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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I would be grateful if those Members who wish to raise points of order would refrain from doing so until I have made a number of announcements. I am not inviting points of order, I am simply asking Members not to raise any until I have made my announcements.

I welcome Members back after the summer recess. I am sure that you are aware of the changes that have been made to the Chamber since our most recent sitting. There may be some teething problems, and I ask Members to channel any concerns through their party Whip rather than by raising points of order. We will see whether we can resolve any problems that way. It is hoped that any teething problems will be short-lived.

A further change that occurred during the recess was the appointment of the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General, Mr Trevor Reaney. He is at the Table today, and I am sure that all Members will wish to join me in welcoming him and in wishing him every success in his new role.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Mesothelioma, etc., Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Mesothelioma, etc., Bill has received Royal Assent. The Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 2 July 2008.

Child Maintenance Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Child Maintenance Bill has received Royal Assent. The Child Maintenance Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 2 July 2008.

Budget (No.2) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Budget (No. 2) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 2 July 2008.

Charities Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Charities Bill has received Royal Assent. The Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 9 September 2008.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will visit Parliament Buildings tomorrow? If that is the case, will you confirm that a search of the Building will take place, in accordance with security arrangements? Will you confirm also that no attempt should be made by any Member to impede that search, and if such an attempt is made — and I ask the question in those terms: if such an attempt is made — will you investigate fully any attempt to impede the police in performing their duty to search the Building? Will you confirm that all offices in the Building — especially those on the third floor — will be unlocked and searched properly before the Prime Minister's visit tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure him that all the issues relating to the implications of tomorrow's visit are being dealt with by the Assembly Commission and the Business Committee. I confirm also that the Assembly Commission will meet at approximately 1.00 pm today to consider such issues, including those that the Member raised.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, Standing Order 11 includes a regulation that allows Members to recall the Assembly. Will you confirm that, over the summer months, you did not receive any official communication on behalf of any Members — let alone 30 Members — calling for the Assembly to be recalled for emergency purposes as the result of an alleged crisis? If that is the case, will you confirm also that you have not received a pro forma letter circulated by the SDLP, calling upon you to recall the Assembly? Furthermore, will you urge Members to refrain from using the Speaker's Office for political gimmickry?

Mr Speaker: First of all, I confirm that I received no such correspondence — *[Interruption.]*

Order, order. I confirm absolutely, to all sides of the House, that I received no correspondence of that nature, nor any other notice issued under Standing Order 11, in relation to the recall of the Assembly during the summer recess.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not protocol, and is it not proper and right, that you are the first person who should be approached if the House is going to be recalled? You confirmed to Ian Paisley Jnr just now that you received no such request, yet some Members have been asked to sign documents that have been floated around.

Mr Speaker: What parties do in relation to the recall of the Assembly is their own business, but I certainly take note of your point.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, I welcome you back to the House and to the Chair.

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your opening statement, you referred to changes that have been made to the Chamber. Will you confirm that, to the largest extent possible, firms from Northern Ireland were employed in the provision of all the new facilities and new additions to the Chamber, so that, to the best of its ability, the Assembly supported firms from Northern Ireland and our local industry?

Mr Speaker: I do not have the details here but I am happy to either come back to the Member in writing or to provide that information to the House. My understanding is that all the firms that were employed in the refurbishment of the Chamber were local, but I stand to be corrected.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Diseases of Animals Bill

Second Stage

Mr Speaker: Order, we now come to the Second Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill. I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Sorry Members, we now come to the Second Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill. I call the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Michelle Gildernew.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome Members back to the Chamber this afternoon.

I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill [NIA 22/07] be agreed.

Over the past year, we have witnessed an increasing threat from animal diseases. The problems in Britain since last summer, due to foot-and-mouth disease, avian influenza and, more recently, bluetongue have highlighted the value of the fortress-Ireland approach, which — in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South — I have adopted. Thankfully, working in close co-operation with colleagues in Britain, the South and in Brussels has enabled us to deliver effective protection against the spread of those diseases to the North.

The Department continues to bear down on animal diseases that impose significant and ongoing costs to both Government and industry — specifically bovine TB and brucellosis. We have had some success in reducing disease levels, but more must be done. In common with other Administrations, we strive to ensure that the strategies and approaches used to combat diseases are the most effective.

However, despite much success, we must not become complacent, and we can do a great deal more. The consequences of any disease outbreak for our agrifood industry and the general economy are all too apparent. That is why I have made animal health a key priority.

The current legislation on disease control dates back to 1981. Although it has served its purpose reasonably well, some serious deficiencies remain. For example, there are no powers in our current domestic legislation to enable the implementation of EU decisions on matters such as emergency vaccinations or preventative slaughter. Furthermore, there are insufficient powers to deal with disease outbreaks and to regulate fully the import and export of animals and products. Moreover, there is a lack of protection for law-abiding farmers against the illegal or inappropriate actions of a minority

who would jeopardise the reputation of the agriculture industry for short-term gain. Clearly, we require legislation that will provide a framework to deal with those issues. We require legislation to go further and to enable the introduction of policies that reflect the latest developments in research and technology in the tracing and combating of disease. Those are the principles behind the Bill.

