympic Elite Programme Projects, WA189
 - Oral Answers
 - Agriculture and Rural Development
 - Assisting the Fishing Industry, 226–8
 - Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone, 225–6
 - Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225
 - Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 224–5
 - Planting Willow Trees, 229
 - Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, 223–4
 - Tackling Brucellosis, 228–9
 - Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 231–2
 - Developing Dog Racing, 233
 - Developing Football Stadia, 234
 - Football (Offences) Act 1991, 232–3
 - New National Stadium, 230–31
 - Northern Ireland Events Company, 233–4
 - Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 229–30
 - Education
 - Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305–7
 - Special Schools: Transformation, 304–5
 - Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 302–4
 - Teacher-Training Provision, 307
 - Employment and Learning
 - Accommodation for Third-Level Students, 309–10
 - Adults in Further Education, 308–9
 - Learning and Skills Commission: NI Representative, 310–11
 - Training for Success and the Automotive Industry, 312
 - Variable Tuition Fees: Impact, 307–8
 - Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 - Anaerobic Digestion, 313–14
 - Economic Investment Conference, 316–17
 - Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 312–13
 - Tourism: Seaside Towns, 315–16
 - Ulster-Scots Heritage, 314–15
 - Environment
 - Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31–2
 - Climate Change, 29–30
 - Indigenous Species and Habitats, 33–4
 - Supporting Rural Development, 30–31
 - Waste Management Targets, 33
 - Finance and Personnel
 - Absenteeism, 37–8
 - Land and Property Services, 34–5
 - Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 36–7
 - Pleural Plaques Legislation, 35
 - Social Segregation: Savings, 36
 - Surplus Land for Disposal, 38
 - Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131–2
 - Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
 - Reallocation of Finance Staff, 133–4
 - Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff, 134–5
 - Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 - Children's Play: Support 25–6
 - Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005, 222–3
 - Equality Impact Assessments: Training, 28–9
 - Executive Subcommittees, 26–7
 - Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland: Intercultural Education, 219–20
 - Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 24–5
 - Tackling Racism, 27–8
 - US Investment Conference, 220–22, 223
 - Regional Development
 - Cycling Trips, 140–1
 - Development Control Section, Roads Service, 136–7
 - Dualling of the A26, 135–6
 - European Funding: Scotland, 138–9
 - Hillhall Road, 139–40
 - Public Transport: Student Use, 137–8
 - Social Development
 - All-Island Policy: Disadvantaged Areas, 145
 - Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
 - Environmental Improvement, 144–5
-

Housing Contracts, 142–3
 Mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme, 143–4
 Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141–2
 Warm Homes Scheme, 142
 Organic Fruit and Vegetables, WA181
 Otter Relocation, WA218
 Out-of-Hours Doctors, WA314
 Outpatient Clinics, WA144
 Overseas Business Meetings, WA43
 Paintings and Statues, WA252–3
 Paper Correspondence, WA253
 Park-and-Ride Facilities, WA151
 Parking Schemes, WA323
 Parking Tickets, WA230
 Parliament Buildings Events, WA328
 Passing Loop Rail, WA323
 Patients Discharged from Long-Term Mental-Health Care, WA147–8
 Pay and Display Tickets, WA237
 Pay Award, WA270
 Peace III Funding, WA71–2
 Pending Policy Reviews, WA11
 Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 36–7
 Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU), 246–53
 Performance-Related Pay, WA221
 Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI), WA77
 PhD Awards, WA286–7
 Phosphate Pollution, WA299
 Pig Farming, WA178–9
 Pigeon Racing, WA92
 Planning Appeals, WA168
 Planning Appeal Backlogs, WA3
 Planning Applications, WA43–6, WA127, WA129, WA129–30, WA210, WA213, WA217, WA299
 Planning Officers, WA302
 Planning Permission, WA46
 Planning Policy, WA297, WA299–300
 Planning Policy Statement 14, WA87, WA127
 Planning Service, WA53, WA300
 Plantation of Ulster Commemorations, WA192
 Planting Willow Trees, 229
 Plastic Bags, WA130
 Plastic Carrier Bags, WA215–16
 Pleural Plaques Legislation, 35
 Portadown Integrated Development Fund, WA159
 Post Offices, WA50
 Post Office Closures, 146–7, 299–302, 317–27
 Postgraduate Courses, WA282
 Postgraduate Policy and Funding, WA282–3
 Post-Primary Education Policy, WA95
 Post-Primary Provision, WA12, WA34, WA39
 Post-Primary Transfer, WA95
 Potential Investment, WA283
 Potholes, WA153, WA154
 Poverty, WA165
 Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion, WA2
 Poverty Reduction, WA166–7
 Pre-Paid Metering, WA161
 Preschool Provision, WA17
 Pre-Senile Dementia, WA306
 Prescription Charges, WA136, WA147
 Press Office, WA92, WA160, WA179, WA199, WA202, WA 206, WA218, WA227, WA239
 Press Office Staff, WA134
 Primary Schools, WA34
 Primary School Principals, WA274
 Primary School Teachers, WA274–5
 Priority Written Questions, WA273
 Private Finance Initiatives, 264–74, WA88–9
 Private Landlords: Funding, WA154–5
 Private Members' Business
 Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 178–92
 Cancelled Clinics, 253–64
 Carer's Allowance Bill
 First Stage, 50
 Combating Underage Drinking, 80–93
 Construction Industry Jobs, 328–40
 Forkhill Military Site, 113–27
 Former Military Sites, 213–19, 235–40
 Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 127–30, 149–60
 Graduated Driving Licensing, 366–79
 International Development, 93–104
 Locally Produced Food, 200–12
 Northern Corridor Railway Development, 164–78
 Post Office Closures, 299–302, 317–27
 Private Finance Initiatives, 264–74
 Schengen Agreement, 380–9
 Varney Review, 50–62
 Private Notice Questions
 Mid-Ulster Hospital, 147–9
 Post Office Closures, 146–7
 Private Treatment, WA224
 Productivity, WA148–9
 Prohibition Notices, WA192
 Projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena, WA161
 Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 229–30
 Prostate Cancer, WA138
 Protestant Working-Class Communities, WA185, WA267
 Psychotherapists and Counsellors, WA306–7, WA307
 Public Appointments, WA5, WA37, WA132
 Public Health (Amendment) Bill
 Further Consideration Stage, 113
 Final Stage, 281
 Public Private Partnerships, WA226, WA238
 Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA93–4
 Public-Sector Jobs, WA303–4
 Public Spending, WA303
 Public Transport, WA318
 Public Transport Costs, WA152
 Public Transport: Student Use, 137–8
 Pupil Behaviour Management, WA280
 Pupil Numbers, WA120–1, WA199–200

Quangos, WA4
 Quango Reduction, WA87–8
 Queens Parade Project, WA159
 Racial Equality Strategy, WA6–7, WA7–8, WA171
 Rail Passenger Numbers, WA240
 Rapid Transport Scheme, WA232
 Rapid Transit Scheme, WA153
 Rat Population, WA126, WA126–7
 Rates Cap, WA219
 Rates Collection Agency, WA132, WA133, WA219, WA303
 IT Systems, WA133
 Rates Income, WA134
 Rates Payment, WA72
 Rates Relief, WA131
 Rates Revenue, WA57, WA131–2
 Rates Valuations Staff, WA132, WA132–3
 Reallocation of Finance Staff, 133–4
 Reconnect Grants, WA206–7, WA288
 Reconnect Scheme, WA125
 Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff, 134–5
 Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, 105–11
 Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of Europe, 199
 Regional Development Strategy, WA152
 Regional Investment, WA293
 Regional Tourism Partnerships, WA43, WA294–5
 Regulation for Business, WA287–8
 Reid Report, WA328
 Religious Education, WA272
 Renewable Energy, WA296
 Renewing Communities Funding, WA247
 Rent Guarantee Scheme, WA160
 Replanted Woodland, WA261
 Representative Central Group, WA37
 Residential Provision, WA142
 Respite Provision, WA141
 Resource Underspend, WA303
 Retirement Dwellings, WA126
 Return to Education, WA204
 Review of Environmental Governance, WA49–50
 Review of Public Administration, 1–15, WA40–1, WA46–7, WA52
 Review of the Assembly Secretariat, WA83, WA84, WA84–5, WA85
 River Blackwater at Annaghroe, WA167
 River Pollution, WA48–9
 Road Bowls, WA190
 Road Bridge Constructions, WA319
 Road Bridges, WA127, WA319–20
 Roads Expenditure, WA234
 Road Repairs, WA233–4
 Road Tax, WA301
 Road Works, WA241
 Roads: Adopted, WA317
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Crumlin, WA232
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Mallusk, WA232–3
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Randalstown, WA232
 Roadside Memorials, WA76–7, WA77, WA316, WA316–17, WA317
 Roller Hockey, WA92
 Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin, WA231
 Rose Energy Consortium, WA292
 Rural Development Plan, WA182–3
 Rural Development Programme, WA180
 Rural Development Programme 2007–2013, 223–4
 Rural Post Offices, WA170–1
 Rural Proofing, WA258, WA263, WA267, WA290, WA299, WA321
 Sainsbury's Supermarket, WA181–2
 Salary for the Holder of the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General, 49
 Sanctuary Cove Roadway, WA149–50, WA229–30
 Satellite Cancer Care Centre in the North-West, WA146–7
 Schengen Agreement, 380–9
 School Closure, WA272–3
 School Holidays, WA34–5
 Schools' Estate, WA13
 Schools' Infrastructure Programme, WA12
 Schools Modernisation Programme, WA35
 Seagate, Limavady, WA285
 Seat Belts, WA209–10
 Section 75, WA254–5
 Seed Potato, WA266
 Senior Civil Servants, WA221, WA302–3
 Septic Tanks, WA299, WA320–1
 Sewerage Systems, WA315–16
 Sewers Provision, WA237–8
 Sex Education, WA38
 Sexual-Health Strategy, WA143
 Shared Ownership Schemes, WA241
 Shellfish from Dundrum Bay, WA314
 Shooting Sports, WA267
 Sick Leave, WA220
 Single Education Authority, WA275–6
 Single Farm Payments, WA180, WA264
 Single Houses in the Countryside, WA297–8
 Smoking Ban, WA146
 Social Economy Sector, WA290
 Social Housing, WA160–1, WA162–3
 Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141–2
 Social Housing Provision, WA78
 Social Security Agency, WA78, WA80
 Social Security Employees, WA155
 Social Segregation: Savings, 36
 South Eastern Education and Library Board, WA192, WA193, WA196, WA273, WA273–4
 South Eastern Regional College, WA42, WA121, WA281
 Spatial Planning, WA151
 Speaker's Business, 341
 Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review, WA278
 Special Responsibility Allowances, WA300
 Speech and Language Therapists, WA305, WA313, WA314

Speed Restrictions, WA153–4
 Special Schools: Transformation, 304–5
 Sport Funding, WA191
 Sport NI, WA269
 Sporting Clubs, WA9–10
 Sports Complex in Coleraine, WA188
 Sports Grounds Legislation, WA92, WA189
 Staff Absences, WA268
 Staff Cutbacks, WA142
 Staff Meetings, WA259
 Staff Reductions, WA201–2
 Staff Sick Leave, WA36
 Staff Suspension, WA259
 Staff Stress, WA292
 STARS Preschool, WA73
 Statemented Children, WA275
 Statutory Committee Membership, 49
 St Donard's Cairn, WA50
 St Patrick's Day Celebrations, WA204
 Steps to Work, WA121, WA121–2
 Stormont Estate, WA71
 Strategic Investment Board, WA5–6
 Strategic Review of Sensory Support Services, WA145
 Stroke Unit at Coleraine Hospital, WA311
 Stroke Unit at Downpatrick Hospital, WA311
 Student Intake, WA284
 Student Representation, WA286
 Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA4
 Subgroup on Children, WA258
 Suicide Helpline, WA73
 Supporting Rural Development, 30–31
 Sustainable Development Action Plan, WA57
 Sustainable Employment Project, WA281
 Sustainable Schools Policy, WA98
 Tackling Brucellosis, 228–9
 Tackling Racism, 27–8
 Tank Costs, WA260–1
 Taxis Bill
 Final Stage, 162–4
 Royal Assent, 341
 Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 302–4
 Teacher-Training Provision, 307
 Teacher Numbers, WA200–1
 Teacher Training Colleges, WA283
 Teacher Training Places, WA203–4
 Teacher Vacancies, WA38
 Teaching Vacancies, WA200
 Teaching and Learning Resources, WA196
 Temporary Classroom Accommodation, WA13
 Temporary Teachers, WA118
 Textbook Service for Blind and Partially Sighted
 Schoolchildren, WA95–6
 The Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing over
 the River Blackwater, WA76
 The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation)
 (Payment of Claims)
 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 48
 Theatre Access, WA190–1
 Titanic Quarter, WA286
 Tor Bank Special Needs School, WA16
 Total Cost Indicator, WA158
 Tourism: Seaside Towns, 315–16
 Tourist Funding, WA124–5
 Tourist Signage, WA322
 Townland Names, WA87, WA125, WA187–8, WA203,
 WA217–18, WA220, WA240, WA243, WA259,
 WA305
 Traffic Calming Schemes, WA319
 Traffic Congestion, WA239–40, WA315
 Traffic Congestion in Lurgan Town Centre, WA74–5
 Traffic Congestion in South Belfast, WA152–3
 Training for Success and the Automotive Industry, 312
 Training for Success, WA286
 Training of Interpreters, WA287
 Transferors Representative Council, WA37–8
 Translink: Advertising, WA231
 Translink: Budget, WA321
 Translink: Complaints, WA322
 Translink: Punctuality, WA322
 Translink: Spending on Fuel, WA231
 Translink: Spend on Vandalism Repairs, WA233
 Transport: Budget, WA278–9
 Travellers' Sites, WA80
 Travelling Community, WA246
 Tree-Felling, WA90, WA173
 Tree Preservation Order, WA215, WA296–7
 Tree Preservation Orders, WA298–9
 Tree Protection Orders, WA216–17
 Tree Removal, WA300–1
 Tullymally Road, WA82
 Twelfth of July, WA10
 Twelfth of July Celebrations, WA185
 Two-Tier Health System, WA145
 Ulster Scots, WA189
 Ulster-Scots Heritage, 314–15
 Ulster-Scots Teaching, WA120
 Ulster Farm By-Products, WA218
 Ulster Weavers Apparel, WA208, WA208–9
 Underage Drinking, WA304–5
 Underperforming Schools, WA194
 Union Flag, WA171
 University Courses, WA202
 Unoccupied Commercial Properties, WA132
 Upgrade Work, WA323–4
 Urban Regeneration, WA162, WA246
 Urney Road and Great Northern Road Junction, WA231
 US Investment Conference, 220–22, 223
 Vacant Properties, WA81
 Varney I, WA73
 Varney Report, WA70
 Varney Review, 50–62
 Vice-Head Teachers, WA18–24, WA25–32
 Victims' Commission, WA87
 Victims' Commissioners, WA166
 Victims' Groups, WA1–2
 Village Area of South Belfast, WA242

Violence Against Women, WA8
 Vioxx, WA135, WA221, WA305
 Warm Homes Scheme, 142
 Waste Management, WA47–8
 Waste Management Targets, 33
 Water Booster, WA238
 Water Charges, WA78
 Water Mains Work, WA241
 Water Meters, WA77, WA77–8
 Water Pressure Problems, WA237
 Water Treatment Works, WA301
 West Tyrone Area Plan, WA128
 Wild Animal Licences, WA52
 Woodland Planting, WA264
 World Police and Fire Games, WA92, WA269–70
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Abattoir in Downpatrick, WA264
 Animal Exports, WA260
 Assembly Questions, WA90
 Biofuels, WA180–1
 Bluetongue, WA182, WA183
 Bulk Buying Fuel, WA176
 Bulls Imported, WA262–3
 Cappagh Burn, WA265–6
 College of Agriculture, Food and Rural
 Enterprise, WA90
 Dog Fish Quotas, WA174
 Farm Machinery Thefts, WA177
 Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, WA261
 Farming and Fishing Figures, WA264
 Farming Industry, WA260
 Fisheries Council, WA173
 Fisheries Fund, WA173–4
 Fishery Harbours Authority, WA174
 Fishing Fleet, WA174, WA175
 Fishing Industry, WA176, WA179, WA261,
 WA263–4
 Fishing Industry: Fleets, WA179–80
 Fishing Vessels: Registered in Northern Ireland,
 WA176
 Flood Protection Measures, WA261–2
 Food from Britain, WA90–1
 Forest Parks, WA176–7
 Forest Service, WA260
 Forest Service Staff, WA259
 Generating Energy, WA259–60
 Grain Shortage, WA177–8
 Irish Cattle Breeds, WA178
 Katesbridge Farm Raid, WA260
 Killyclogher Burn, WA266
 Locally Sourced Products, WA183
 Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings, WA264–5
 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA266
 Northern Ireland Produce, WA175
 Official Visits, WA178
 Organic Fruit and Vegetables, WA181
 Pig Farming, WA178–9
 Press Office, WA179
 Replanted Woodland, WA261
 Rural Development Plan, WA182–3
 Rural Development Programme, WA180
 Rural Proofing, WA263
 Sainsbury's Supermarket, WA181–2
 Seed Potato, WA266
 Single Farm Payments, WA180, WA264
 Staff Meetings, WA259
 Staff Suspension, WA259
 Tank Costs, WA260–1
 Townland Names, WA259
 Tree-Felling, WA90, WA173
 Woodland Planting, WA264
 Assembly Commission
 Assembly Jobs, WA83, WA83–4, WA84,
 WA248, WA248–9, WA249, WA249–50,
 WA250–2
 Assembly Paintings, WA82–3
 Booking Procedure, WA254
 Bottled Water, WA328
 Events in Parliament Buildings, WA253–4
 Event Sponsorship, WA254
 Good Relations Working Group, WA254
 Information Booklets, WA255
 Paintings and Statues, WA252–3
 Paper Correspondence, WA253
 Parliament Buildings Events, WA328
 Reid Report, WA328
 Review of the Assembly Secretariat, WA83,
 WA84, WA84–5, WA85
 Section 75, WA254–5
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 2012 Olympic Games, WA91, WA270
 Anglers: Facilities, WA91
 Armagh Observatory, WA186, WA268–9
 Arts and Culture Funding, WA184
 Bamford Review, WA185–6
 Book Spending, WA183
 British Olympics Association, WA189
 Crumlin Glen Project, WA92, WA189
 Departmental Funding, WA186–7, WA267–8,
 WA268
 Departmental Publications, WA188
 Disciplinary Procedures, WA269
 European Charter for Regional or Minority
 Languages, WA188
 Féile an Phobail Funding, WA188
 Football Grounds, WA269
 Gaelic Language Links, WA8–9
 Irish Hockey Union, WA189
 Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, WA191
 Lá Nua Newspaper, WA93
 Leisure Funding, WA91
 Library Services, WA192
 Library Spending, WA10–11, WA190
 Loyal Orders, WA266–7
 Maze Stadium, WA269

Meetings with MLAs, WA91
 Museums, WA188
 Northern Ireland Screen, WA191–2
 Northern Ireland Events Company, WA185, WA189–90
 Olympic Centres of Excellence, WA190
 Olympic Elite Programme Projects, WA189
 Pigeon Racing, WA92
 Plantation of Ulster Commemorations, WA192
 Press Office, WA92
 Prohibition Notices, WA192
 Protestant Working-Class Communities, WA185, WA267
 Road Bowls, WA190
 Roller Hockey, WA92
 Rural Proofing, WA267
 Shooting Sports, WA267
 Sport Funding, WA191
 Sport NI, WA269
 Sporting Clubs, WA9–10
 Sports Complex in Coleraine, WA188
 Sports Grounds Legislation, WA92, WA189
 Staff Absences, WA268
 Theatre Access, WA190–1
 Townland Names, WA187–8
 Twelfth of July, WA10
 Twelfth of July Celebrations, WA185
 Ulster Scots, WA189
 World Police and Fire Games, WA92, WA269–70

Education
 Academic Entrance Criteria, WA280
 Alcohol Abuse, WA197
 Alcohol Consumption, WA119, WA120
 Allegations Against Teachers, WA271–2
 Ancillary Staff, WA39
 Area Planning Groups, WA278
 Asbestos in Schools, WA98–116
 Assembly Questions, WA16, WA121, WA270
 Autism: Post-Primary Children, WA278
 Autistic Spectrum Disorder, WA11
 Autistic Spectrum Disorders, WA195
 Ballywalter Primary School, WA271
 Bamford Review, WA13–14
 Bangor Grammar School, WA271
 Blackwater Integrated College, WA15–16
 Bloomfield Primary School, WA197–8
 Braeside Integrated Primary School, WA15
 Breezemount School, WA197
 Budget Overspend, WA25
 Bunscoil an Traonaigh, WA12
 Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil, WA196–7
 C2K Infrastructure, WA11
 Children's Fund, WA96–7
 Christian Ethos in Schools, WA193
 Clandeboy Primary School, WA198
 Class Sizes, WA195
 Classroom Assistants, WA272
 Commissioner's Expenses, WA195–6
 Conlig Primary School, WA40
 Constituency Visits, WA38
 Consultancy Firms, WA32–34
 Controlled Sector: Christian Ethos, WA116
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, WA41–2
 Cullycapple Primary School, WA12–13
 Demographic Decline, WA277–8
 Dickson Plan, WA276–7
 Drugs Education Programme, WA35
 Early Retirement, WA194–5
 East-West Co-operation, WA18
 Economic Appraisal, WA40
 Education and Skills Authority, WA11–12, WA42
 Education Decisions, WA40
 Education Task Force, WA41
 Educational Psychologist, WA117–18
 Educational Psychologists, WA193–4, WA270–1
 Employer Liability Cover, WA201
 Extra Curricular Activities, WA279
 Falling Pupil Numbers, WA120
 Foreign Languages, WA36
 Gaelscoil an Chaistil's LMS Budget, WA93
 GCSE and A-Level Grades, WA198
 Groomsport Primary School, WA40
 ICAN Speech and Language Facility, WA199
 Integrated Schools, WA11, WA275
 Irish-Medium School in Dungannon, WA116–17
 Irish-Medium Schools, WA119, WA197
 Irish Translation, WA25
 Kilcooley Primary School, WA198
 Killard Special School, WA273
 Language Needs, WA15, WA16–17
 Members' Expenses, WA119
 Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, WA17, WA37, WA38–9, WA97, WA116, WA118, WA271
 Mid-Term Breaks, WA34
 Milburn School, WA197
 Mobile Classrooms, WA15
 Modern Languages, WA276
 Movilla High School, WA16
 Musical Traditions in Ireland, WA117
 National Pay Agreements, WA199
 Newbuild Schools, WA279
 Newtownbreda Primary School, WA273
 NJC Pay Increase, WA193
 Non-Teaching Staff, WA198
 North/South Educational Projects, WA279–80
 Numeracy and Literacy Strategy, WA277
 Pay Award, WA270
 Pending Policy Reviews, WA11
 Post-Primary Education Policy, WA95
 Post-Primary Provision, WA12, WA34, WA39
 Post-Primary Transfer, WA95
 Preschool Provision, WA17
 Press Office, WA199
 Primary Schools, WA34

Primary School Principals, WA274
 Primary School Teachers, WA274–5
 Priority Written Questions, WA273
 Public Appointments, WA37
 Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA93–4
 Pupil Behaviour Management, WA280
 Pupil Numbers, WA120–1, WA199–200
 Religious Education, WA272
 Representative Central Group, WA37
 Review of Public Administration, WA40–1
 School Closure, WA272–3
 School Holidays, WA34–5
 Schools' Estate, WA13
 Schools' Infrastructure Programme, WA12
 Schools Modernisation Programme, WA35
 Sex Education, WA38
 Single Education Authority, WA275–6
 South Eastern Education and Library Board, WA192, WA193, WA196, WA273, WA273–4
 Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review, WA278
 Staff Sick Leave, WA36
 Statemented Children, WA275
 Sustainable Schools Policy, WA98
 Teacher Numbers, WA200–1
 Teacher Vacancies, WA38
 Teaching Vacancies, WA200
 Teaching and Learning Resources, WA196
 Temporary Classroom Accommodation, WA13
 Temporary Teachers, WA118
 Textbook Service for Blind and Partially Sighted Schoolchildren, WA95–6
 Tor Bank Special Needs School, WA16
 Transferors Representative Council, WA37–8
 Transport Budget, WA278–9
 Ulster-Scots Teaching, WA120
 Underperforming Schools, WA194
 Vice-Head Teachers, WA18–24, WA25–32
 Youth Service Budget, WA13
 Youth Service Budget, WA94–5
 Youth Workers, WA96
 Employment and Learning
 Apprenticeship Courses, WA285
 Approved Qualifications, WA122
 Bamford Review, WA203
 Careers Advice, WA284–5
 Dentistry Graduates, WA283
 Dentistry Students, WA283
 Drop-Out Rates, WA202
 Early Retirement, WA285
 Educating for a Sustainable Future Project, WA281
 Environmental Audit, WA201
 European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, WA282
 Financial Burden, WA281
 Flags and Emblems, WA284
 Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, WA282
 Kircubbin Campus, WA287
 Labour Relations Agency, WA202–3, WA285
 Language Courses, WA282
 Lecturers Dispute, WA285
 Night Classes, WA42
 PhD Awards, WA286–7
 Postgraduate Courses, WA282
 Postgraduate Policy and Funding, WA282–3
 Potential Investment, WA283
 Press Office, WA202
 Return to Education, WA204
 Seagate, Limavady, WA285
 South Eastern Regional College, WA42, WA121, WA281
 Staff Reductions, WA201–2
 Steps to Work, WA121, WA121–2
 Student Intake, WA284
 Student Representation, WA286
 Sustainable Employment Project, WA281
 Teacher Training Colleges, WA283
 Teacher Training Places, WA203–4
 Titanic Quarter, WA286
 Townland Names, WA203
 Training for Success, WA286
 Training of Interpreters, WA287
 University Courses, WA202
 Young People, WA282
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 2012 Olympic Games, WA295
 Accommodation: East Derry/Londonderry, WA288
 Area of Economic Disadvantage, WA291
 Business Meetings, WA289–90
 Campbelltown to Ballycastle Ferry Service, WA206
 Chicken Waste Plant, WA125
 Coach Tourism, WA294
 Construction Industry Deaths, WA207
 Departmental Land, WA207–8, WA208, WA287
 Departmental Support, WA290, WA291
 Disciplinary Procedures, WA292
 District Council Funding, WA125, WA205
 Economic Inactivity, WA291–2
 Economic Investment Conference, WA293–4, WA296
 Electricity, WA296
 Energy Market, WA294
 Entrepreneurs, WA 292–3
 Electricity Generation, WA43
 Electricity and Gas Providers, WA206
 Foreign Direct Investment, WA122, WA122–3
 Freehold Disposal Programme, WA291
 Health and Safety Executive, WA295–6
 Historical Tourism, WA289
 Incandescent Bulbs, WA205–6
 International Trading, WA293
 Invest NI, WA295
 Invest NI Schemes, WA289
 Lough Neagh Tourism, WA204–5, WA205
 Maze Stadium, WA292

Natural Gas, WA296
 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA124
 Northern Ireland Electricity, WA288–9
 Northern Ireland Science Park, WA207
 Northern Ireland Trade, WA124
 Overseas Business Meetings, WA43
 Planning Policy Statement 14, WA127
 Press Office, WA206
 Reconnect Grants, WA206–7, WA288
 Reconnect Scheme, WA125
 Regional Investment, WA293
 Regional Tourism Partnerships, WA43, WA294–5
 Regulation for Business, WA287–8
 Renewable Energy, WA296
 Rose Energy Consortium, WA292
 Rural Proofing, WA290
 Social Economy Sector, WA290
 Staff Stress, WA292
 St Patrick’s Day Celebrations, WA204
 Tourist Funding, WA124–5
 Townland Names, WA125
 Ulster Weavers Apparel, WA208, WA208–9

Environment

Apartment-Style Developments, WA210
 Architectural Heritage, WA130
 Ards and Down Area Plan, WA298
 Back Garden Development, WA216
 Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, WA210
 Biodiversity Protection, WA216
 Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, WA51
 Boundary Commission, WA213–14
 Boundaries Commission, WA301
 Carbon Footprints, WA211–12, WA212
 Clean Neighbourhoods and Environmental Act, WA50
 Chicken Waste Incinerator Plant, WA217
 Chicken Waste Plant, WA130
 Climate Change Commitments, WA51–2
 Climate Change Committee, WA128
 Climate Impact Assessment, WA300
 CO2 Emissions, WA47
 Coast Protection, WA49
 Constituency Visits, WA50
 Countryside Visitors, WA217
 District Council Lending, WA214–15
 Draft Rural Planning Policy, WA218
 Driving Test Examinations, WA300
 Emerging Findings Paper, WA127–8
 Endangered Species, WA212
 Energy Saving Trust, WA52–3
 Environmental Protection Agency, WA51
 Environmental Protection Directorate, WA51
 European Waste Directives and Regulations, WA216
 Flood Plains, WA209
 Foundations for the Future, WA125–6
 Fly-Posting, WA51
 Genetically Modified Crops, WA218
 Giant’s Causeway Visitors’ Centre, WA50–1
 Global Warming, WA215
 Graduated Driver Licensing Scheme, WA127
 Green Economy, WA52
 Housing Potential, WA211, WA212, WA212–13, WA213
 Illegal Dumping, WA48, WA301, WA302
 Larne Draft Area Plan, WA128–9
 Larne Lough Water, WA210–11
 Malone Conservation Area, WA301–2
 Mary’s Style at Shrigley, WA297
 MLA Co-option, WA215
 Motorcycle Drivers, WA48
 Motor Tax Evasion, WA53
 Northern Area Plan, WA214
 Nuisance High Hedges, WA48
 Otter Relocation, WA218
 Phosphate Pollution, WA299
 Planning Applications, WA43–6, WA127, WA129, WA129–30, WA210, WA213, WA217, WA299
 Planning Officers, WA302
 Planning Permission, WA46
 Planning Policy, WA297, WA299–300
 Planning Service, WA53, WA300
 Plastic Bags, WA130
 Plastic Carrier Bags, WA215–16
 Post Offices, WA50
 Press Office, WA218
 Rat Population, WA126, WA126–7
 Retirement Dwellings, WA126
 Review of Environmental Governance, WA49–50
 Review of Public Administration, WA46–7, WA52
 River Pollution, WA48–9
 Road Bridges, WA127
 Road Tax, WA301
 Rural Proofing, WA299
 Seat Belts, WA209–10
 Septic Tanks, WA299
 Single Houses in the Countryside, WA297–8
 Special Responsibility Allowances, WA300
 St Donard’s Cairn, WA50
 Townland Names, WA217–18
 Tree Preservation Order, WA215, WA296–7
 Tree Preservation Orders, WA298–9
 Tree Protection Orders, WA216–17
 Tree Removal, WA300–1
 Ulster Farm By-Products, WA218
 Waste Management, WA47–8
 Water Treatment Works, WA301
 West Tyrone Area Plan, WA128
 Wild Animal Licences, WA52

Finance and Personnel

Acute Hospitals, WA72
Agricultural Clauses, WA69
Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, WA130
Building Regulations, WA220
Capital Investment Plans, WA57
Capital Realisation Programme, WA70
Childcare Places for Civil Servants, WA133
Civil Service Disability, WA221
Civil Service Employment in South Down, WA135
Civil Service Vacancies, WA53–5
Code for Sustainable Homes, WA55, WA69–70
Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act, WA134
Consultancy Fees, WA131
Corporate Services, WA72
Data Protection Review, WA70
Departmental Demographics, WA58–62, WA63–69
Departmental Underspending, WA219
Domestic and Commercial Valuations, WA134
Economic Growth, WA134
Efficiency Savings, WA70–1
Energy Initiatives, WA134–5
Energy Performance Certificates, WA302
Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death, WA218–19
Fuel Smuggling, WA220
Government Contracts, WA71
Government Departments, WA220–1
Government Procurement, WA72
Land Registry, WA221
Maze Stadium, WA303
Ministerial Drivers, WA132
National Joint Council Pay Award, WA219
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA55–7
Neonatal Death, WA57–8
Newspaper Expenditure, WA55
NJC Pay Increase, WA58
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, WA302
Official Visits, WA69
Peace III Funding, WA71–2
Performance-Related Pay, WA221
Press Office Staff, WA134
Public Appointments, WA132
Public-Sector Jobs, WA303–4
Public Spending, WA303
Rates Cap, WA219
Rates Collection Agency, WA132, WA133, WA219, WA303
Rates Collection Agency: IT Systems, WA133
Rates Income, WA134
Rates Payment, WA72
Rates Relief, WA131
Rates Revenue, WA57, WA131–2
Rates Valuations Staff, WA132, WA132–3
Resource Underspend, WA303
Senior Civil Servants, WA221, WA302–3