Before I comment on the generalities of the Bill, I would like to thank those who responded to the consultation exercise carried out by my Department earlier this year. Particularly, I pay tribute to the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, who, on three occasions, invited my officials to make presentations on the Bill. I thank them as well for their helpful comments.

Although I recognise that not everyone is happy with all the provisions of the Bill, I am glad to say that there is broad industry support for the establishment of a more effective framework to deal with animal diseases. I will address those concerns later.

The Bill contains 24 clauses and three schedules. Those provisions supplement powers already available under the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. I do not intend to comment on each clause in the Bill, as many of them concern relatively minor, tidying-up changes to the 1981 Order. However, I would like to explain the thinking behind the main provisions.

Clauses 1, 2 and 14 provide my Department with new powers to carry out vaccination programmes and to slaughter animals to prevent the spread of disease. Under EU rules, emergency vaccination and preventative slaughter have become key tools in dealing with serious disease outbreaks. I must ensure that we have the necessary powers to transpose any EU requirements on vaccination and slaughter into our domestic law.

I mentioned earlier that powers are required to enable the introduction of policies reflecting the latest developments in research and technology in tracing and combating disease. Clause 3 contains contingency powers to enable action, should any transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) disease in livestock become a human health risk. Examples of TSE diseases would be bovine spongiform encephalopathy — that is BSE in cattle, or scrapie in sheep. At present, there is no evidence of any new risk. However, the contingency powers in clause 3 will enable swift and decisive action to be taken to protect human and animal health, should that be necessary in the future.

Another emerging area is the use of new technologies such as DNA sampling and retinal imaging or eye scanning. Those technologies would determine and record — for all time — the unique identity of an animal.

12.15 pm

Clause 4 will enable the use of those procedures to confirm the identity of an animal and thus enhance and strengthen the traceability of livestock. For example, it will enable a TB or brucellosis reactor to be identified by its DNA profile or retinal image, thus ensuring that the correct animal is removed from the farm for slaughter. I am delighted to say that pioneering research from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), involving the retinal imaging of sheep in the glens of Antrim, has won a Home Office award for the most innovative method of crime prevention through a joint PSNI/AFBI pilot project.

Clause 4 will also provide new powers for my inspectors to enter premises for purposes related to the identification, vaccination or slaughter of animals. I am aware that there are particular concerns and sensitivities about how powers of entry are exercised. I assure Members that I have given careful consideration to that aspect of the Bill.

First, the new powers are strictly related to enforcement of disease control matters. If those powers are not made available to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) inspectors, it could seriously hold up the progress of a disease investigation. Although I am satisfied that the powers are the minimum necessary, I have included the following controls that inspectors must observe. Inspections must be undertaken at reasonable times; inspectors must produce evidence of their legal authority and, if requested, state in writing their reasons for entering the premises; inspectors must leave any unoccupied premises effectively secured; and 24 hours' notice must be given for entry to a dwelling house — Members should note that no such notice is required currently. A magistrate's warrant is required for entry without notice, and strict conditions must be met to satisfy the magistrate. When a warrant is used, strict obligations apply to communication with the occupier and to record-keeping.

Furthermore, following the Ruddock Review of DARD's handling of the alpha-nortestosterone (ANT) issue, I have reviewed the manner in which my Department conducts on-farm searches. I have considered several additional operational and administrative protocols and procedures that will complement and reinforce the statutory safeguards in the Bill. Best practice in other organisations has also been explored for areas that we can draw upon. Those administrative and operational measures are not appropriate for inclusion in the Bill, as they relate to practice and protocol, rather than legislative measures. However, the practices are now included in staff instructions and operational procedures.

Clause 6 will provide powers to introduce a fixed-penalty scheme by means of subordinate legislation. It is fair to say that the proposal for a fixed-penalty scheme has caused some concern and, therefore, it will be helpful to explain the advantages of such an approach. The scheme will apply to certain existing offences under the Diseases of Animals Order 1981; we are not taking powers to create new offences. The scheme will offer recipients the opportunity to elect to take the fixed penalty and thus avoid being subjected to formal enforcement proceedings that may culminate with a court appearance and a criminal conviction. It is, therefore, entirely down to the recipient whether he or she accepts the fixed penalty. People have the choice of going down the fixed-penalty route or the court proceedings route, and the Department will enable that flexibility.

The offences will be specified in draft subordinate legislation, which will be subject to consultation with stakeholders and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, and the Order will be laid before the Assembly. The type of offences covered will be strict liability offences that have the potential to compromise disease-control measures.

Examples of the possible application of fixed penalties would be: in relation to the movement of animals during a disease outbreak; in relation to the movement of unidentified cattle or sheep, with animals not tagged or identified in accordance with current legislation; or where there has been an attempted illegal import.

Members will agree that any breach of disease-control measures causes considerable resentment from law-abiding farmers and the general public, as well as adding to the burden of animal disease on the public purse. I hope that a fixed-penalty scheme will act as a deterrent to anyone who is not complying with animal-health law. I assure Members that fixed-penalty notices will be handed out sparingly, and only when the need arises. As I have said already, there will be an option to decline in favour of the full legal process.

Clause 15 requires farmers to have isolation facilities on their farms. Again, I want to allay fears that that means a state-of-the-art biosecure building. It means, ideally, a small house; however, a pen or segregated part of a field will do.