Sick Leave, WA220
Stormont Estate, WA71
Sustainable Development Action Plan, WA57
Townland Names, WA220
Unoccupied Commercial Properties, WA132
Varney I, WA73
Varney Report, WA70
Vioxx, WA135, WA221
Zero-Carbon Rating, WA70
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
24-Hour Scanner Services, WA310
Accident and Emergency Units, WA305–6
Adoption Applications, WA142–3
Adoption Home Services, WA141
Adoption Home Studies, WA142
Agency Nurses, WA223
Agenda for Change, WA144, WA308, WA308–9
Ambulance Call Outs, WA306
Ambulance Cover, WA228
Ambulance Response Times, WA147
Armed Forces Veterans, WA73–4
Assaults on Staff, WA311
Attacks on Hospital Staff, WA143
Autism, WA307–8
Bamford Review, WA305
Banbridge Community Health Village, WA312–13
Bed Blocking, WA148, WA149
Binge Drinking, WA149
Blockbusting Drugs, WA310
Blood Transfusion Service, WA224
Bonuses Paid, WA224–5, WA225
Cancer Cases, WA224
Card Before You Leave System, WA312
Childminder Registration, WA136, WA136–7, WA137, WA143
Children Adoption, WA139
Clostridium Difficile, WA307, WA311
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, WA222
Community and Voluntary Sector, WA221–2
Community Pharmacy Contracts, WA225
Community Psychiatric Nurses, WA311–12
Counselling Services, WA312
Craigavon Area Hospital, WA228
Dental Care Provision, WA146
Dental Practices, WA228–9
Dental Services, WA137–8, WA138, WA139, WA140–1, WA141
Departmental Funding, WA309–10, WA310
Developing Better Services, WA141–2, WA222
Domestic Violence, WA143
Drug Addicts, WA144
Drug Misuse, WA310
Drugs Awareness Projects, WA307
Elder Abuse, WA226, WA226–7
Emergency Calls, WA139
Epilepsy Medication, WA142
Fire Appliances, WA139–40
Fire Stations, WA147

Foreign Nationals, WA222–3, WA304
Golden Handshakes, WA223, WA223–4
Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park, WA309
Health and Social Care Trusts, WA222
Health Service Dentists, WA313
Herceptin Treatment, WA74
Irish Travelling Community, WA308
Locum Doctors, WA145
Lurgan Hospital Dermatology Unit, WA305
Medical Secretaries, WA137, WA225, WA227
Mental-Health Clients, WA135–6
Mental-Health Facility, WA228
Mental Health of Pregnant Women, WA227–8
Mental-Health Services, WA306
Mid-Ulster Hospital, WA144, WA144–5, WA146
Midwife Support, WA146
Minor Injuries Unit, WA308
MRI Scan Waiting Times, WA147
Music Therapy, WA73
Non-Access-Related Housing Adaptations, WA149
Northwest Independent Clinic, WA73
Official Visits, WA135
Off-Road Bike Accidents, WA309
Out-of-Hours Doctors, WA314
Outpatient Clinics, WA144
Patients Discharged from Long-Term Mental-Health Care, WA147–8
Pre-Senile Dementia, WA306
Prescription Charges, WA136, WA147
Press Office, WA227
Private Treatment, WA224
Productivity, WA148–9
Prostate Cancer, WA138
Psychotherapists and Counsellors, WA306–7, WA307
Public Private Partnerships, WA226
Residential Provision, WA142
Respite Provision, WA141
Satellite Cancer Care Centre in the North-West, WA146–7
Sexual-Health Strategy, WA143
Shellfish from Dundrum Bay, WA314
Smoking Ban, WA147
Speech and Language Therapists, WA305, WA313, WA314
Staff Cutbacks, WA142
STARS Preschool, WA73
Strategic Review of Sensory Support Services, WA145
Stroke Unit at Coleraine Hospital, WA311
Stroke Unit at Downpatrick Hospital, WA311
Suicide Helpline, WA73
Townland Names, WA305
Two-Tier Health System, WA145
Underage Drinking, WA304–5
Vioxx, WA305

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment, WA3
Alcohol Consumption, WA7
Annual Costs to the Taxpayer, WA4
Anti-Poverty Strategy, WA165
Assembly Questions, WA4
Attorney General for Northern Ireland, WA3
Bamford Review, WA170, WA171–2
Bill of Rights, WA8
Byron Report, WA171
Capital Realisation Task Force's Report, WA1
Child Poverty, WA171, WA172–3
Civic Forum, WA88, WA172
Climate Change, WA172
CO2 Emissions, WA258
Combating Violence, WA6
Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA258
Committee of the Regions, WA167–8
Community Relations, WA5
Deloitte and Touche Research, WA258
Devolved Legislatures, WA7
Disciplinary Procedures, WA258–9
Eames/Bradley Consultative Group, WA4
Employment and Equality Legislation, WA168
Equality Impact Assessment, WA5, WA173
Ethnic Minority Groups, WA166
European Union Gender Directive, WA8
European Union Goods and Services Directive, WA2
Executive Office In Brussels, WA169
Flash Flooding, WA257
Freedom of Information, WA168
Gender Inequality, WA169
Gender Pay Gap, WA6, WA8
Good Relations Indicators, WA1
Good Relations Strategy, WA170
Integrated Development Fund, WA257
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, WA165
Legal Advice to the First Minister, WA169
Lisanelly Army Site, WA165–6
Major Capital Investment Projects, WA87
Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration, WA3
Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA2–3
National Stadium, WA166
Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, WA1
Official Visits, WA167
Planning Appeals, WA168
Planning Appeal Backlogs, WA3
Planning Policy Statement 14, WA87
Poverty, WA165
Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion, WA2
Poverty Reduction, WA166–7
Private Finance Initiatives, WA88–9
Public Appointments, WA5

Racial Equality Strategy, WA171
 Rural Post Offices, WA170–1
 Rural Proofing, WA258
 Quangos, WA4
 Quango Reduction, WA87–8
 Racial Equality Strategy, WA6–7, WA7–8
 River Blackwater at Annaghroe, WA167
 Strategic Investment Board, WA5–6
 Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA4
 Subgroup on Children, WA258
 Townland Names, WA87
 Union Flag, WA171
 Victims' Commission, WA87
 Victims' Commissioners, WA166
 Victims' Groups, WA1–2
 Violence Against Women, WA8
 Regional Development
 A1 Road Intersects, WA151–2
 A3 Road Upgrade, WA315
 A5 Dual Carriageway, WA239
 Bridges Across the River Blackwater, WA75–6, WA76
 Car Ferry Service, WA237
 Car Parking Spaces, WA232
 Carrickfergus Spine Road, WA318–19
 Co-ownership Scheme, WA244
 Comber Bypass, WA315
 Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn, WA320
 Corkey Road/Lough Road Junction in Loughgiel, WA231
 Crawfordsburn Village, WA237
 Culverts, WA154
 Customer Choice, WA318
 Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast Inter-City Rail Service, WA153
 Disability Discrimination, WA150
 Disability Discrimination Act, WA240
 Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, WA232
 Eleventh Night Bonfires, WA240
 Fallagh Road, Gortin, WA241
 Flooding, WA154
 Flooding Problems, WA321
 Free Travel Fares, WA240
 Free Travel for Over 60s, WA153
 Free Travel Passes, WA237
 Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA321
 Gritted Roads, WA150, WA151
 Information Evenings in Caledon and Glaslough, WA320
 Irish Language Translation, WA231–2
 Level-Crossing Gates, WA321
 Light Rail System, WA153
 M2 Widening Scheme, WA316
 Main Street, Glenavy, WA317
 Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, WA247
 Northern Ireland Water, WA234–5, WA235, WA235–6, WA314, WA317
 Northern Ireland Railways, WA322–3
 Park-and-Ride Facilities, WA151
 Parking Schemes, WA323
 Parking Tickets, WA230
 Passing Loop Rail, WA323
 Pay and Display Tickets, WA237
 Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI), WA77
 Potholes, WA153, WA154
 Press Office, WA239
 Public Private Partnerships, WA238
 Public Transport, WA318
 Public Transport Costs, WA152
 Rail Passenger Numbers, WA240
 Rapid Transit Scheme, WA153
 Rapid Transport Scheme, WA232
 Regional Development Strategy, WA152
 Road Bridge Constructions, WA319
 Road Bridges, WA319–20
 Roads Expenditure, WA234
 Road Repairs, WA233–4
 Road Works, WA241
 Roads: Adopted, WA317
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Crumlin, WA232
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Mallusk, WA232–3
 Roads Service/NIW Work: Randalstown, WA232
 Roadside Memorials, WA76–7, WA77, WA316, WA316–17, WA317
 Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin, WA231
 Rural Proofing, WA321
 Sanctuary Cove Roadway, WA149–50, WA229–30
 Septic Tanks, WA320–1
 Sewerage Systems, WA315–16
 Sewers Provision, WA237–8
 Spatial Planning, WA151
 Speed Restrictions, WA153–4
 The Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater, WA76
 Townland Names, WA240
 Tourist Signage, WA322
 Traffic Calming Schemes, WA319
 Traffic Congestion, WA239–40, WA315
 Traffic Congestion in Lurgan Town Centre, WA74–5
 Traffic Congestion in South Belfast, WA152–3
 Translink: Advertising, WA231
 Translink: Budget, WA321
 Translink: Complaints, WA322
 Translink: Punctuality, WA322
 Translink: Spending on Fuel, WA231
 Translink: Spend on Vandalism Repairs, WA233
 Upgrade Work, WA323–4
 Urney Road and Great Northern Road Junction, WA231
 Water Booster, WA238
 Water Charges, WA78
 Water Mains Work, WA241
 Water Meters, WA77, WA77–8
 Water Pressure Problems, WA237

Social Development

Affordable Social Housing, WA82
Alcohol Consumption, WA163
Alcohol Purchase, WA159
Banbridge Town Centre, WA80
Belfast Regeneration Office, WA247
Benefit Take-Up, WA325
Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall, WA78
Caravan Owners, WA242
Child Support Agency, WA80–1
Community Houses, WA246
Community Organisations, WA324
Co-ownership Housing, WA242
Co-ownership Scheme, WA324–5
Co-ownership Housing Scheme, WA156, WA160
Departmental Land in North Down, WA328
Disability Living Allowance, WA155, WA243
Dungannon Housing Plan, WA324
Emergency Fund, WA81
Employment Support Allowance, WA161
Empty Homes in the New Lodge Area, WA157
Energy Efficient Homes, WA246
Homelessness, WA161
Hostel Beds, WA155
House Fires, WA247
House Numbers, WA244, WA245
Housing Associations, WA245, WA325
Housing Association Applications, WA157–8
Housing Benefit Claimants, WA156–7
Housing Executive, WA81, WA157, WA242, WA243, WA244–5, WA245, WA247, WA325–6
Housing Executive Properties, WA156
Housing Executive Waiting Lists, WA326
Housing Waiting Lists, WA241–2,
Incapacity Benefit, WA243, WA327
International Development Fund, WA159–60
Job Losses, WA160
Jobseeker's Allowance, WA155–6, WA327–8
Legahory Travellers' Site, WA162
Omagh Town Centre: Masterplan, WA159
Mortgage Rescue Schemes, WA162
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA79–80
Newbuild Schemes, WA326
New Homes, WA324
No Drinking Areas, WA244
North/South Co-operation, WA161
Portadown Integrated Development Fund, WA159
Pre-Paid Metering, WA161
Press Office, WA160
Private Landlords: Funding, WA154–5
Projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena, WA161
Queens Parade Project, WA159
Renewing Communities Funding, WA247
Rent Guarantee Scheme, WA160
Shared Ownership Schemes, WA241
Social Housing, WA160–1, WA162–3

Social Housing Provision, WA78
Social Security Agency, WA78, WA80
Social Security Employees, WA155
Total Cost Indicator, WA158
Townland Names, WA243
Travellers' Sites, WA80
Travelling Community, WA246
Tullymally Road, WA82
Urban Regeneration, WA162, WA246
Vacant Properties, WA81
Village Area of South Belfast, WA242
Youth Workers, WA326–7
Young People, WA282
Youth Service Budget, WA13
Youth Service Budget, WA94–5
Youth Workers, WA96, WA326–7
Zero-Carbon Rating, WA70

PART II (MEMBERS' INDEX)

Adams, Mr G

Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131

Anderson, Ms M

Adults in Further Education, 309
Assembly Business, 197
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 181–2, 182
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 245
Cancer Services in Foyle, 277–8
Community Organisations, WA324
Departmental Demographics, WA58, WA63, WA68
Equality Impact Assessment, WA173
Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park, WA309
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 172, 173
Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion, WA2
Public-Sector Jobs, WA303
Public Spending, WA303
Rates Collection Agency, WA303
Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, 223, 224
Satellite Cancer Care Centre in the North-West, WA146
Schengen Agreement, 386
Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141
Suicide Helpline, WA73

Armstrong, Mr B

Bulls Imported, WA262
Dental Care Provision, WA146
Energy Efficient Homes, WA246
Graduated Driving Licensing, 372–3
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 293, 293–4
 Second Stage, 352
Post Office Closures, 321
Review of Public Administration, 8

Attwood, Mr A

Assembly Jobs, WA83, WA83–4, WA84, WA248
Attorney General for Northern Ireland, WA3
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 243
Civic Forum, WA172
Combating Violence, WA6
Eames/Bradley Consultative Group, WA4
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 150
International Development, 98–9
Land and Property Services, 34
North/South Educational Projects, WA279
Post Office Closures, 146, 299
Reid Report, WA328
Review of the Assembly Secretariat, WA83, WA84, WA85

Variable Tuition Fees: Impact, 308

Beggs, Mr R

Anaerobic Digestion, 314
Arts and Culture Funding, WA184
Bamford Review, WA185, WA203, WA305
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 182, 187–8, 188, 189
Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS4, CS5, CS12, CS17, CS18, CS20, CS21, CS22, CS23, CS24, CS25, CS37, CS38, CS43, CS44, CS46
Clean Neighbourhoods and Environmental Act, WA50
Combating Underage Drinking, 87–8
Construction Industry Jobs, 331–2
Departmental Underspending, WA219
Drug Addicts, WA144
Endangered Species, WA212
European Funding: Scotland, 138
Housing Waiting Lists, WA241
Land and Property Services, 35
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Second Stage, 343–4, 344, 348, 353, 360
Mortgage Rescue Schemes, WA162
New National Stadium, 231
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 250
Planning Applications, WA43
Planting Willow Trees, 229
Private Finance Initiatives, 269–70
Rail Passenger Numbers, WA240
Rates Revenue, WA57, WA131
Reallocation of Finance Staff, 134
Review of Public Administration, 14
Schools' Infrastructure Programme, WA12
Varney Review, 53, 55
Violence against Women, WA8

Boylan, Mr C

Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 232
Construction Industry Jobs, 335–6
Craigavon Area Hospital, WA228
Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone, 226
Graduated Driving Licensing, 367–8, 368
Job Losses, WA160
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 283
 Second Stage, 343
Mental-Health Facility, WA228
Road Bowls, WA190

Bradley, Mr D

Armagh Observatory, WA186
Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31
Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil, WA196

Cancelled Clinics, 259
European Union Gender Directive, WA8
Forkhill Military Site, 115–16, 124
Former Military Sites, 218–19, 219
Global Warming, WA215
Irish-Medium Schools, WA119, WA197
Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism,
WA17, WA271
Primary Schools, WA34
Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 229, 230
Residential Provision, WA142
Respite Provision, WA141
South Eastern Education and Library Board,
WA192, WA193
Teaching and Learning Resources, WA196

Bradley, Mrs M

All-Island Policy: Disadvantaged Areas, 145
Cancer Services in Foyle, 276–7
Child Poverty, WA171
Children’s Play: Support, 26
Combating Underage Drinking, 88
Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 153
Lecturers Dispute, WA285
Olympic Centres of Excellence, WA190
Post Office Closures, 301
Public Transport: Student Use, 138

Bradley, Mr PJ

Developing Dog Racing, 233
Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone,
225–6, 226
Forkhill Military Site, 120
Locally Produced Food, 202, 210
North/South Co-operation, WA161
Post Office Closures, 326–7

Brady, Mr M

Accommodation for Third-Level Students,
309–10, 310
Ambulance Cover, WA228
Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31
Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
Employment Support Allowance, WA161
Equality Impact Assessments: Training, 28
Forkhill Military Site, 118–19
Free Travel for Over 60s, WA153
Return to Education, WA204
The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers’
Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 48

Bresland, Mr A

Autism: Post-Primary Children, WA278
Careers Advice, WA284
Controlled Sector: Christian Ethos, WA116
Forkhill Military Site, 118

Former Military Sites, 214
Locally Produced Food, 203
Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings, WA264–5
Northern Ireland Water, WA314
Post Office Closures, 318
Regional Public Health Authority, 132
Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, 224

Brolly, Mr F

Accommodation: East Derry/Londonderry, WA288
Cancer Services in Foyle, 275, 278–9
Clostridium Difficile, WA307
Construction Industry Jobs, 334
Environmental Improvement, 144, 144–5
Graduated Driving Licensing, 370–1, 371
House Fires, WA247
Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, WA191
Locally Produced Food, 210–11, 211
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 173
Regional Tourism Partnerships, WA294
Sports Complex in Coleraine, WA188

Browne, Lord

Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 193
Post Office Closures, 323
Sport Funding, WA191

Buchanan, Mr T

Assembly Questions, WA16, WA270
Developing Better Services, WA141, WA222
Disability Living Allowance, WA155
Former Military Sites, 238
Irish Translation, WA25
Language Needs, WA16
Social Security Employees, WA155
Staff Cutbacks, WA142
Victims’ Groups, WA1
Vioxx, WA135, WA305

Burns, Mr T

Annual Costs to the Taxpayer, WA4
Assisting the Fishing Industry, 228
Crumlin Glen Project, WA92, WA189
Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, WA232
Main Street, Glenavy, WA317
Park-and-Ride Facilities, WA151
Planning Service, WA300
Roads: Adopted, WA317
Roads Service/NIW Work: Crumlin, WA232
Roads Service/NIW Work: Mallusk, WA232
Roads Service/NIW Work: Randalstown, WA232
Shared Ownership Schemes, WA241
Social Economy Sector, WA290
Social Segregation: Savings, 36
Training for Success, WA286
Translink: Advertising, WA231
Translink: Budget, WA321
Translink: Spending on Fuel, WA231

Ulster Farm By-Products, WA218

Burnside, Mr D

Assembly Business, 281
Development Control Section, Roads Service, 137
Efficiency Savings, WA70–1
Extra Curricular Activities, WA279
Locally Produced Food, 203
New National Stadium, 231
Post Office Closures, 317–18
Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141
Supporting Rural Development, 31
Surplus Land for Disposal, 38
Union Flag, WA171

Butler, Mr P

Anaerobic Digestion, 314
Blackwater Integrated College, WA15–16
Chicken Waste Incinerator Plant, WA217
Chicken Waste Plant, WA125, WA130
Departmental Funding, WA186
Departmental Publications, WA188
Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability
(2005 Order) (Amendment) (General
Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises
and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland)
2008, 199
Eleventh Night Bonfires, WA240
European Charter for Regional or Minority
Languages, WA188
Féile an Phobail Funding, WA188
Freehold Disposal Programme, WA291
Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 152
Hillhall Road, 139–40
Housing Executive, WA247
ICAN Speech and Language Facility, WA199
Lá Nua Newspaper, WA93
Lecturers Dispute, WA285
Maze Stadium, WA269, WA292, WA303
Medical Secretaries, WA227
Museums, WA188
Off-Road Bike Accidents, WA309
Peace III Funding, WA71
Post Office Closures, 319–20
Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 230
Protestant Working-Class Communities, WA185,
WA267
Rose Energy Consortium, WA292
Senior Civil Servants, WA221
Social Segregation: Savings, 36
Special Responsibility Allowances, WA300
Sports Grounds Legislation, WA92, WA189
St Patrick's Day Celebrations, WA204
Statemented Children, WA275
Student Intake, WA284
Teaching Vacancies, WA200
Temporary Classroom Accommodation, WA13

Tor Bank Special Needs School, WA16
Tourist Funding, WA124
Tree Preservation Orders, WA298
Tree Protection Orders, WA216
Ulster Scots, WA189
World Police and Fire Games, WA92, WA269
Youth Service Budget, WA13

Campbell, Mr G

Devolved Legislatures, WA7
Learning and Skills Commission: NI
Representative, 311
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Accelerated Passage, 285
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 173–4, 174
Pupil Numbers, WA199
Surplus Land for Disposal, 38
The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers'
Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 48
Seagate, Limavady, WA285
Tourism: Seaside Towns, 316

**Campbell, Mr G (as Chairperson of the Committee
for Social Development)**

Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS15, CS16, CS41

Clarke, Mr T

Animal Exports, WA260
Apartment-Style Developments, WA210
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 45
Driving Test Examinations, WA300
Forkhill Military Site, 119
Former Military Sites, 236
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Accelerated Passage, 293
Locally Produced Food, 204, 205
Northern Ireland Water, WA317
Pigeon Racing, WA92
Planning Applications, WA210
Review of Public Administration, 9
Tank Costs, WA260–1

Clarke, Mr W

Civil Service Employment in South Down, WA135
Demographic Decline, WA277
Illegal Dumping, WA48, WA301, WA302
Locally Produced Food, 203–4, 204
Post Office Closures, 301, 301–2
Shellfish from Dundrum Bay, WA314
St Donard's Cairn, WA50
Tackling Brucellosis, 228
Water Treatment Works, WA301

Cobain, Mr F

Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS33
Environmental Protection Directorate, WA51

Executive Subcommittees, 27
Learning and Skills Commission: NI
Representative, 310, 311
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 165–6
Rates Payment, WA72
Sustainable Development Action Plan, WA57
Warm Homes Scheme, 142
Waste Management, WA47

Coulter, Rev Dr Robert

Locally Sourced Products, WA183
Pre-Paid Metering, WA161
Smoking Ban, WA146
Wild Animal Licences, WA52

Coulter, Rev Dr Robert (as the Representative of the Assembly Commission)

Assembly Jobs, WA83, WA84, WA248, WA248–9, WA249, WA250, WA250–2
Assembly Paintings, WA82–3, WA252–3
Booking Procedure, WA254
Bottled Water, WA328
Events in Parliament Buildings, WA253–4
Event Sponsorship, WA254–5
Good Relations Working Group, WA254
Information Booklets, WA255
Paper Correspondence, WA253
Parliament Buildings Events, WA328
Reid Report, WA328
Review of the Assembly Secretariat, WA83, WA84, WA84–5, WA85
Section 75, WA254–5

Craig, Mr J

Bed Blocking, WA149
Combating Underage Drinking, 85, 86
Co-ownership Scheme, WA244
Customer Choice, WA318
Electricity and Gas Providers, WA206
Entrepreneurs, WA292
Graduated Driving Licensing, 374–5
Hillhall Road, 139
Planning Service, WA53
Warm Homes Scheme, 142

Cree, Mr L

Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment, WA3
Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall, WA78
Biofuels, WA180–1
Capital Investment Plans, WA57
Children's Play: Support, 26
Cycling Trips, 140
Electricity, WA296
Electricity Generation, WA43
Homelessness, WA161
Labour Relations Agency, WA285
Major Capital Investment Projects, WA87
Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 313

Pay Award, WA270
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 37, 252
Review of Public Administration, 14–15
Schengen Agreement, 384, 384–5
Varney Review, 56–7

Dallat, Mr J

Consultancy Fees, WA131
Dualling of the A26, 136
Graduated Driving Licensing, 369
International Development, 100–1
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 164–5
Post Office Closures, 321–2
Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 302, 303

Dallat, Mr J (as Deputy Speaker)

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 43, 46
Consideration Stage, 364, 364–5, 365
Forkhill Military Site, 126
Surplus Land for Disposal, 38

Deeny, Dr K

Cancer Services in Foyle, 277
Former Military Sites, 216–17
Lisanelly Army Site, WA165
Private Finance Initiatives, 271–2
Regional Public Health Authority, 132

Dodds, Mr N

Interfaces in North Belfast, 394–5

Dodds, Mr N (as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment)

2012 Olympic Games, WA295
Accommodation: East Derry/Londonderry, WA288
Anaerobic Digestion, 313, 313–14, 314
Area of Economic Disadvantage, WA291
Business Meetings, WA290
Chicken Waste Plant, WA125
Coach Tourism, WA294
Construction Industry Deaths, WA207
Construction Industry Jobs, 336–7
Departmental Land, WA207–8, WA208, WA287
Departmental Support, WA290, WA291
Disciplinary Procedures, WA292
District Council Funding, WA125, WA205
Economic Inactivity, WA291–2
Economic Investment Conference, 316, 317, WA294, WA296
Electricity, WA296
Electricity and Gas Providers, WA206
Electricity Generation, WA43
Energy Market, WA294
Entrepreneurs, WA292–3
Foreign Direct Investment, WA122, WA123
Freehold Disposal Programme, WA291
Health and Safety Executive, WA295–6

Historical Tourism, WA289
Incandescent Bulbs, WA205–6
International Trading, WA293
Invest NI, WA295
Invest NI Schemes, WA289
Lough Neagh Tourism, WA204–5, WA205
Maze Stadium, WA292
Natural Gas, WA296
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA124
Northern Ireland Electricity, WA288–9
Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 312, 313
Northern Ireland Science Park, WA207
Northern Ireland Trade, WA124
Overseas Business Meetings, WA43
Press Office, WA206
Reconnect Grants, WA206–7, WA288
Reconnect Scheme, WA125
Regional Investment, WA293
Regional Tourism Partnerships, WA43, WA294–5
Regulation for Business, WA288
Renewable Energy, WA296
Rose Energy Consortium, WA292
Rural Proofing, WA290
Social Economy Sector, WA290
Staff Stress, WA292
St Patrick's Day Celebrations, WA204
Tourism: Seaside Towns, 315, 316
Tourist Funding, WA124–5
Townland Names, WA125
Ulster-Scots Heritage, 314, 315
Ulster Weavers Apparel, WA208, WA208–9

Doherty, Mr P

A5 Dual Carriageway, WA239
Cappagh Burn, WA265
Dental Practices, WA228
Fallagh Road, Gortin, WA241
Forkhill Military Site, 120–1, 121, 125
Former Military Sites, 213–14
Killyclogher Burn, WA266
Locally Produced Food, 201
Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 224
Omagh Town Centre: Masterplan, WA159
Road Works, WA241
Urney Road and Great Northern Road Junction, WA231
Water Booster, WA238
West Tyrone Area Plan, WA128

Donaldson, Mr J (as junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister)

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 22, 23, 41, 42, 44, 45
Second Stage, 66, 67, 71, 72
Consideration Stage, 161, 364
Interfaces in North Belfast, 395–7
Post Office Closures, 146, 146–7, 147

Durkan, Mr M

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 306
Civil Service Vacancies, WA53
Classroom Assistants, WA272
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 19–20, 20
Second Stage, 71, 72, 72–3, 73, 73–4, 74, 75, 75–6
Counselling Services, WA312
Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast Inter-City Rail Service, WA153
Economic Investment Conference, 316–17
European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, WA282
Financial Burden, WA281
Mental-Health Clients, WA135
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 171–2, 172, 173, 174, 177–8
Review of Public Administration, 12
Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141
Tackling Racism, 28
Varney Review, 51

Easton, Mr A

24-Hour Scanner Services, WA310
Agenda for Change, WA144
Alcohol Purchase, WA159
Assaults on Staff, WA311
Back Garden Development, WA216
Bangor Grammar School, WA271
Blockbusting Drugs, WA310
Bloomfield Primary School, WA197
Boundary Commission, WA213
Breezemount School, WA197
Cancelled Clinics, 253–4, 263–4
Caravan Owners, WA242
Car Ferry Service, WA237
Clandeboy Primary School, WA198
Community Houses, WA246
Conlig Primary School, WA40
Co-ownership Scheme, WA244
Crawfordsburn Village, WA237
Foreign Nationals, WA222
Fuel Smuggling, WA220
Groomsport Primary School, WA40
Housing Executive, WA242
Kilcooley Primary School, WA198
Medical Secretaries, WA225
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA79, WA79–80
No Drinking Areas, WA244
Northern Ireland Events Company, 233, 234, WA185
Outpatient Clinics, WA144
Productivity, WA148
Pupil Numbers, WA120
Queens Parade Project, WA159
Rates Cap, WA219
School Closure, WA272
Stroke Unit at Coleraine Hospital, WA311
Stroke Unit at Downpatrick Hospital, WA311
Water Pressure Problems, WA237

Elliott, Mr T

2012 Olympic Games, WA91
Anglers: Facilities, WA91
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 185–6
Blood Transfusion Service, WA224
Bunscoil an Traonaigh, WA12
Cancer Cases, WA224
Car Parking Spaces, WA232
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 41, 41–2
 Second Stage, 65, 65–6, 66
Construction Industry Jobs, 334
Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, WA232
Emergency Calls, WA139
Farm Machinery Thefts, WA177
Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, WA261
Forest Parks, WA176
Forkhill Military Site, 116, 116–17, 117
Former Military Sites, 218
Grain Shortage, WA177
Indigenous Species and Habitats, 33, 34
Irish Cattle Breeds, WA178
Irish Language Translation, WA231–2
Language Needs, WA15
Locally Produced Food, 200–1, 207, 211
Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland:
 Intercultural Education, 219, 220
Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 225
Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, WA1
Northern Ireland Trade, WA124
Official Visits, WA178
Pig Farming, WA178
Planning Permission, WA46
Post-Primary Provision, WA39
Prohibition Notices, WA192
Prostate Cancer, WA138
Public Transport Costs, WA152
Regulation for Business, WA287–8
Review of Public Administration, 14, WA46–7
Single Education Authority, WA275
Staff Sick Leave, WA36
Twelfth of July, WA10
Twelfth of July Celebrations, WA185
Victims' Commissioners, WA166

Empey, Sir Reg

Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 193–4

Empey, Sir Reg (as Minister for Employment and Learning)

Accommodation for Third-Level Students, 310
Adults in Further Education, 308–9, 309
Apprenticeship Courses, WA285
Approved Qualifications, WA122
Bamford Review, WA203
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 241–2, 242, 243, 243–4, 244, 244–5, 245, 245–6

Careers Advice, WA284–5
Dentistry Graduates, WA283
Dentistry Students, WA283
Drop-Out Rates, WA202
Early Retirement, WA285
Educating for a Sustainable Future Project, WA281
Environmental Audit, WA201
European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, WA282
Financial Burden, WA281
Flags and Emblems, WA284
Former Military Sites, 215–16
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 155–7, 159
Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, WA282
Kircubbin Campus, WA287
Labour Relations Agency, WA203, WA285
Language Courses, WA282
Learning and Skills Commission: NI
 Representative, 310–11, 311
Lecturers Dispute, WA285, WA285–6
Night Classes, WA42
PhD Awards, WA286–7
Postgraduate Courses, WA282
Postgraduate Policy and Funding, WA282–3
Potential Investment, WA283
Press Office, WA202
Return to Education, WA204
Seagate, Limavady, WA285
South Eastern Regional College, WA42, WA121, WA281
Staff Reductions, WA201–2
Steps to Work, WA121–2
Student Intake, WA284
Student Representation, WA286
Sustainable Employment Project, WA281
Teacher Training Colleges, WA283
Teacher Training Places, WA203–4
Titanic Quarter, WA286
Townland Names, WA203
Training for Success, WA286
Training for Success and the Automotive Industry, 312
Training of Interpreters, WA287
University Courses, WA202
Variable Tuition Fees: Impact, 307–8, 308
Young People, WA282

Farry, Dr S

Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 182–3, 183
Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS3, CS18, CS19, CS22, CS23
Climate Change, 30
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 44, 44–5, 45, 45–6
 Second Stage, 76–7, 77, 77–8, 78
Deloitte and Touche Research, WA258
Good Relations Indicators, WA1
Integrated Schools, WA275

Invest NI, WA295
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, WA165
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 286, 291, 294, 295, 295–6
 Second Stage, 351, 354, 354–6, 361
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 251
Post-Primary Education Policy, WA95
Private Finance Initiatives, 267
Schengen Agreement, 380–1, 383, 384, 387
Schools' Estate, WA13
Varney Review, 61, 62

Ford, Mr D

Ambulance Response Times, WA147
Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31
Bamford Review, WA172
Bluetongue, WA182
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 17, 18
 Second Stage, 64, 67, 67–8, 68, 68–9, 69, 70, 78, 79
 Consideration Stage, 161, 364, 365
Green Economy, WA52
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 284, 285, 287, 290, 296, 297
 Second Stage, 344–6, 348, 350, 351, 354
Locally Produced Food, 205–6, 211
M2 Widening Scheme, WA316
Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland:
 Intercultural Education, 220
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 168–9, 169
Public Transport, WA318
Review of Public Administration, 8
Taxis Bill
 Final Stage, 163
Townland Names, WA125, WA187, WA203, WA259
Variable Tuition Fees: Impact, 307, 308

Foster, Mrs A (as Minister of the Environment)

Apartment-Style Developments, WA210
Architectural Heritage, WA130
Ards and Down Area Plan, WA298
Armagh Observatory: Light Pollution, 31, 31–2
Back Garden Development, WA216
Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, WA210
Biodiversity Protection, WA216
Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, WA51
Boundaries Commission, WA301
Boundary Commission, WA213–14
Carbon Footprint, WA212
Carbon Footprints, WA211–12
Chicken Waste Incinerator Plant, WA217
Chicken Waste Plant, WA130
Clean Neighbourhoods and Environmental Act, WA50
Climate Change, 29, 29–30, 30
Climate Change Committee, WA128
Climate Change Commitments, WA51–2
Climate Impact Assessment, WA300
CO2 Emissions, WA47