The requirement is for a specified area where an animal that is suspected of being diseased can be kept in isolation from other animals, pending further investigation. I stress that the isolation of diseased animals is a fundamental tool in the control of any contagious disease, including tuberculosis and brucellosis. It is also good animal husbandry practice and can be used by farmers to protect their farms. In

the biosecurity code, herd-keepers are already advised to have isolation facilities available.

Failure to isolate an animal increases the risk of disease spread. For example, failure to isolate brucellosis reactors may lead to the rapid spread of disease within the herd and present an added risk to those handling the cattle. DARD has no powers to require the isolation of animals and must rely on the voluntary co-operation of herd-keepers. Most keepers are highly responsible and understand the need to isolate animals in particular circumstances. The small minority who fail to co-operate will, in future, risk the prospect of legal proceedings.

I now turn to the important issue of biosecurity. A point often made to me is that there is no recognition or protection for the many law-abiding farmers who maintain high animal-health standards on their farms and who do so much to enhance the reputation of our livestock industry, both at home and further afield. I recognise that, all too often, their efforts are jeopardised by a minority of farmers who adopt practices — either deliberately or through bad management and ignorance — that encourage the spread of disease. For example, poor on-farm biosecurity is a significant factor in the spread of brucellosis and tuberculosis and is undermining our efforts to get on top of those diseases. That is why I have decided to include in the Bill powers to draw up disease-specific biosecurity guidance, which will be binding on all farmers. I will consult on any proposed biosecurity guidance, and stakeholders will have the opportunity to provide input to it.

I am also creating a new offence of deliberate infection of an animal with disease. Apart from having fraud and welfare implications, such action has the potential to cause the spread of disease to adjacent holdings, requiring animals there to be restricted and subjected to tests. Animals moved from those holdings may also have to be traced and tested. That results in significant additional costs for DARD and places innocent farmers in the position of having their herds restricted due to the unscrupulous actions of others. Even a single case of deliberately infecting an animal is completely unacceptable on welfare and disease grounds.

I am particularly concerned by allegations of deliberate infection of animals with brucellosis in order to obtain compensation. If that is happening, it must be stamped out. I am determined to take action where there is sufficient evidence to warrant prosecution. I hope that that will not be necessary and that the fact that we will have robust powers in place will act as a deterrent to anyone who might be considering deliberately infecting an animal.

Finally, I will draw attention to some other provisions in the Bill. Clause 5 makes it an offence to fail to give a name and an address to an inspector. That power will assist inspectors at ports, for example, in combating illegal or uncertified imports that threaten the disease status of the island. Clause 17 will provide powers to regulate the export of animals, providing an additional safeguard against the illegal movement of animals and products. It will also safeguard the reliability of export consignments from the North and protect the competitiveness of our agrifood sector. Clause 19 will further strengthen the controls at our ports by enabling inspectors to examine personal luggage and packages. At present, we rely on passengers agreeing to those searches, which is unsatisfactory.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly because I believe that it will have a positive impact on the reputation of our agrifood industry at home and abroad. It will enable swift and effective action to be taken to deal with a disease outbreak. It will improve animal-health standards generally and it will help us to deal with the small minority of people whose actions undermine everything that is good and positive about our industry. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I welcome the Speaker of the Assembly back to his post. It is always difficult to offer support to the principle of a Bill at its Second Stage when the Committee has not had the same opportunity as the Department to undertake in-depth consultation and consideration of the matter. That opportunity will only present itself at the Committee Stage, the next stage of the Bill's passage. Therefore, I offer the Committee's views, with a request that the Department notes the reservations that I will mention on the Committee's behalf.

Disease in agricultural animals has the potential to cripple a country, particularly when the agriculture industry makes such a significant contribution to the economy, as is the case in Northern Ireland.

We need cast our minds back only a few years to the devastation that foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks caused, or back just over a decade to the onslaught of BSE and its impact on the industry. Many of the markets that were lost as a result of those outbreaks have never been regained, and that has most certainly contributed to a downward trend in Northern Ireland agriculture. That trend is proving extremely difficult to stop and reverse; indeed, it is only now that we are seeing evidence of some reversal.

I want to express our appreciation of the farming community's fortitude in facing the challenges that have been thrust on it and the manner in which it has faced them. Moreover, we admire its willingness to

work with the Department and the rest of Northern Ireland to conquer those difficulties.

No Member can disagree that it is important to ensure that our industry remain protected from disease. We hear — almost daily, it would appear — about the outbreak of new diseases that threaten our livestock and our industry. Bluetongue is a prime example. It was originally associated with tropical conditions but has now found itself able to survive and develop in less humid conditions, arriving in Sweden only a fortnight ago. It is, therefore, imperative that we remain vigilant and are prepared to counter animal diseases in the most effective and efficient manner possible. That places a burden of responsibility on legislators, and I, therefore, accept the need for the Bill.

The Bill seeks to amend the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. As I mentioned earlier, several major outbreaks of disease have occurred since that Order came into effect. It is appropriate that the Department take this opportunity to bring the 1981 Order up to date.