Coast Protection, WA49
Constituency Visits, WA50
Countryside Visitors, WA217
District Council Lending, WA214–15
Draft Rural Planning Policy, WA218
Driving Test Examinations, WA300
Emerging Findings Paper, WA127–8
Endangered Species, WA212
Energy Saving Trust, WA52–3
Environmental Protection Agency, WA51
Environmental Protection Directorate, WA51
European Waste Directives and Regulations, WA216
Flood Plains, WA209
Foundations for the Future, WA126
Fly-Posting, WA51
Genetically Modified Crops, WA218
Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre, WA50–1
Global Warming, WA215
Graduated Driver Licensing Scheme, WA127
Graduated Driving Licensing, 376–8
Green Economy, WA52
Housing Potential, WA211, WA212, WA212–3, WA213
Illegal Dumping, WA48, WA301, WA302
Indigenous Species and Habitats, 33–4, 34
Larne Draft Area Plan, WA128–9
Larne Lough Water, WA210–11
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 First Stage, 281
 Accelerated Passage, 282, 296, 296–7, 297–8, 298
 Second Stage, 341–2, 360, 360–1, 361–3, 363
Malone Conservation Area, WA301
Mary's Style at Shrigley, WA297
MLA Co-option, WA215
Motorcycle Drivers, WA48
Motor Tax Evasion, WA53
Northern Area Plan, WA214
Nuisance High Hedges, WA48
Otter Relocation, WA218
Phosphate Pollution, WA299
Planning Applications, WA43–6, WA127, WA129,
 WA130, WA210, WA213, WA217, WA299
Planning Officers, WA302
Planning Permission, WA46
Planning Policy, WA297, WA300
Planning Policy Statement 14, WA127
Planning Service, WA53, WA300
Plastic Bags, WA130
Plastic Carrier Bags, WA215–16
Post Offices, WA50
Press Office, WA218
Rat Population, WA126, WA126–7
Retirement Dwellings, WA126
Review of Environmental Governance, WA50
Review of Public Administration, 1–6, 7, 8, 8–9,
 9, 10, 10–11, 11, 12, 12–13, 13, 13–14, 14, 15,
 WA47, WA52
River Pollution, WA48–9
Road Bridges, WA127

Road Tax, WA301
Rural Proofing, WA299
Seat Belts, WA209–10
Septic Tanks, WA299
School Bus Safety, 32, 33
Single Houses in the Countryside, WA297–8
Special Responsibility Allowances, WA300
St Donard's Cairn, WA50
Supporting Rural Development, 30, 30–1, 31
Taxis Bill
 Final Stage, 162, 163–4
Townland Names, WA217–18
Tree Preservation Order, WA215, WA297
Tree Preservation Orders, WA298–9
Tree Protection Orders, WA216–17
Tree Removal, WA300–1
Ulster Farm By-Products, WA218
Waste Management, WA47–8
Waste Management Targets, 33
Water Treatment Works, WA301
West Tyrone Area Plan, WA128
Wild Animal Licences, WA52

Gallagher, Mr T

Climate Change, WA172
Climate Impact Assessment, WA300
Construction Industry Jobs, 334–5
Executive Subcommittees, 27
Former Military Sites, 215, 238
Health Service Dentists, WA313
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 292, 293
 Second Stage, 346
Plantation of Ulster Commemorations, WA192
Private Finance Initiatives, 264–5, WA88
Renewable Energy, WA296
Review of Environmental Governance, WA49–50
Review of Public Administration, 10
School Bus Safety, 32
US Investment Conference, 221

Gardiner, Mr S

Accommodation for Third-Level Students, 310
Alcohol Consumption, WA163
Capital Realisation Task Force's Report, WA1
Climate Change, 29
Dualling of the A26, 136
Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225
Graduated Driving Licensing, 368–9
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 284, 296
Motorcycle Drivers, WA48
Northern Ireland Screen, WA191
Regional Public Health Authority, 132
Salary for the Holder of the Office of Comptroller
 and Auditor General, 49
Strategic Investment Board, WA5

Gildernew, Ms M (as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development)

Abattoir in Downpatrick, WA264
Animal Exports, WA260
Assembly Questions, WA90
Assisting the Fishing Industry, 227, 227–8, 228
Biofuels, WA181
Bluetongue, WA182, WA183
Bulk Buying Fuel, WA176
Bulls Imported, WA262–3
Cappagh Burn, WA265–6
College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise,
 WA90
Dog Fish Quotas, WA174, WA174–5
Farm Machinery Thefts, WA177
Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, WA261
Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone, 226
Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225
Farming Industry, WA260
Farming and Fishing Figures, WA264
Fisheries Council, WA173
Fisheries Fund, WA173–4
Fishery Harbours Authority, WA174
Fishing Fleet, WA174, WA175
Fishing Industry, WA176, WA179, WA261, WA264
Fishing Industry: Fleets, WA179–80
Fishing Vessels: Registered in Northern Ireland,
 WA176
Flood Protection Measures, WA261–2
Food from Britain, WA90–1
Forest Parks, WA176–7
Forest Service, WA260
Forest Service Staff, WA259
Forkhill Military Site, 121–3
Generating Energy, WA259–60
Grain Shortage, WA177–8
Irish Cattle Breeds, WA178
Katesbridge Farm Raid, WA260
Killyclogher Burn, WA266
Locally Produced Food, 208–10
Locally Sourced Products, WA183
Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings, WA265
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA266
Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 224,
 224–5, 225
Northern Ireland Produce, WA175
Official Visits, WA178
Organic Fruit and Vegetables, WA181
Pig Farming, WA178–9
Press Office, WA179
Planting Willow Trees, 229
Replanted Woodland, WA261
Rural Development Plan, WA182–3
Rural Development Programme 2007–2013, 223–4,
 224, WA180
Rural Proofing, WA263
Sainsbury's Supermarket, WA181–2
Seed Potato, WA266

Single Farm Payments, WA180, WA264
Staff Meetings, WA259
Staff Suspension, WA259
Tackling Brucellosis, 228, 228–9, 229
Tank Costs, WA261
Townland Names, WA259
Tree-Felling, WA90, WA173
Woodland Planting, WA264

Hamilton, Mr S

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305, 306
Area of Economic Disadvantage, WA291
Bill of Rights, WA8
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights
Commission, 183–4, 184
Book Spending, WA183
Commissioners' Expenses, WA195
Data Protection Review, WA70
Economic Growth, WA134
Energy Market, WA294
Farming Industry, WA260
Fishing Industry, WA176, WA261, WA263
Fishing Vessels: Registered in Northern Ireland,
WA176
Flood Protection Measures, WA261
Free Travel Fares, WA240
Housing Associations, WA245
Housing Executive, WA244, WA245
International Development, 95–6
Kircubbin Campus, WA287
Members' Expenses, WA119
Minor Injuries Unit, WA308
Newspaper Expenditure, WA55
Northern Ireland Produce, WA175
Northern Ireland Railways, WA322
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 252
Private Finance Initiatives, 267–8, 268, 271
Public Private Partnerships, WA226, WA238
Rapid Transit Scheme, WA153
Rapid Transport Scheme, WA232
Rates Relief, WA131
Regional Tourism Partnerships, WA43
Roads Expenditure, WA234
Road Repairs, WA233
Schengen Agreement, 383
South Eastern Education and Library Board, WA196
South Eastern Regional College, WA281
Traffic Calming Schemes, WA319
Translink: Spend on Vandalism Repairs, WA233
US Investment Conference, 223
Varney Review, 57–8, 58

Hanna, Mrs C

Cancelled Clinics, 256–7
Combating Underage Drinking, 84
Environmental Protection Agency, WA51
Gender Inequality, WA169
International Development, 93, 93–5

Modern Languages, WA276
Patients Discharged from Long-Term Mental-Health
Care, WA147
Post Office Closures, 299, 299–300, 300

Hilditch, Mr D

Flooding, WA154
Forkhill Military Site, 116
Warm Homes Scheme, 142

Hilditch, Mr D (as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development)

Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS29, CS30, CS31,
CS32, CS33

Irwin, Mr W

Economic Investment Conference, 316
Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225
Food from Britain, WA90
Locally Produced Food, 204–5, 205
Out-of-Hours Doctors, WA314
Post Office Closures, 324–5
Preschool Provision, WA17
Resource Underspend, WA303
Seed Potato, WA266

Kelly, Mrs D

A3 Road Upgrade, WA315
Agency Nurses, WA223
Assembly Jobs, WA248, WA249, WA249–50, WA250
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights
Commission, 188–9, 189
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Second Stage, 66, 68, 70, 74–5, 77, 78
Consideration Stage, 161, 364
Departmental Support, WA290
Foreign Nationals, WA304
International Development Fund, WA159
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Second Stage, 351, 352
Lurgan Hospital Dermatology Unit, WA305
Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration, WA3
Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
Newbuild Schools, WA279
New National Stadium, 230, 231
Planning Applications, WA129, WA213, WA217
Portadown Integrated Development Fund, WA159
Racial Equality Strategy, WA7
Sick Leave, WA220
Social Housing, WA162
Sub Group on Children, WA258
Training for Success and the Automotive Industry, 312
Young People, WA282

Kelly, Mr G

Interfaces in North Belfast, 393–4

Kelly, Mr G (as junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister)

International Development, 101–3
Private Finance Initiatives, 272–3

Kennedy, Mr D

A1 Road Intersects, WA151
Assembly Business, 365
Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 231, 232
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 178–9, 179, 180
Cancer Services in Foyle, 275
Children’s Fund, WA96
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 16–17
 Consideration Stage, 161, 364
Energy Saving Trust, WA52
Farmers: Financial Loss: Alpha-nortestosterone, 226
Flash Flooding, WA257
Forkhill Military Site, 123–4
International Development, 96–7
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 284, 286, 289, 291, 291–2, 292, 298
 Second Stage, 350, 363
Mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme, 143
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 25
Post Office Closures, 147
Private Finance Initiatives, 266–7, 268
Review of Public Administration, 7, 12

Lo, Ms A

Accommodation for Third-Level Students, 310
Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 232
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 188
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 244
Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS15
Combating Underage Drinking, 84–5
Culverts, WA154
Economic Investment Conference, WA293–4
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 151
Newtownbreda Primary School, WA273
Post Office Closures, 325–6
Racial Equality Strategy, WA6, WA171
Varney Report, WA70

Long, Mrs N

Anti-Poverty Strategy, WA165
Bamford Review, WA170
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 20–21, 22, 22–3, 23, 23–4, 40
 Second Stage, 72, 78
Construction Industry Jobs, 332–3, 338, 339
Development Control Section, Roads Service, 137
Economic Investment Conference, WA296

Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 192–3
Fly-Posting, WA51
Free Travel Passes, WA237
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 295
 Second Stage, 348, 351
Post Office Closures, 318–19, 323
Poverty, WA165
Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, 107–8
Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA4
Titanic Quarter, WA286

Lunn, Mr T

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305
Architectural Heritage, WA130
Former Military Sites, 235
Graduated Driving Licensing, 370
Integrated Schools, WA11
New National Stadium, 230, 231
Prescription Charges, WA147
Textbook Service for Blind and Partially Sighted Schoolchildren, WA95

McCallister, Mr J

Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, WA130
Armed Forces Veterans, WA73
Assembly Paintings, WA82
Autistic Spectrum Disorder, WA11
Binge Drinking, WA149
Bridges Across the River Blackwater, WA75, WA76
Cancelled Clinics, 256
Combating Underage Drinking, 90–1
Ethnic Minority Groups, WA166
Flood Plains, WA209
Foundations for the Future, WA125–6
Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA321
Illegal Dumping, WA48
Information Evenings in Caledon and Glaslough, WA320
Locally Produced Food, 211–12, 212
Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, WA37, WA38, WA39, WA97, WA116, WA118
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 170–1, 171
River Blackwater at Annaghroe, WA167
Road Bridge Constructions, WA319
Road Bridges, WA127, WA319
Social Housing Provision, WA78
The Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing over the River Blackwater, WA76
Tourism: Seaside Towns, 315
Training of Interpreters, WA287

McCann, Mr F

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS6, CS37, CS39
Integrated Development Fund, WA257

McCann, Ms J

Absenteeism, 37
Belfast Regeneration Office, WA247
Boundaries Commission, WA301
Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS5, CS14, CS24, CS27
Combating Underage Drinking, 80–1
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 19
Domestic Violence, WA143
Economic Investment Conference, 317
Energy Initiatives, WA134
Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, WA247
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 251
Private Finance Initiatives, 270–1, 271
Reconnect Scheme, WA125
Renewing Communities Funding, WA247
Varney Review, 55–6

McCarthy, Mr K

Assisting the Fishing Industry, 226, 227
Bamford Review, WA171
Cancelled Clinics, 257–8, 261
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 47
Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act, WA134
Departmental Funding, WA267
Football (Offences) Act 1991, 233
Graduated Driving Licensing, 379
Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 313
Post Office Closures, 299, 301
Prescription Charges, WA136
Sanctuary Cove Roadway, WA149–50, WA229
School Bus Safety, 33
Townland Names, WA87, WA217, WA220, WA240, WA243, WA305
Warm Homes Scheme, 142

McCartney, Mr R

Autism, WA307–8
Cancer Services in Foyle, 275
Historical Tourism, WA289
International Development, 96
Irish Travelling Community, WA308
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 167, 168, 177
Regional Development Strategy, WA152
Transport Budget, WA278

McCausland, Mr N

Assembly Business, 197
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 181, 189, 190
Interfaces in North Belfast, 391–2
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 36
Review of Public Administration, 11

McClarty, Mr D

British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 242
Cancer Services in Foyle, 276
Capital Realisation Programme, WA70
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 157–8
Sainsbury's Supermarket, WA181

McClarty, Mr D (as Deputy Speaker)

International Development, 97, 101, 104

McCrea, Mr B

2012 Olympic Games, WA295
Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 306–7
British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 245
Climate Change Commitments, WA51
Combating Underage Drinking, 81–3, 92
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 20, 23, 42, 42–3, 44
 Second Stage, 70–1, 71, 72
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 129, 129–30, 130
Graduated Driving Licensing, 375, 376
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Second Stage, 347, 348, 349, 351, 358–9, 359, 359–60
Northern Ireland Events Company, 233, 233–4
Organic Fruit and Vegetables, WA181
Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff, 135
Representative Central Group, WA37
Review of Public Administration, 9–10, 14
Schengen Agreement, 386, 387, 389
Teacher Vacancies, WA38
Transferor's Representative Council, WA37
US Investment Conference, 221
Varney Review, 58–9, 61–2

McCrea, Mr I

Locum Doctors, WA145
Mid-Ulster Hospital, WA144, WA146
Review of Public Administration, 11
Rural Development Plan, WA182

McCrea, Dr W

Forkhill Military Site, 124–5, 125, 126
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Second Stage, 349
Locally Produced Food, 202–3, 203
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 169
Northern Ireland Agriculture in Europe, 225
Post Office Closures, 320–1
Tackling Brucellosis, 229

McDonnell, Dr A

Benefit Take-Up, WA325
Bonuses Paid, WA224, WA225

Civil Service Disability, WA221
Construction Industry Deaths, WA207
Construction Industry Jobs, 329–30
Domestic and Commercial Valuations, WA134
Educational Psychologist, WA117
Educational Psychologists, WA193, WA270
Golden Handshakes, WA223
Northern Ireland Energy Targets, 312, 312–13
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, WA302
Northern Ireland Water, WA234, WA235
Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI), WA77
PhD Awards, WA286
Rates Collection Agency, WA132, WA133, WA219
IT Systems, WA133
Rates Income, WA134
Rates Valuations Staff, WA132, WA132–3
Surplus Land for Disposal, 38
Staff Absences, WA268
Staff Stress, WA292
Underperforming Schools, WA194
Unoccupied Commercial Properties, WA132
Urban Regeneration, WA162
Water Charges, WA78
Water Meters, WA77

McElduff, Mr B

Bluetongue, WA182
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Second Stage, 69, 69–70, 75
Construction Industry Jobs, 328–9
Corporate Services, WA72
Cycling Trips, 140
Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles)
Regulations 2005, 222
Former Military Sites, 238–40
Musical Traditions in Ireland, WA117
Non-Access-Related Housing Adaptations, WA149
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 24, 25
Post Office Closures, 322–3
Potholes, WA154
Special Schools: Transformation, 304
Sport NI, WA269
Supporting Rural Development, 30
Theatre Access, WA190
Varney Review, 57, 58

McFarland, Mr A

Bottled Water, WA328
Economic Investment Conference, 316
Gender Pay Gap, WA6
Planning Applications, WA299
Pupil Behaviour Management, WA280
Stormont Estate, WA71

McGill, Mrs C

Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS31
Former Military Sites, 217–18

Housing Benefit Claimants, WA156
Housing Contracts, 143
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA55–6, WA124, WA266

McGimpsey, Mr M (as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety)

24-Hour Scanner Services, WA310
Accident and Emergency Units, WA305–6
Adoption Applications, WA143
Adoption Home Studies, WA141, WA142
Agency Nurses, WA223
Agenda for Change, WA144, WA308–9
Ambulance Call Outs, WA306
Ambulance Cover, WA228
Ambulance Response Times, WA147
Armed Forces Veterans, WA73–4
Assaults on Staff, WA311
Attacks on Hospital Staff, WA143
Autism, WA308
Bamford Review, WA305
Banbridge Community Health Village, WA312–13
Bed Blocking, WA148, WA149
Binge Drinking, WA149
Blockbusting Drugs, WA310
Blood Transfusion Service, WA224
Bonuses Paid, WA224–5, WA225
Cancelled Clinics, 260–1, 261–2, 262
Cancer Cases, WA224
Cancer Services in Foyle, 279–80
Card Before You Leave System, WA312
Childminder Registration, WA136, WA136–7, WA137, WA143
Children Adoption, WA139
Clostridium Difficile, WA307, WA311
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, WA222
Community and Voluntary Sector, WA222
Community Pharmacy Contracts, WA225
Community Psychiatric Nurses, WA312
Counselling Services, WA312
Craigavon Area Hospital, WA228
Dental Care Provision, WA146
Dental Practices, WA228–9
Dental Services, WA137–8, WA138, WA139, WA140–1, WA141
Departmental Funding, WA309–10, WA310
Developing Better Services, WA141–2, WA222
Domestic Violence, WA143
Drug Addicts, WA144
Drug Misuse, WA310
Drugs Awareness Projects, WA307
Elder Abuse, WA226, WA226–7
Emergency Calls, WA139
Epilepsy Medication, WA142
Fire Appliances, WA139–40
Fire Stations, WA147
Foreign Nationals, WA222–3, WA304
Golden Handshakes, WA223, WA223–4

Health and Care Centre at Creggan Burn Park, WA309
 Health and Social Care Trusts, WA222
 Health Service Dentists, WA313
 Herceptin Treatment, WA74
 Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131,
 131–2
 Irish Travelling Community, WA308
 Locum Doctors, WA145
 Lurgan Hospital Dermatology Unit, WA305
 Medical Secretaries, WA137, WA225, WA227
 Mental-Health Clients, WA135–6
 Mental-Health Facility, WA228
 Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
 Mental Health of Pregnant Women, WA227–8
 Mental-Health Services, WA306
 Mid-Ulster Hospital, 147, 148, 148–9, WA144,
 WA144–5, WA146
 Midwife Support, WA146
 Minor Injuries Unit, WA308
 MRI Scan Waiting Times, WA147
 Music Therapy, WA73
 Non-Access-Related Housing Adaptations, WA149
 Northwest Independent Clinic, WA73
 Official Visits, WA135
 Off-Road Bike Accidents, WA309
 Out-of-Hours Doctors, WA314
 Outpatient Clinics, WA144
 Patients Discharged from Long-Term Mental-Health
 Care, WA147–8
 Pre-Senile Dementia, WA306
 Prescription Charges, WA136, WA147
 Press Office, WA227
 Private Treatment, WA224
 Productivity, WA148–9
 Prostate Cancer, WA138
 Psychotherapists and Counsellors, WA306–7, WA307
 Public Health (Amendment) Bill
 Final Stage, 281
 Public Private Partnerships, WA226
 Reallocation of Finance Staff, 133–4, 134
 Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff, 134–5, 135
 Regional Public Health Authority, 132
 Residential Provision, WA142
 Respite Provision, WA141
 Satellite Cancer Care Centre in the North-West,
 WA146–7
 Sexual-Health Strategy, WA143
 Shellfish from Dundrum Bay, WA314
 Smoking Ban, WA146
 Speech and Language Therapists, WA305, WA313,
 WA314
 Staff Cutbacks, WA142
 STARS Preschool, WA73
 Strategic Review of Sensory Support Services, WA145
 Stroke Unit at Coleraine Hospital, WA311
 Stroke Unit at Downpatrick Hospital, WA311
 Suicide Helpline, WA73
 Townland Names, WA305

Two-Tier Health System, WA145
 Underage Drinking, WA304–5
 Vioxx, WA305

McGlone, Mr P

Accident and Emergency Units, WA305
 Ambulance Call Outs, WA306
 Climate Change, 29
 Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles)
 Regulations 2005, 222–3
 Draft Rural Planning Policy, WA218
 Emerging Findings Paper, WA127
 Employer Liability Cover, WA201
 Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 283, 288
 Midwife Support, WA146
 Planning Applications, WA127
 Planning Policy, WA297, WA299–300
 Planning Policy Statement 14, WA127
 Review of Public Administration, 6–7
 Single Houses in the Countryside, WA297
 Taxis Bill
 Final Stage, 162–3

McGuinness, Mr M (as deputy First Minister)

Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment, WA3
 Alcohol Consumption, WA7
 Annual Costs to the Taxpayer, WA4
 Anti-Poverty Strategy, WA165
 Assembly Questions, WA4
 Attorney General for Northern Ireland, WA3
 Bamford Review, WA170, WA172
 Bill of Rights, WA8
 Byron Report, WA171
 Capital Realisation Task Force's Report, WA1
 Child Poverty, WA171, WA172–3
 Children's Play: Support, 25, 25–6, 26
 Civic Forum, WA88, WA172
 Climate Change, WA172
 Combating Violence, WA6
 CO2 Emissions, WA47, WA258
 Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 First Stage, 15
 Accelerated Passage, 16, 46, 46–7, 47
 Committee of the Regions, WA167–8
 Community Relations, WA5
 Deloitte and Touche Research, WA258
 Devolved Legislatures, WA7
 Disciplinary Procedures, WA259
 Eames/Bradley Consultative Group, WA4
 Employment and Equality Legislation, WA168
 Equality Impact Assessments: Training, 28–9
 Equality Impact Assessment, WA5, WA173
 Ethnic Minority Groups, WA166
 European Union Gender Directive, WA8
 European Union Goods and Services Directive, WA2
 Executive Office in Brussels, WA169
 Executive Subcommittees, 26, 27

Flash Flooding, WA257
Freedom of Information, WA168
Gender Inequality, WA169
Gender Pay Gap, WA6, WA8
Good Relations Indicators, WA1
Good Relations Strategy, WA170
Integrated Development Fund, WA257
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, WA165
Legal Advice to the First Minister, WA169
Lisanelly Army Site, WA165–6
Major Capital Investment Projects, WA87
Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration, WA3
Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA2–3
National Stadium, WA166
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 24–5, 25,
Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, WA1
Official Visits, WA167
Planning Appeals, WA168
Planning Appeal Backlogs, WA3
Planning Policy Statement 14, WA87
Poverty, WA165
Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion, WA2
Poverty Reduction, WA166–7
Private Finance Initiatives, WA88–9
Public Appointments, WA5
Quangos, WA4
Quango Reduction, WA87–8
Racial Equality Strategy, WA6–7, WA7–8, WA171
River Blackwater at Annaghroe, WA167
Rural Post Offices, WA170–1
Rural Proofing, WA258
Strategic Investment Board, WA5–6
Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA4
Sub Group on Children, WA258
Tackling Racism, 27, 28
Townland Names, WA87
Union Flag, WA171
Victims’ Commission, WA87
Victims’ Commissioners, WA166
Victims’ Groups, WA1–2
Violence Against Women, WA8

McHugh, Mr G

Two-Tier Health System, WA145

McIlveen, Miss M

Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 184, 185
Ballywalter Primary School, WA271
Charities Bill (NIA 9/07), CS32
Child Poverty, WA172
Christian Ethos in Schools, WA193
Combating Underage Drinking, 83–4
Comber Bypass, WA315
CO2 Emissions, WA47, WA258
Constituency Visits, WA38, WA50

East/West Co-operation, WA18
Elder Abuse, WA226
House Numbers, WA244
Official Visits, WA69, WA167
Planning Appeal Backlogs, WA3
Pleural Plaques Legislation, 35
School Modernisation Programme, WA35
Single Farm Payments, WA264
Social Security Agency, WA78
Sustainable Schools Policy, WA98
Vice-Head Teachers, WA18, WA25

McKay, Mr D

Attacks on Hospital Staff, WA143
Biodiversity Protection, WA216
C2K Infrastructure, WA11
Carbon Footprint, WA212
Carbon Footprints, WA211
College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, WA90
Corkey Road/Lough Road Junction in Loughgiel, WA231
Drugs Education Programme, WA35
Dualling of the A26, 135
Educating for a Sustainable Future Project, WA281
Environmental Audit, WA201
Equality Impact Assessment, WA5
European Waste Directives and Regulations, WA216
Forest Service, WA260
Forest Service Staff, WA259
Gaelic Language Links, WA8–9
Gaelscoil an Chaistil’s LMS Budget, WA93
Giant’s Causeway Visitors’ Centre, WA50
Gritted Roads, WA150, WA151
Housing Executive, WA81
Incandescent Bulbs, WA205
Information Booklets, WA255
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Second Stage, 352
MLA Co-option, WA215
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 170
Paintings and Statues, WA252
Paper Correspondence, WA253
Phosphate Pollution, WA299
Planning Applications, WA129
Plastic Bags, WA130
Review of Public Administration, 9
Rural Development Programme, WA180
Rural Proofing, WA258, WA262, WA267, WA290, WA299, WA321
Seat Belts, WA209
Septic Tanks, WA299
Sporting Clubs, WA9
Staff Meetings, WA259
Staff Suspension, WA259
STARS Preschool, WA73
Sustainable Employment Project, WA281
Tree-Felling, WA90, WA173

Vacant Properties, WA81

McLaughlin, Mr M

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305
Byron Report, WA171
Combating Underage Drinking, 86
Learning and Skills Commission: NI
Representative, 311
Nuisance High Hedges, WA48
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 249
Private Finance Initiatives, 268–9
Varney Review, 52–3

McLaughlin, Mr M (as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS1, CS3, CS5, CS6, CS6–7, CS9, CS12, CS14, CS35, CS38, CS39, CS40, CS43, CS44, CS45, CS46, CS47, CS48, CS49

McNarry, Mr D

Assisting the Fishing Industry, 228
Carer's Allowance Bill
First Stage, 50
Countryside Visitors, WA217
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Second Stage, 69, 70, 71
Consideration Stage, 365
Interfaces in North Belfast, 389
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Accelerated Passage, 289
Second Stage, 350, 359, 363
Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 230
Schengen Agreement, 388
Septic Tanks, WA320–1
South Eastern Education and Library Board, WA273

McQuillan, Mr A

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS19, CS22
Cullycapple Primary School, WA12
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 252
Ulster-Scots Heritage, 314
Varney Review, 51–2

Maginness, Mr A

Acute Hospitals, WA72
Adults in Further Education, 309
Anaerobic Digestion, 313
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 179–80, 180–1, 181, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 190
Committee of the Regions, WA167
Housing Contracts, 143
Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131
Interfaces in North Belfast, 392–3
Light Rail System, WA153
Ministerial Drivers, WA132

Northern Ireland Science Park, WA207
Private Finance Initiatives, 270
Schengen Agreement, 381–3, 386, 387, 387–8

Maskey, Mr A

Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Accelerated Passage, 288, 288–9, 289, 290, 292, 292–3, 293
Second Stage, 346–7, 347–8
Review of Public Administration, 7–8
Schengen Agreement, 383, 383–4, 387, 388
Social Housing, WA160
Traffic Congestion in South Belfast, WA152

Maskey, Mr P

Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, WA51
Construction Industry Jobs, 338–9, 339, 339–40
Football (Offences) Act 1991, 232–3
Government Contracts, WA71
Integrated Development Fund, WA257
Ulster-Scots Heritage, 314–15

Molloy, Mr F

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 40, 40–1
Second Stage, 65, 68, 73
Good Relations Strategy, WA170
Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
Northern Ireland Events Company, WA189
Review of Public Administration, 10
School Bus Safety, 32

Molloy, Mr F (as Deputy Speaker)

Carer's Allowance Bill
First Stage, 50
Forkhill Military Site, 62
Statutory Committee Membership, 49

Morrow, Lord

Autistic Spectrum Disorders, WA195
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 21–2
Dungannon Housing Plan, WA324
Forkhill Military Site, 113–15, 121
Irish-Medium School in Dungannon, WA116
Primary School Principals, WA274
Primary School Teachers, WA274
Post Office Closures, 300–1, 301
Teacher Training Colleges, WA283

Moutray, Mr S

Academic Entrance Criteria, WA280
Civic Forum, WA88
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 18, 18–19
Second Stage, 64, 65, 72
Community Relations, WA5

Football (Offences) Act 1991, 232
Government Departments, WA220
Motor Tax Evasion, WA53
MRI Scan Waiting Times, WA147
Night Classes, WA42
Roadside Memorials, WA76–7, WA77, WA316,
WA317
Senior Civil Servants, WA302
US Investment Conference, 220, 221

Murphy, Mr C

Forkhill Military Site, 117, 117–18, 118

**Murphy, Mr C (as Minister for Regional
Development)**

A1 Road Intersects, WA151–2
A3 Road Upgrade, WA315
A5 Dual Carriageway, WA239
Bridges Across the River Blackwater, WA75–6, WA76
Car Ferry Service, WA237
Car Parking Spaces, WA232
Carrickfergus Spine Road, WA318–19
Comber Bypass, WA315
Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn, WA320
Corkey Road/Lough Road Junction in Loughgiel,
WA231
Crawfordsburn Village, WA237
Culverts, WA154
Customer Choice, WA318
Cycling Trips, 140, 140–1
Derry/Londonderry-to-Belfast Inter-City Rail
Service, WA153
Development Control Section, Roads Service, 136,
137
Disability Discrimination, WA150
Disability Discrimination Act, WA240
Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, WA232
Dualling of the A26, 135, 135–6, 136
Eleventh Night Bonfires, WA240
European Funding: Scotland, 138, 138–9, 139
Fallagh Road, Gortin, WA241
Flooding, WA154
Flooding Problems, WA321
Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 194–5
Free Travel Fares, WA240
Free Travel for Over 60s, WA153
Free Travel Passes, WA237
Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA321
Gritted Roads, WA150, WA151
Hillhall Road, 139, 140
Information Evenings in Caledon and Glaslough,
WA320
Irish Language Translation, WA232
Level-Crossing Gates, WA321
Light Rail System, WA153
M2 Widening Scheme, WA316
Main Street, Glenavy, WA317
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 174–6

Northern Ireland Railways, WA322–3
Northern Ireland Water, WA234–5, WA235, WA235–6,
WA314, WA317
Park-and-Ride Facilities, WA151
Parking Schemes, WA323
Parking Tickets, WA230
Passing Loop Rail, WA323
Pay and Display Tickets, WA237
Phase 3 Domestic Metering (NI), WA77
Potholes, WA153, WA154
Press Office, WA239
Public Private Partnerships, WA238
Public Transport, WA318
Public Transport Costs, WA152
Public Transport: Student Use, 137, 137–8, 138
Rail Passenger Numbers, WA240
Rapid Transit Scheme, WA153
Rapid Transport Scheme, WA232
Regional Development Strategy, WA152
Road Bridge Constructions, WA319
Road Bridges, WA319–20
Roads Expenditure, WA234
Road Repairs, WA233–4
Road Works, WA241
Roads: Adopted, WA317
Roads Service/NIW Work: Crumlin, WA232
Roads Service/NIW Work: Mallusk, WA232–3
Roads Service/NIW Work: Randalstown, WA232
Roadside Memorials, WA77, WA316, WA316–17,
WA317
Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin, WA231
Rural Proofing, WA321
Sanctuary Cove Roadway, WA150, WA229–30
Septic Tanks, WA320–1
Sewerage Systems, WA316
Sewers Provision, WA238
Spatial Planning, WA151
Speed Restrictions, WA154
The Ballagh Crossing and the Cortynan Crossing
over the River Blackwater, WA76
Tourist Signage, WA322
Traffic Calming Schemes, WA319
Traffic Congestion, WA239–40, WA315
Traffic Congestion in Lurgan Town Centre, WA74–5
Traffic Congestion in South Belfast, WA152–3
Translink: Advertising, WA231
Translink: Budget, WA321
Translink: Complaints, WA322
Translink: Punctuality, WA322
Translink: Spending on Fuel, WA231
Translink: Spend on Vandalism Repairs, WA233
Townland Names, WA240
Upgrade Work, WA324
Urney Road and Great Northern Road Junction,
WA231
Water Booster, WA238
Water Charges, WA78
Water Mains Work, WA241