The Bill introduces three principles, the first being the enhancement of existing disease prevention, biosecurity and control measures. The second involves the creation of new offences, such as deliberately causing infection, and provision for enforcement. The third is the provision of biosecurity guidance. It is difficult to see how anyone in the House would oppose those principles, particularly when we see the Department seeking to enhance existing control measures. The Department has no doubt learnt valuable lessons from the BSE crisis, and, in particular, from the outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease. I hope that those lessons are incorporated in the legislation — the Committee will certainly scrutinise the Bill's detail to ensure that they are. The Committee also looks forward to seeing and contributing to the proposed biosecurity guidance.

However, there are concerns about the Bill's principles, and those concerns can be alleviated only through close scrutiny of the Bill in Committee. For example, the Committee has been very worried about the powers of entry afforded to departmental officials, particularly after their handling of the alpha-nortestosterone fiasco. Farmers were subjected to public humiliation, as departmental officials, in many cases supported by members of the police, raided farmyards and family homes, claiming all sorts of wrongdoing, only to discover subsequently that those farmers had done nothing wrong at all. In such cases, public apologies offer little solace to farming families.

A mechanism must be put in place that makes the Department bear the cost when it gets it wrong — in that case, it got it woefully wrong. Although the Committee believes that there will be circumstances in which the burden of proof must rest with the accused,

as in the case of deliberate infection of an animal — an act that I totally condemn, as does my Committee — a balance must be struck. The Department must give that appropriate consideration and come up with an appropriate response.

As Members will know, the Department instigated an inquiry into the ANT fiasco and published the Ruddock Report, which the Committee considered in 2007. The Committee genuinely hopes that the lessons that were learned from that fiasco and the recommendations from the Ruddock Review have found their way into the legislation.

If the recommendations have not found their way into the legislation, I hope that the Department will work with the Committee to ensure that they will be introduced. The Minister stated that the new practices will be included in staff guidance. That is unacceptable — those measures should be included in the legislation. Therefore, I will deal with that issue at Committee Stage.

12.30 pm

One of the Bill's main principles is the enhancement of existing disease prevention and control measures. As I previously stated, the Committee does not object to that principle, but clause 3(1) part II of the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 states:

“Without prejudice to any power conferred on it by any other enactment, the Department may, with the approval of the Department of Finance, expend such sums as the Department thinks fit with the object of eradicating ... diseases”.

It is disappointing that the Department did not take the opportunity to obtain approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel for the eradication programme in respect of TB and brucellosis, which are two common and devastating diseases in the agricultural sector that pose serious threats to public health. Every year, the Department spends in excess of £30 million trying to reduce incidences of those diseases. However, despite claims that the Department's attempts have proved successful, we have not seen the benefits of its methodology.

The Committee and the agriculture industry have long called for the Department to be proactive in dealing with those diseases, and I hope that we can work collectively during Committee Stage to establish how disease-control practices can be enhanced.

Finally, I wish to return briefly to the powers-of-entry principle. The proposed amendment provides for the Department to recover fees and expenses — in other words, costs. The Committee will examine that issue closely to ensure that the recovery of costs is not a departmental attempt to introduce the principle of cost sharing — a principle that the Committee opposes.

As I said at the outset, the Committee has reservations and concerns about the Bill and, hopefully,

I have provided some examples of those worries today. However, it wants the industry to be protected against disease, as it is vital to our industry, to the rural economy and to the Northern Ireland economy.

The Committee also wants farmers who comply with all legislation to be protected from the minority who tarnish our proud farming tradition. The Department must ensure that it protects farmers by exercising in a considered, balanced manner the proposed powers bestowed on it by the Bill. Therefore, the Committee will scrutinise the Bill to ensure that the principles are appropriate and that they do what they are intended to do in an appropriate manner.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development looks forward to receiving the Bill at Committee Stage.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, I hope you are well after the recess. First, I wish to pay tribute to the Minister and the Department for their swift actions when faced with animal diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease and, more recently, for introducing measures to prevent bluetongue from spreading into Ireland.

New strains of animal disease will threaten our country, and we must improve our legislation to combat them. Officials must have powers that are fit for purpose, especially given the consequences of any disease on our agrifood industry. They must not be powerless or slow to react to an outbreak of disease. As the Chairperson of the Committee said, we all remember the devastating effect that the foot-and-mouth epidemic had on the agriculture and tourism industries.

I will now address a few aspects of the Bill. Clause 1 deals with slaughter to prevent spread of disease. At present, powers exist to slaughter animals that are infected, or suspected of being diseased, or have been in contact with diseased animals. The new provisions of the Bill seek to create a buffer zone when a contagious disease is evident. Nobody wants the destruction of healthy animals that have been bred for generations. However, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must have the power to carry out a cull, enabling farmers to contain outbreaks, particularly of fast-spreading diseases, such as foot-and-mouth disease.

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

Clause 4 deals with powers of entry. There is a need to ensure that inspectors can get on to farms quickly during a disease outbreak in order to carry out essential investigations and that powers are available to deal with any stumbling blocks. The current system involves seeking a court injunction, which is a time-consuming process when faced with a disease outbreak. However, we must also respect the human rights of farmers. As the Chairperson of the Committee

said, there was a lot of anger about the way in which the alpha-nortestosterone issue was handled. I hope that lessons have been learned and that safeguards are in place so that events such as that will never happen again. I welcome the Minister's announcement that additional operational and administrative protocols will reinforce safeguards in the Bill. An important qualification is that the powers will not extend to a dwelling house unless 24 hours' prior notice of intended entry is given to the occupier. Clause 4 will be scrutinised carefully by the Committee, along with the stakeholders.