Water Meters, WA77, WA78
Water Pressure Problems, WA237

Neeson, Mr S

Rural Development Plan, WA183
European Funding: Scotland, 139
Executive Office in Brussels, WA169
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Second Stage, 350
Review of Public Administration, 13
Schengen Agreement, 388, 388–9, 389
Special Schools: Transformation, 304
Student Representation, WA286
Varney 1, WA73
Varney Review, 50–1, 51

Newton, Mr R

British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral
Meeting, 244
Construction Industry Jobs, 333–4
Departmental Land, WA287
Footpaths in Kingsdale Park, East Belfast, 194
Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 151–2
Government Procurement, WA72
Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road,
Belfast, 105–7
Salary for the Holder of the Office of Comptroller
and Auditor General, 49
Variable Tuition Fees: Impact, 308

Ní Chuilín, Ms C

Cancelled Clinics, 262–3, 263
Card Before You Leave System, WA312
Childcare Places for Civil Servants, WA133
Childminder Registration, WA143
Clostridium Difficile, WA311
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, WA222
Community Psychiatric Nurses, WA311
Co-ownership Scheme, WA324
Empty Homes in the New Lodge Area, WA157
Events in Parliament Buildings, WA253
Gender Pay Gap, WA8
Hostel Beds, WA155
Interfaces in North Belfast, 389, 389–91
Leisure Funding, WA91
Mental Health of Pregnant Women, WA227
Plastic Carrier Bags, WA215
Potential Investment, WA283
Private Landlords: Funding, WA154–5
Regional Investment, WA293
Traffic Congestion, WA239, WA315
Youth Workers, WA326

O'Dowd, Mr J

2012 Olympic Games, WA270
Assembly Questions, WA4
Banbridge Community Health Village, WA312

Banbridge Town Centre, WA80
Booking Procedure, WA254
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Second Stage, 69, 70, 71, 75
Departmental Support, WA291
Event Sponsorship, WA254
Flags and Emblems, WA284
Good Relations Working Group, WA254
Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland:
Intercultural Education, 220
Private Finance Initiatives, 265–6
Recruitment of Midwives/Maternity Staff, 134, 135
Review of Public Administration, 11
Section 75, WA254
Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review,
WA278
Spatial Planning, WA151
Tackling Racism, 27
Traffic Congestion in Lurgan Town Centre, WA74
Ulster Weavers Apparel, WA208
Waste Management Targets, 33

O'Loan, Mr D

Bed Blocking, WA148
Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA
11/07), CS6, CS19, CS20, CS21, CS27, CS40,
CS44, CS45, CS46, CS47
Construction Industry Jobs, 337–8, 339
Departmental Land, WA207, WA208
European Funding: Scotland, 138
Farmers: Increased Vehicle Excise Duty, 225
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 176–7,
177, 178
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 37, 250
Private Finance Initiatives, 273–4
Reallocation of Finance Staff, 134
Retirement Dwellings, WA126
Rural Post Offices, WA170
Tourism: Seaside Towns, 315
Varney Review, 53–4

O'Neill, Mrs M

Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 127–9, 129
Mid-Ulster Hospital, 147, 147–8
Strategic Review of Sensory Support Services, WA145

Paisley, Rev Dr I (as First Minister)

Advisory Council on Infrastructure Investment, WA3
Alcohol Consumption, WA7
Annual Costs to the Taxpayer, WA4
Anti-Poverty Strategy, WA165
Assembly Questions, WA4
Attorney General for Northern Ireland, WA3
Bamford Review, WA170, WA172
Bill of Rights, WA8
Byron Report, WA171
Capital Realisation Task Force's Report, WA1

Child Poverty, WA171, WA172–3
Civic Forum, WA88, WA172
Climate Change, WA172
CO2 Emissions, WA258
Combating Violence, WA6
CO2 Emissions, WA47, WA258
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 41, 44
 Second Stage, 63–4, 64, 65, 68, 73, 74, 77, 78, 79
Committee of the Regions, WA167–8
Community Relations, WA5
Deloitte and Touche Research, WA258
Devolved Legislatures, WA7
Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles)
 Regulations 2005, 222, 223
Disciplinary Procedures, WA259
Eames/Bradley Consultative Group, WA4
Employment and Equality Legislation, WA168
Equality Impact Assessment, WA5, WA173
Ethnic Minority Groups, WA166
European Union Gender Directive, WA8
European Union Goods and Services Directive, WA2
Executive Office in Brussels, WA169
Flash Flooding, WA257
Freedom of Information, WA168
Gender Inequality, WA169
Gender Pay Gap, WA6, WA8
Good Relations Indicators, WA1
Good Relations Strategy, WA170
Integrated Development Fund, WA257
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, WA165
Legal Advice to the First Minister, WA169
Lisanelly Army Site, WA165–6
Major Capital Investment Projects, WA87
Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration, WA3
Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young
 People, WA2–3
Minority Ethnic People in Northern Ireland:
 Intercultural Education, 219–20, 220
National Stadium, WA166
Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, WA1
Official Visits, WA167
Planning Appeals, WA168
Planning Appeal Backlogs, WA3
Planning Policy Statement 14, WA87
Poverty, WA165
Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion, WA2
Poverty Reduction, WA166–7
Private Finance Initiatives, WA88–9
Public Appointments, WA5
Quangos, WA4
Quango Reduction, WA87–8
Racial Equality Strategy, WA6–7, WA7–8, WA171
River Blackwater at Annaghroe, WA167
Rural Post Offices, WA170–1
Rural Proofing, WA258
Strategic Investment Board, WA5–6
Subcommittee on Children and Young People, WA4

Sub Group on Children, WA258
Townland Names, WA87
Union Flag, WA171
US Investment Conference, 220–1, 221, 221–2, 223
Victims' Commission, WA87
Victims' Commissioners, WA166
Victims' Groups, WA1–2
Violence Against Women, WA8

Poots, Mr E

Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Second Stage, 71, 73

Poots, Mr E (as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure)

2012 Olympic Games, WA91
Anglers: Facilities, WA91
Armagh Observatory, WA186, WA268–9
Arts and Culture Funding, WA184
Assisting the Armagh Observatory, 231–2, 232
Bamford Review, WA185–6
Book Spending, WA183
British Olympics Association, WA189
Crumlin Glen Project, WA92, WA189
Departmental Funding, WA186–7, WA267–8, WA268
Departmental Publications, WA188
Developing Dog Racing, 233
Developing Football Stadia, 234
Disciplinary Procedures, WA269
European Charter for Regional or Minority
 Languages, WA188
Féile an Phobail Funding, WA188
Football (Offences) Act 1991, 232, 233
Football Grounds, WA269
Gaelic Language Links, WA9
Irish Hockey Union, WA189
Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, WA191
Lá Nua Newspaper, WA93
Leisure Funding, WA91
Library Services, WA192
Library Spending, WA11, WA190
Loyal Orders, WA267
Maze Stadium, WA269
Meetings with MLAs, WA91
Museums, WA188
New National Stadium, 230–1, 231
Northern Ireland Events Company, 233, 234,
 WA185, WA190
Northern Ireland Screen, WA191–2
Olympic Centres of Excellence, WA190
Olympic Elite Programme Projects, WA189
Pigeon Racing, WA92
Plantation of Ulster Commemorations, WA192
Press Office, WA92
Prohibition Notices, WA192
Proposed Regional Sports Stadium, 229–30, 230
Protestant Working-Class Communities, WA185,
 WA267

Road Bowls, WA190
Roller Hockey, WA92
Rural Proofing, WA267
Shooting Sports, WA267
Sport Funding, WA191
Sport NI, WA269
Sporting Clubs, WA9–10
Sports Complex in Coleraine, WA188
Sports Grounds Legislation, WA92, WA189
Staff Absences, WA268
Theatre Access, WA190–1
Townland Names, WA187–8
Twelfth of July, WA10
Twelfth of July Celebrations, WA185
Ulster Scots, WA189
World Police and Fire Games, WA92, WA270

Purvis, Ms D

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS12, CS24
International Development, 99–100
Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, 108–9

Ramsey, Mr P

Cancer Services in Foyle, 278
Developing Football Stadia, 234
Graduated Driving Licensing, 371–2
Post Office Closures, 300, 325
Rural Development Programme 2007–2013, 224
Teacher-Training Provision, 307

Ramsey, Ms S

British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 242
Cancelled Clinics, 254–5
Children's Play: Support, 25
Combating Underage Drinking, 91–2, 92–3
Community and Voluntary Sector, WA221
Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 129, 158–9, 159–60, 160
International Trading, WA293
Private Treatment, WA224
Public Transport: Student Use, 137
Rent Guarantee Scheme, WA160
Sexual-Health Strategy, WA143
Youth Workers, WA96

Ritchie, Ms M (as Minister for Social Development)

Affordable Social Housing, WA82
Alcohol Consumption, WA163
Alcohol Purchase, WA159
All-Island Policy: Disadvantaged Areas, 145
Banbridge Town Centre, WA80
Belfast Regeneration Office, WA247
Benefit Take-Up, WA325
Big Wheel at Belfast City Hall, WA78
Caravan Owners, WA242

Child Support Agency, WA80
Combating Underage Drinking, 88–90
Community Houses, WA246
Community Organisations, WA324
Co-ownership Housing, WA242
Co-ownership Scheme, WA244, WA324–5
Co-ownership Housing Scheme, WA156, WA160
Departmental Land in North Down, WA328
Disability Living Allowance, WA155, WA243
Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
Dungannon Housing Plan, WA324
Emergency Fund, WA81
Employment Support Allowance, WA161
Empty Homes in the New Lodge Area, WA157
Environmental Improvement, 144, 145
Homelessness, WA161
Hostel Beds, WA155
House Fires, WA247
House Numbers, WA244, WA245
Housing Associations, WA245, WA325
Housing Association Applications, WA157–8
Housing Benefit Claimants, WA156–7
Housing Contracts, 142–3, 143
Housing Executive, WA81, WA157, WA242, WA243, WA244–5, WA245, WA247, WA325–6
Housing Executive Properties, WA156
Housing Executive Waiting Lists, WA326
Housing Waiting Lists, WA241–2
Incapacity Benefit, WA243, WA327
International Development Fund, WA159–60
Jobseeker's Allowance, WA155–6, WA327–8
Job Losses, WA160
Legahory Travellers' Site, WA162
Mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme, 143, 143–4
Omagh Town Centre: Masterplan, WA159
Mortgage Rescue Schemes, WA162
Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA79, WA80
Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, WA247
Newbuild Schemes, WA326
New Homes, WA324
No Drinking Areas, WA244
North/South Co-operation, WA161
Pre-Paid Metering, WA161
Private Landlords: Funding, WA155
Portadown Integrated Development Fund, WA159
Press Office, WA160
Projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena, WA161
Queens Parade Project, WA159
Redevelopment of the Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, 109–111
Renewing Communities Funding, WA247
Rent Guarantee Scheme, WA160
Shared Ownership Schemes, WA241
Social Housing, WA160–1, WA162–3
Social Housing Projects: Foyle, 141, 141–2
Social Housing Provision, WA78
Social Security Agency, WA78, WA80
Social Security Employees, WA155

The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 48
Total Cost Indicator, WA158
Townland Names, WA243
Travellers' Sites, WA80
Travelling Community, WA246
Tullymally Road, WA82
Urban Regeneration, WA162, WA246
Vacant Properties, WA81
Village Area of South Belfast, WA242
Warm Homes Scheme, 142
Youth Workers, WA326–7

Robinson, Mr G

Alcohol Abuse, WA197
Alcohol Consumption, WA119, WA120
Cancelled Clinics, 259–60
Cancer Services in Foyle, 275–6
Child Support Agency, WA80
Co-ownership Housing, WA242
Co-ownership Housing Scheme, WA160
Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
Early Retirement, WA285
Emergency Fund, WA81
Epilepsy Medication, WA142
Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death, WA218
Fire Stations, WA147
Former Military Sites, 217
Graduated Driving Licensing, 373
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Second Stage, 346
Milburn School, WA197
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 169,
 169–70, 170
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, 25
Northwest Independent Clinic, WA73
Passing Loop Rail, WA323
Review of Public Administration, 13
Speech and Language Therapists, WA305, WA313,
 WA314
Speed Restrictions, WA153–4

Robinson, Mrs I

Asbestos in Schools, WA98
Cancelled Clinics, 255–6
Consultancy Firms, WA32
Farming and Fishing Figures, WA264
Fisheries Council, WA173
Fisheries Fund, WA173
Fishery Harbours Authority, WA174
Fishing Fleet, WA174
Further Education Provision for Young People with
 Disabilities, 154–5, 155
Graduated Driving Licensing, 372, 374
Jobseeker's Allowance, WA155
Mental-Health Facility: Craigavon Area Hospital, 133
Mental-Health Services, WA306

Mid-Ulster Hospital, 148
Music Therapy, WA73
Neonatal Death, WA57
Official Visits, WA135
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 252
Post-Primary Provision, WA34
Pre-Senile Dementia, WA306
Psychotherapists and Counsellors, WA306, WA307
Sex Education, WA38
South Eastern Regional College, WA42, WA121
Special Schools: Transformation, 304

Robinson, Mr K

Ancillary Staff, WA39
Assembly Business, 365
Business Meetings, WA289–90
Carrickfergus Spine Road, WA318
Departmental Funding, WA268
Disability Living Allowance: Epilepsy, 144
Employment and Equality Legislation, WA168
Freedom of Information, WA168
Hillhall Road, 140
Impact of the Internet on Suicide Prevention, 131
Invest NI Schemes, WA289
Labour Relations Agency, WA202
Language Courses, WA282
Level-Crossing Gates, WA321
Newbuild Schemes, WA326
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 167–8, 171
Overseas Business Meetings, WA43
Performance-Related Pay, WA221
Priority Written Questions, WA273
Religious Education, WA272
Sewerage Systems, WA315
Teacher Numbers, WA200
Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 303
Teacher Training Places, WA203

Robinson, Mr P

Review of Public Administration, 10

Robinson, Mr P (as Minister of Finance and Personnel)

Absenteeism, 37, 38
Acute Hospitals, WA72
Agricultural Clauses, WA69
Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, WA130
Building Regulations, WA220
Capital Investment Plans, WA57
Capital Realisation Programme, WA70
Childcare Places for Civil Servants, WA133
Civil Service Disability, WA221
Civil Service Employment in South Down, WA135
Civil Service Vacancies, WA53–5
Code for Sustainable Homes, WA55, WA69–70
Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act, WA134
Consultancy Fees, WA131
Corporate Services, WA72

Data Protection Review, WA70
 Departmental Demographics, WA58–62, WA63–8, WA68–9
 Departmental Underspending, WA219
 Domestic and Commercial Valuations, WA134
 Economic Growth, WA134
 Efficiency Savings, WA71
 Energy Initiatives, WA134–5
 Energy Performance Certificates, WA302
 Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death, WA218–19
 Fuel Smuggling, WA220
 Government Contracts, WA71
 Government Departments, WA220–1
 Government Procurement, WA72
 Land and Property Services, 34, 34–5, 35
 Land Registry, WA221
 Maze Stadium, WA303
 Ministerial Drivers, WA132
 National Joint Council Pay Award, WA219
 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, WA56–7
 Neonatal Death, WA57–8
 Newspaper Expenditure, WA55
 NJC Pay Increase, WA58
 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, WA302
 Official Visits, WA69
 Peace III Funding, WA71–2
 Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 36, 37, 246–9, 249, 249–50, 250, 250–1, 251, 251–2, 252, 252–3
 Performance-Related Pay, WA221
 Pleural Plaques Legislation, 35
 Press Office Staff, WA134
 Public Appointments, WA132
 Public-Sector Jobs, WA303–4
 Public Spending, WA303
 Rates Cap, WA219
 Rates Collection Agency, WA132, WA133, WA219
 IT Systems, WA133
 Rates Income, WA134
 Rates Payment, WA72
 Rates Relief, WA131
 Rates Revenue, WA57, WA131–2
 Rates Valuations Staff, WA132, WA133
 Resource Underspend, WA303
 Senior Civil Servants, WA221, WA302–3
 Sick Leave, WA220
 Social Segregation: Savings, 36
 Stormont Estate, WA71
 Surplus Land for Disposal, 38
 Sustainable Development Action Plan, WA57
 Townland Names, WA220
 Unoccupied Commercial Properties, WA132
 Varney I, WA73
 Varney Report, WA70
 Varney Review, 59–61
 Vioxx, WA135, WA221
 Zero-Carbon Rating, WA70