Clause 6 concerns fixed penalties for certain offences. The Committee will have to do a lot of work on this clause — it is not surprising that stakeholders are not jumping for joy about it. The Minister said that she will specify offences that will be appropriate for fixed penalties. The Committee will revisit that issue, and I will not get bogged down in the detail of that now. I concur with the Minister that any breaches in disease-control measures are to be deplored, and cause considerable annoyance in the farming community and the rural community in general. It must be remembered that such breaches cost the community a great deal of money that could be directed towards rural development and initiatives to improve farming communities. Fixed penalties may reduce bureaucracy, but only as long as they are effective and not being dished out like confetti.

There is a fear that farming communities will be hounded by over-zealous officials in pursuit of the payment of fixed penalties for minor offences. I hope that many of those fears will be addressed during the Committee Stage of the Bill. Everyone wants to achieve compliance, and it is in everyone's interests that that can be achieved without fixed penalties or court cases. However, we must not allow a minority of rogue farmers to jeopardise the well-being of our proud agriculture industry. Law-abiding farmers have nothing to fear from such penalties. I look forward to consulting with the stakeholders on those matters.

Clause 11 deals with deliberate infection of animals, which is a very sensitive subject. There is no evidence to imply that deliberate infection of animals has taken place, but there have been allegations from an array of different sources that infection, primarily brucellosis, is being intentionally introduced into herds in order to cause enforced slaughter of the herd and payment of considerable compensation. As the Minister said, LeasCheann Comhairle, that results in major extra costs, and, more disturbingly, blameless farmers are put in the position of having their herds restricted because of the unprincipled actions of others. The Department requires the compulsory legal powers to take disciplinary action, which will put off possible offenders and look after responsible farmers.

I conclude by making it clear again that the honest, hard-working farmers have nothing to fear from the Diseases of Animals Bill. It is the people who are taking shortcuts and cutting corners who will feel the pressure. Those people are jeopardising the whole industry through poor biosecurity, the deliberate infection of animals and other deceitful practices. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, departmental officials and the Minister must co-operate with one another when considering the Bill. We must not play political football with the issue; it is too important to the rural community to get wrong.

There is no point in the Committee being angry with officials when it comes to the issues of brucellosis or TB. It is important that we obtain the necessary powers and legislation to help eradicate those diseases. Our officials cannot operate with one arm tied behind their backs; they need the tools for the job. I call on all Members to support the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Elliott: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I give broad support to the principles of the Diseases of Animals Bill. I hope that some of the areas that it covers will help to improve the existing legislation and prevent disease. The key issue is the prevention of disease, followed by the matter of dealing with those who are trying to manipulate the system.

However, we need to adopt a cautionary approach to some of the areas covered in the Bill, and I look forward to dealing with those at Committee Stage and further afield. What is required is a tightening of the legislation, to make it much more difficult for the very small numbers of those in the agriculture industry whom I call professional criminals. Some of them can still operate at will, while the vast majority of those in the industry, who are serving the industry well and who do everything appropriate, often find that they are burdened by legislation. That is the difficulty.

I appreciate Mr Clarke's remark that honest, hard-working farmers have nothing to fear from the legislation. I am sure that the four people whose properties were raided in the alpha-nortestosterone incident — who are hard-working, honest, decent farmers — also thought that they had nothing to fear from legislation. Unfortunately they were caught in a situation and treated despicably. I do not want to see that happen again. I hope that lessons have been learned, and that those will be reflected in the Bill.

The new powers of entry provided for in the proposals give me cause for concern, and at the Committee Stage I will be asking that those provisions be examined. On the issue of deliberate infection, I totally support the idea that farmers who deliberately infect an animal or herd must be made amenable for it.

I have huge concerns about the fixed-penalty process, as it could be misused by the Department. I

am sure that Members are all aware of many cases in which farmers have been brought to court by the Department and subsequently found not guilty of the offence with which they were charged. The fixed-penalty process may provide an easy solution for the Department. Farmers may be faced with the choice of paying a fixed penalty or going to court, and some of those farmers, who may be innocent, will be forced to choose between paying what may be a meagre fixed penalty and taking the risk of going to court, and possibly facing a great financial burden.

Those are just some of the areas that I have concerns about, and we will labour those points much more deeply at the Committee Stage, and further in the Chamber. I suppose that, as a farmer, I should have declared an interest, just in case I myself end up subject to the legislation, but I look forward to discussing it further.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her presentation this morning. I accept that there is a need for a Bill, but at the same time it is to be regretted that there is such a need, because of the unscrupulous people that are out there. The Chairperson of the Committee adequately explained that quite a lot of the Bill will be challenged. We in the Committee will be fine-combing it to see how it can be improved. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee also outlined his concerns.