Ross, Mr A

Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 182, 185, 187
 British-Irish Council Demography Sectoral Meeting, 242
 British Olympics Association, WA189
 Class Sizes, WA195
 Coach Tourism, WA294
 Combating Underage Drinking, 85–6
 Early Retirement, WA194
 Economic Inactivity, WA291
 Falling Pupil Numbers, WA120
 Further Education Provision for Young People with Disabilities, 152–3
 Graduated Driver Licensing Scheme, WA127
 Graduated Driving Licensing, 366–7, 368, 374, 375
 Housing Executive Properties, WA156
 Irish Hockey Union, WA189
 Larne Draft Area Plan, WA128
 Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 283
 Second Stage, 342–3
 Meetings with MLAs, WA91
 Review of Public Administration, 9
 Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 303
 Temporary Teachers, WA118
 Tourist Signage, WA322

Ruane, Ms C (as Minister of Education)

Academic Entrance Criteria, WA280
 Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 305, 306, 307
 Alcohol Abuse, WA197
 Alcohol Consumption, WA119, WA120
 Allegations against Teachers, WA271
 Ancillary Staff, WA39
 Area Planning Groups, WA278
 Asbestos in Schools, WA98–116
 Assembly Questions, WA16, WA121, WA270
 Autism: Post-Primary Children, WA278
 Autistic Spectrum Disorder, WA11
 Autistic Spectrum Disorders, WA195
 Ballywalter Primary School, WA271
 Bamford Review, WA13–14
 Bangor Grammar School, WA271
 Blackwater Integrated College, WA16
 Bloomfield Primary School, WA197–8
 Braidside Integrated Primary School, WA15
 Budget Overspend, WA25
 Breezemount School, WA197
 Bunscoil an Traonaigh, WA12
 Bunscoil Bhaile an Chaistil, WA196–7
 C2K Infrastructure, WA11
 Children's Fund, WA96–7
 Christian Ethos in Schools, WA193
 Clandeboye Primary School, WA198
 Class Sizes, WA195
 Classroom Assistants, WA272

Commissioners' Expenses, WA195–6
 Conlig Primary School, WA40
 Consultancy Firms, WA32–34
 Constituency Visits, WA38
 Controlled Sector: Christian Ethos, WA116
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, WA41–2
 Cullycapple Primary School, WA12–13
 Demographic Decline, WA277–8
 Dickson Plan, WA277
 Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, 198–99, 199
 Drugs Education Programme, WA35
 Early Retirement, WA194–5
 East/West Co-operation, WA18
 Economic Appraisal, WA40
 Education and Skills Authority, WA11–12, WA42
 Education Decisions, WA40
 Education Task Force, WA41
 Educational Psychologist, WA117–18
 Educational Psychologists, WA193–4, WA270–1
 Employer Liability Cover, WA201
 Extra Curricular Activities, WA279
 Falling Pupil Numbers, WA120
 Foreign Languages, WA36
 Former Military Sites, 235–6, 237
 Gaelscoil an Chaistil's LMS Budget, WA93
 GCSE and A-Level Grades, WA198
 Groomsport Primary School, WA40
 ICAN Speech and Language Facility, WA199
 Integrated Schools, WA11, WA275
 Irish-Medium School in Dungannon, WA116–17
 Irish-Medium Schools, WA119, WA197
 Irish Translation, WA25
 Kilcooley Primary School, WA198
 Killard Special School, WA273
 Language Needs, WA15, WA16–17
 Members' Expenses, WA119
 Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, WA17, WA37, WA38–9, WA39, WA97, WA116, WA118, WA271
 Mid-Term Breaks, WA34
 Milburn School, WA197
 Mobile Classrooms, WA15
 Modern Languages, WA276
 Movilla High School, WA16
 Musical Traditions in Ireland, WA117
 National Pay Agreements, WA199
 Newbuild Schools, WA279
 Newtownbreda Primary School, WA273
 NJC Pay Increase, WA193
 Non-Teaching Staff, WA198
 North/South Educational Projects, WA279–80
 Numeracy and Literacy Strategy, WA277
 Pay Award, WA270

Pending Policy Reviews, WA11
 Post-Primary Education Policy, WA95
 Post-Primary Provision, WA12, WA34, WA39
 Post-Primary Transfer, WA95
 Pre-School Provision, WA17
 Press Office, WA199
 Primary Schools, WA34
 Primary School Principals, WA274
 Primary School Teachers, WA274–5
 Priority Written Questions, WA273
 Public Appointments, WA37
 Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA93–4
 Pupil Behaviour Management, WA280
 Pupil Numbers, WA120–1, WA199–200
 Religious Education, WA272
 Representative Central Group, WA37
 Review of Public Administration, WA40–1
 School Closure, WA272–3
 School Holidays, WA34–5
 School Modernisation Programme, WA35
 Schools' Estate, WA13
 Schools' Infrastructure Programme, WA12
 Sex Education, WA38
 Single Education Authority, WA276
 South Eastern Education and Library Board, WA192, WA193, WA196, WA273–4
 Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review, WA278
 Special Schools: Transformation, 304, 305
 Staff Sick Leave, WA36
 Statemented Children, WA275
 Sustainable Schools Policy, WA98
 Teacher-Pupil Ratios in Primary Schools, 302–3, 303, 303–4
 Teacher-Training Provision, 307
 Teacher Numbers, WA200–1
 Teacher Vacancies, WA38
 Teaching and Learning Resources, WA196
 Teaching Vacancies, WA200
 Temporary Classroom Accommodation, WA13
 Temporary Teachers, WA118
 Textbook Service for Blind and Partially Sighted Schoolchildren, WA95
 Tor Bank Special Needs School, WA16
 Transferor's Representative Council, WA37–8
 Transport Budget, WA278–9
 Ulster-Scots Teaching, WA120
 Underperforming Schools, WA194
 Vice-Head Teachers, WA18–24, WA25–32
 Youth Service Budget, WA13
 Youth Service Budget, WA94–5
 Youth Workers, WA96

Savage, Mr G

Assembly Questions, WA90, WA121
 Childminder Registration, WA136, WA137
 Co-ownership Housing Scheme, WA156

Developing Dog Racing, 233
Disciplinary Procedures, WA258, WA269, WA292
Forkhill Military Site, 119–20
Locally Produced Food, 206–7
Natural Gas, WA296
Northern Ireland Water, WA235
Parking Tickets, WA230
Pay and Display Tickets, WA237
Post Office Closures, 323–4
Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance
Initiatives, WA93

Shannon, Mr J

Absenteeism, 37
Affordable Social Housing, WA82
Agenda for Change, WA308
Agricultural Clauses, WA69
Ards and Down Area Plan, WA298
Armagh Observatory, WA268
Assisting the Fishing Industry, 226–7, 227
Bamford Review, WA13
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights
Commission, 186, 187
Bulk Buying Fuel, WA176
Cancelled Clinics, 258
Combating Underage Drinking, 86–7
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Accelerated Passage, 39–40
Second Stage, 70
Construction Industry Jobs, 330–1
Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles)
Regulations 2005, 222
Disability Living Allowance, WA243
Dog Fish Quotas, WA174
Environmental Improvement, 145
Fishing Fleet, WA175
Fishing Industry, WA179
Fishing Industry: Fleets, WA179
Flooding Problems, WA321
Football Grounds, WA269
Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 153–4, 155, 160
Graduated Driving Licensing, 373–4, 374
Health and Safety Executive, WA295
Herceptin Treatment, WA74
Housing Association Applications, WA157
Housing Executive, WA157, WA243, WA245
Incapacity Benefit, WA243
International Development, 98
Killard Special School, WA273
Land Registry, WA221
Library Spending, WA10, WA190
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Second Stage, 353
Locally Produced Food, 207, 207–8
Mary's Style at Shrigley, WA297
Mid-Term Breaks, WA34
Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young

People, WA2
Movilla High School, WA16
National Stadium, WA166
Otter Relocation, WA218
Planning Officers, WA302
Planning Policy Statement 14, WA87
Post Office Closures, 318
Potholes, WA153
Poverty Reduction, WA166
Public Transport: Student Use, 138
Quangos, WA4
Quango Reduction, WA87
Rat Population, WA126
Replanted Woodland, WA261
Rowreagh Road, Kircubbin, WA231
Schengen Agreement, 385–6
School Holidays, WA34
Shooting Sports, WA267
Social Security Agency, WA80
Tackling Racism, 28
Total Cost Indicator, WA158
Tullymally Road, WA82
Victims' Commission, WA87
Victims' Commissioners, WA166
Vioxx, WA221
Waste Management Targets, 33
Water Mains Work, WA241
Woodland Planting, WA264

Simpson, Mr D

Alcohol Consumption, WA7
Apprenticeship Courses, WA285
Combating Underage Drinking, 86, 87
Dickson Plan, WA276
District Council Funding, WA125, WA205
Economic Appraisal, WA40
Education Decisions, WA40
Foreign Direct Investment, WA122, WA122–3
Legahory Travellers' Site, WA162
Lough Neagh Tourism, WA204, WA205
Loyal Orders, WA266
NJC Pay Increase, WA58, WA193
Olympic Elite Programme Projects, WA189
Planning Appeals, WA168
Supporting Rural Development, 30
Travellers' Sites, WA80
Travelling Community, WA246
Varney Review, 56

Speaker (Mr W Hay)

Assembly Business, 197, 281, 365
Budget Bill
Royal Assent, 1
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
First Stage, 15
Accelerated Passage, 18
Consideration Stage, 161
Construction Industry Jobs, 328

Forkhill Military Site, 113
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 First Stage, 281
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 174
Public Health (Amendment) Bill
 Further Consideration Stage, 113
Regional Chamber of the Congress of Regional and
 Local Authorities of Europe, 199
Speaker's Business, 341
Taxis Bill
 Royal Assent, 341

Spratt, Mr J

Absenteeism, 37
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 43–4, 44
Dentistry Graduates, WA283
Dentistry Students, WA283
Foreign Languages, WA36
Further Education Provision for Young People with
 Disabilities, 149–50
Malone Conservation Area, WA301
Parking Schemes, WA323
Road Tax, WA301
Translink: Complaints, WA322
Translink: Punctuality, WA322
Village Area of South Belfast, WA242

Storey, Mr M

Adults in Further Education, 308, 309
Approved Qualifications, WA122
Area Planning Groups, WA278
Braidside Integrated Primary School, WA15
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
 Second Stage, 67
Community Pharmacy Contracts, WA225
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment, WA41
Disability Discrimination, WA150
Disability Discrimination Act, WA240
District Council Lending, WA214
Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability
 (2005 Order) (Amendment) (General
 Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises
 and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland)
 2008, 199
Education and Skills Authority, WA11, WA42
Education Task Force, WA41
European Union Goods and Services Directive, WA2
Executive Subcommittees, 26
Fire Appliances, WA139
GCSE and A-Level Grades, WA198
Health and Social Care Trusts, WA222
Land and Property Services, 35
Legal Advice to the First Minister, WA169
Mobile Classrooms, WA15
National Joint Council Pay Award, WA219
National Pay Agreements, WA199

Non-Teaching Staff, WA198
Northern Area Plan, WA214
Northern Corridor Railway Development, 166–7,
 169, 170
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 249
Post-Primary Provision, WA12
Post-Primary Transfer, WA95
Prescribed List of Approved Qualifications, WA121
Projects in Ballykeel, Ballymena, WA161
Reallocation of Finance Staff, 133–4, 134
Review of Public Administration, 13, WA40, WA52
Sewers Provision, WA237–8
Staff Reductions, WA201
Steps to Work, WA121
Ulster-Scots Teaching, WA120
Upgrade Work, WA323

**Storey, Mr M (as Deputy Chairperson of the
Committee for Finance and Personnel)**

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA
 11/07), CS17, CS18, CS19, CS20, CS21, CS22,
 CS23, CS24, CS25, CS26, CS27, CS28

Weir, Mr P

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, WA210
Bill of Rights and Northern Ireland Human Rights
 Commission, 179, 182, 189–90, 190, 191
Budget Overspend, WA25
Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA
 11/07), CS13, CS19
Coast Protection, WA49
Cootehill Road in Crawfordsburn, WA320
Climate Change Committee, WA128
Dental Services, WA137, WA138
Departmental Funding, WA268, WA309, WA310
Departmental Land in North Down, WA328
Drug Misuse, WA310
Drugs Awareness Projects, WA307
Energy Performance Certificates, WA302
Graduated Driving Licensing, 376, 378–9, 379
House Numbers, WA245
Housing Associations, WA325
Housing Executive, WA325
Housing Executive Waiting Lists, WA326
Housing Potential, WA211, WA212, WA213
Incapacity Benefit, WA327
Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, WA282
International Development, 103
Jobseeker's Allowance, WA327
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
 Accelerated Passage, 287, 289, 289–90, 290,
 290–1, 293, 294, 294–5
 Second Stage, 344, 349, 352–3, 353, 353–4, 354,
 357, 363
Medical Secretaries, WA137
New Homes, WA324
Parliament Buildings Events, WA328
Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit, 251

Postgraduate Courses, WA282
Postgraduate Policy and Funding, WA282
Press Office, WA92, WA160, WA179, WA199,
WA202, WA206, WA218, WA227, WA239
Press Office Staff, WA134
Public Appointments, WA5, WA37, WA132
Review of Public Administration, 7
Roller Hockey, WA92
Underage Drinking, WA304–5
Urban Regeneration, WA246
Varney Review, 54–5, 55, 58

Single Farm Payments, WA180
Special Schools: Transformation, 304, 305
University Courses, WA202
Youth Service Budget, WA94

Wells, Mr J

Abattoir in Downpatrick, WA264
International Development, 93, 103, 103–4
Tree Removal, WA300

Wilson, Mr B

Building Regulations, WA220
Code for Sustainable Homes, WA55, WA69
Genetically Modified Crops, WA218
International Development, 97–8
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Second Stage, 356–7, 357, 357–8
Northern Ireland Electricity, WA288
Post Offices, WA50
Reconnect Grants, WA206, WA288
River Pollution, WA48
Tree Preservation Order, WA215, WA296
Zero-Carbon Rating, WA70

Wilson, Mr S

Admissions Test: Lumen Christi College, 306
Adoption Applications, WA142
Adoption Home Studies, WA141, WA142
Allegations against Teachers, WA271
Children Adoption, WA139
CO2 Emissions, WA47, WA258
Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill
Consideration Stage, 161
Dental Services, WA139, WA140, WA141
Development Control Section, Roads Service, 136,
136–7
Drop-Out Rates, WA202
Further Education Provision for Young People with
Disabilities, 130
Generating Energy, WA259
Housing Contracts, 142, 143
Katesbridge Farm Raid, WA260
Larne Lough Water, WA210
Library Services, WA192
Local Government (Boundaries) Bill
Accelerated Passage, 285–6, 286, 287, 287–8,
291, 293, 295
Second Stage, 348, 349, 349–50, 350, 351,
351–2, 353, 357, 359, 363
Numeracy and Literacy Strategy, WA277
Pending Policy Reviews, WA11

PART III (STRANGERS' INDEX)

Allison, Mr D (Friends of the Earth)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS2–3, CS4, CS5, CS6

Birt, Mr J (Association of Building Engineers)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS44, CS45, CS46, CS47, CS48, CS48–9, CS49

Dumigan, Mr J (Building Control Northern Ireland)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS17, CS18, CS19, CS19–20, CS20, CS21, CS21–2, CS22, CS23, CS23–4, CS24, CS25, CS26, CS26–7, CS27

Flynn, Mr P (Sustainable Energy Association)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS10, CS11, CS12, CS12–13, CS13–14

Gillespie, Mr B (Association of Building Engineers)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS43, CS44, CS44–5, CS45, CS46, CS46–7, CS47, CS47–8, CS48, CS49

Hardy, Mr J (Sustainable Energy Association)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS9, CS9–10, CS10, CS11, CS12, CS13

Humphreys, Dr I (Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS1–2, CS4, CS4–5, CS5, CS6

McArdle, Mr G (Sustainable Energy Association)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS9, CS10, CS11, CS11–12, CS12, CS13, CS14

McGivern, Mr R (Department for Social Development)

Charities Bill (NIA9/07), CS16

McGlade, Mr J (Institution of Structural Engineers)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS43, CS49

McNulty, Ms E (Trócaire)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS1, CS4, CS5

Martin, Mr T (Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS35–7, CS37, CS37–8, CS38, CS38–9, CS39, CS39–40, CS40

Murray, Mr S (Department for Social Development)

Charities Bill (NIA9/07), CS15, CS16, CS29, CS30, CS30–1, CS31, CS32, CS33

Reid, Mr D (Building Control Northern Ireland)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS18–19, CS20, CS21, CS23, CS24, CS25, CS26

Rogan, Mr D (Building Control Northern Ireland)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS17, CS19, CS20, CS20–1, CS21, CS22, CS23, CS24, CS25, CS26, CS27

Scott, Mr B (Oxfam Ireland)

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07), CS2, CS3–4, CS5–6