I have just one small point to make on the issue of fixed-penalty notices, on which Tom Elliott has already commented. I am concerned at the wording:

"Where an inspector finds a person on any occasion and has reason to believe that on that occasion he is committing or has committed a fixed penalty offence, the inspector may give that person a fixed penalty notice in respect of that offence."

Members have heard about the debacle during the alpha-nortestosterone situation. I want to bring people's minds back to that occasion; indeed, it is fresh in the minds of people in Markethill, Belleek, Crossmaglen and Annaclone — the different areas where farms were raided. One inspector took great pride in telling farmers that they had been caught red-handed and were guilty. That was his joy; it made his morning to say that to farmers, and they took deep offence at it. If that man had been in a position to issue a fixed-penalty notice he would have done so. For that reason, I will propose at the Committee that the legislation should prescribe that fixed-penalty notices must be issued jointly by at least two inspectors. Otherwise, penalties will depend on the whim of one inspector, who may not like certain farmers or may have particular grievances — the issue is too serious for that. The issuing of a fixed penalty by two inspectors provides an assurance to the industry that the appropriate action has been taken.

The Members who spoke have covered the other issues that the Bill raises, so there is no point in me

repeating them. One inspector issuing a fixed-penalty notice is unacceptable.

12.45 pm

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to debate the Diseases of Animals Bill. To obtain a sustainable livestock industry in Northern Ireland, it is vital that we ensure the highest possible levels of animal health and, in turn, offer consumers healthy and wholesome food.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, livestock farmers in Northern Ireland have faced numerous challenges, many of which are due to the impact of disease in the industry. BSE crippled our beef industry and left many farmers facing economic ruin. Foot-and-mouth disease has also had a serious impact on the farming industry, and bluetongue and avian flu continue to pose a threat. Livestock farmers are constantly battling a host of animal diseases, including bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis, which we have failed to eradicate from cattle herds in Northern Ireland. All those diseases have the potential to seriously impact on the farming community and on the provision of quality food to consumers.

I have concerns about the powers of entry as listed in clause 4 — many farmers have experienced the heavy hand of DARD. Although it may be, on occasion, vital to animal welfare that DARD inspectors gain immediate admission to farms, there is also a need for DARD inspectors and officials to work positively with the farming community. Farmers are equally committed to the eradication of the disease as it impacts on the welfare of their animals and, therefore, their incomes.

Clause 15 deals with regulations on the movement of animals. I urge DARD to speed up the process of the removal of diseased animals, especially cattle that have been diagnosed as having tuberculosis and brucellosis. Leaving such cattle on farms increases the chance that the disease will spread. It is vital that our livestock industry is protected from disease and the spread of disease.

Although I have concerns about the powers of entry, the Bill will help to increase biosecurity and improve animal welfare.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. The Assembly and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development are always mindful of anything that poses a threat to our agriculture industry, and there is nothing more threatening to the industry than animal disease. Therefore, any fair measures, such as those contained in the Bill, are welcome. When dealing with issues of animal disease, we must always be mindful of how they may affect human health, directly or via the food chain. I look forward to discussing the detail of the Bill as it moves through its Committee Stage.

Mr Poots: I declare an interest, which is probably diminishing.

Often the implementation of a Bill, rather than the Bill itself, can be the problem. The Assembly wants the implementation of the Bill to be proportionate and measured. I refer to the implementation of measures that were introduced to deal with the outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy. I said that to show off.

Mr Hamilton: Is that Irish?

Mr Poots: It is very much English. The measures that were introduced to deal with BSE were neither proportionate nor measured when compared with those for other animal diseases. Twelve years after its introduction, the over-30-months scheme, which treats animals differently when they are aged 30 months — even one day over 30 months — is still in place. There is no scientific reason for it; therefore I want the Minister to deal with the idea that an animal aged 30 months and one day is somehow more liable to have BSE. All the scientific evidence that has been gathered during the past several years demonstrates that many young cattle go into the food chain without there being any BSE in the system. Meat plants and supermarkets should not be able to introduce wholly unnecessary cuts in the value of such animals.

It would also be proportionate and measured to have badger culls in areas where there is a significant outbreak of disease. Not only would it be good for the bovine population but also for the badger population, because it would eradicate the spread of disease among badgers as well as among cattle. The Minister must take the lead on that issue and stop running away from it.

Those who introduce disease to animals deliberately must not be allowed to keep animals — full stop; such people must be banned from keeping animals, just as people who mistreat animals are banned from keeping them. People who have mistreated animals are taken to court again and again, yet it is known that such people continue to keep animals. That must be dealt with decisively.

The creation of an animal-health industry in the Department, whereby new work is found for civil servants when a disease has been brought under control, is not needed. If there is no work to be done, new jobs should not be created for civil servants. During the 1990s, when the authorities managed to get on top of brucellosis, they dropped the ball by allowing the introduction of animals from the Irish Republic where brucellosis had not been dealt with adequately. Testing for maedi-visna in sheep was introduced. Most Members have probably never heard of maedi-visna; however, apparently, at one stage, there was a risk of the disease in Northern Ireland. A testing regime for maedi-visna in the sheep population was introduced, but never came to anything. When the spread of

brucellosis took off again, maedi-visna was dropped like a hot potato. It was never a threat, and regular tests for it should not have been conducted.

I have much sympathy with previous Members' comments on fixed penalties; for example, a fixed penalty on duplicate fields is in place. I trust that the outcome of the court hearing in the test case that the Ulster Farmers' Union has taken on behalf of two individuals, and Mr Justice Weatherup's ruling on the issue, will be that the fixed penalty that has been imposed on many farmers throughout the Province will be done away with and that those farmers will receive the payments that are due to them. Again, the Assembly seeks the Minister's leadership on the issue. Farmers must not continue to be punished needlessly because of the duplicate fields issue.

Finally, I ask the Minister to join me in congratulating her officials and the PSNI who have received the award for the good work to which she referred.

Mr Savage: I also declare an interest.

In principle, I support the Diseases of Animals Bill. Its primary purpose is to update and strengthen the powers of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that are contained in the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. Public consultation on the Bill was held between May and June 2004, and that consultation highlighted broad support in the industry for measures to control and prevent the introduction of disease.

The new powers set out in the Bill will enable the Department to deal quickly and effectively with the outbreak of any disease and will reflect current and future developments in research and technology in tracing and combating disease. The Bill also includes powers to identify genetic susceptibility to transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in livestock. Furthermore, the Bill will strengthen DARD's powers to enter farms for the purposes of surveillance, vaccination, serology and slaughter.

However, there must be greater consultation between farmers and the Department when problems arise. Sometimes in such cases, the Department washes its hands of the whole thing — even where it is at fault — and blames the farmer. Greater trust must be built between farmers and the Department.

I support the Bill in principle: however, the devil is in the detail, and I have several reservations about it. I look forward to raising those issues in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I am confident that we can amend the Bill to the satisfaction of farmers and the Department.

Mr Shannon: The Minister's statement is welcome: however, some of the issues referred to in the statement are of concern to those Members who represent rural

constituencies. The need to control animal diseases — blue-ear disease, bluetongue or avian flu, to which Members have referred — is paramount.

The Minister's statement implies that there is a need for co-ordination and co-operation between many bodies, including: port authorities; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; the Veterinary Service; and HM Revenue and Customs on the border. It is important that the Minister assures us that that co-ordination and co-operation will continue and be strengthened. The pig and poultry industries have suffered demise in many constituencies across the Province, particularly my own. The farmers who remain need to be assured that controls at our land and sea borders will continue to ensure that disease is kept out of the Province — our economy and many jobs depend on that. It is essential that the high quality products that our agriculture industry provides daily can continue to be sold at home and overseas.

Will the Minister confirm that controls at our land and sea borders will be strengthened and will ensure that animal disease will not creep into the Province?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the debate: they have all been valuable and informative. I now respond to some of the issues raised. I will be unable to respond to some of them this morning, however, I will read Hansard carefully and, where appropriate, I will write to individual Members.

Many issues received thorough discussion. On taking office last year, I was greatly concerned about the handling of alpha-nortestosterone.

Resentment over those cases arose mainly from searches of dwelling houses. In the Diseases of Animals Bill, powers of entry relate to the authorisation of entry to farmland for the purposes of testing, vaccination, identification and slaughter. Rather than introduce new powers relating to the entry of dwelling houses, the Bill will, in fact, place additional controls on DARD staff. I am saying that to reassure those Members who raised the issue.

1.00 pm

The Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 permits staff to enter any building or place, including dwelling houses, without notice for the purposes of disease control. However, the Order does not distinguish between outhouses, cattle houses or farmers' dwelling houses. The Bill will distinguish between those places. In addition, on the rare occasion that a dwelling house search is required, a warrant will be needed if no notice is given. In any case, certain specified conditions will need to be met. I hope that that provides some reassurance to Members.

The issue of alpha-nortestosterone has already been debated fairly extensively. However, I fully accept that inspectors exercising statutory powers under any legislation must do so under certain conditions and be subject to appropriate controls and limitations. Valuable lessons have been learned from the alpha-nortestosterone issue. The Ruddock Review was very good, and the Department has already put in place practices and controls based on its recommendations. The Department has learned valuable lessons from the alpha-nortestosterone issue and wants to avoid those types of situations happening again.

Specific safeguards have already been included in the Bill to cover the manner in which powers of entry are exercised. Details now included in staff instructions and protocols cover detailed instructions on communication with farmers and the appointment of a search liaison officer. Joan Ruddock recommended that sort of detail as best practice, but it is not appropriate for inclusion in the Bill. Dr McCrea, the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, raised that issue.

Dr McCrea also raised the issue of cost sharing and responsibility. Cost sharing is a separate issue and is independent from the Diseases of Animals Bill. The powers that the Department is seeking were recommended by the departmental solicitor in order to clarify business activities for which fees or charges may apply. The issue will be discussed in detail at Committee Stage. The Department of Finance and Personnel has a policy of full cost recovery for certificates, licences, etc, that are issued by Government Departments.

The Bill does not introduce powers to establish responsibility-sharing bodies or powers to raise any sort of levy to fund animal disease control. I hope that that reassures the Chairman.

The Chairman also raised the issue of tuberculosis and brucellosis. The Bill does not specifically address the eradication of either; however, it will introduce powers to help address issues associated with the diseases, such as combating deliberate infection and introducing biosecurity guidance, which will require farmers to take reasonable steps to protect themselves and, ultimately, their neighbours from infection.

I agree with the Committee that we need to work hard to eradicate those diseases, and my officials are working closely with the industry to develop approaches that are appropriate to our circumstances. I point to the good work carried out this year to set up liaison committees to take advice and guidance from farmers affected by, primarily, brucellosis. The Department wants to listen to the people at the frontline; we want to take advice and to work in partnership with them. The Chairman mentioned partnership, co-operation and working together — and it is that ethos that the

Department has been adopting to achieve the best outcome for the farming community. Of course, the Department will be engaging further with the Committee as it develops its approach.

Many Members raised issues about fixed penalties. Farmers can decide whether to opt for a fixed penalty as a means of avoiding court action. That is entirely their decision. I appreciate that the application of fixed penalties is a new idea as regards animal health and welfare legislation, but it is already a well-established practice for other Departments and enforcement agencies. Fixed penalty notices are equally applicable to animal health and welfare and should be welcomed as being a more straightforward approach than reliance on the courts in all cases.

Willie Clarke queried DARD inspectors' adoption of an over-enthusiastic approach of imposing penalties for minor offences which might previously have been dealt with informally. I assure the House that fixed-penalty notices will be handed out sparingly, and will be used only when the need arises. Clear guidance and training for DARD staff will be provided to ensure that the application of the scheme is accurate, fair and consistent.

The Department's purpose is to achieve compliance, and if it can do that without having to impose a financial penalty, then so much the better for all concerned. Persistent offenders, however, must be aware that they will be liable to receive a fixed-penalty notice.

Tom Elliott spoke about fixed penalties, and the financial burden on farmers. My work in this Department over the past 18 months has shown that I have a great deal of sympathy for, and empathy with, farmers. I want, at all costs and at all times, to avoid placing a financial burden on farmers. I have striven, for everyone's sake, to work in partnership, with a better, co-operative, approach between the farming industry and the Department. The Department does not want to impose additional financial burdens on farmers; rather, it wants to alleviate burdens — financial and otherwise — on our farmers, who are the backbone of our rural community and of our economy.

Among other issues, Mr Poots asked questions about BSE testing. Testing and surveillance for BSE is determined at EU level. I understand that the European Commission is currently revising its BSE surveillance and testing requirements. The Commission is likely to suggest changes to the regime over the coming months. The changes expected at EU level will not be dependent on the implementation of the Diseases of Animals Bill. That will mean less of a burden on our farming community.

Mr Poots mentioned maedi-visna testing, which is always carried out by DARD as the result of a veterinary risk assessment. I do not have the full details of these

tests, but I shall write to the Member with an explanation.

Mr Savage raised the problem of duplicate field claims. Powers to deal with that issue are held by Europe, and the fines imposed on duplicate fields are dealt with under European legislation. I recognise and accept that there is much frustration surrounding that issue. I would like a better system to be applied. I do not feel that the laws that have been laid down are always proportionate. The Department wants to get it right and reduce that burden.

Jim Shannon asked about the departmental controls on animal export and entry. There is a genuine threat of the introduction of animal disease to the island of Ireland, and, since many food items present a risk to public health, there is a risk of illness to members of the general public. Although we can never be 100% certain that no disease will enter, and there will always be an element of risk, we must do all that we can to reduce that level of risk from illegally imported meat and other products. The new enforcement powers will clearly strengthen our hand; however, other measures can help, such as improving publicity announcements to travellers about import rules, and working closely with other agencies to ensure that we get it right.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, the debate has been useful and the Committee will take its time to scrutinise all of the clauses in the Bill. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate on the Diseases of Animals Bill and for the questions and issues that they have raised. I am confident that the powers in the Bill will help to protect and improve our animal-health status through enhanced disease prevention, biosecurity and enforcement measures.

The availability of powers to deal quickly and effectively with a disease outbreak will also minimise the impact on the agrifood industry, and protect our vital export markets. My officials and I look forward to working closely with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development as it begins its detailed scrutiny of the Bill. I have no doubt that that will prove to be very valuable. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill [NIA 22/07] be agreed.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Presumption of Death Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill [NIA 23/07] be agreed.

The Presumption of Death Bill confers a new statutory jurisdiction on the High Court to make declarations in respect of missing persons. Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive procedure for declaring that a missing person may be presumed to be dead. As a consequence of such a declaration, the Registrar General will then be authorised to enter the details of that missing person in a new register of presumed deaths.

The effect in law of the High Court declaration and the entering of details in that new register will be as though the missing person has died and his or her death registered in the usual way under the Births and Deaths Registration Order (Northern Ireland) 1976. The Bill is modelled on the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, which has been operating for 30 years. I hope that that reassures us that we are putting in place a piece of legislation that is workable, sensible and proportionate to the task with which it must meet.

A draft of the Presumption of Death Bill was published in January of this year for public consultation. There was, I have to say, a disappointingly small number of responses to that consultation, although the seven organisations and individuals who provided written responses supported the main proposals in the Bill. In addition to the written consultation, officials met with some of the families of the disappeared and with the Association of British Insurers.

Since my Department embarked on the preparation of a draft Bill for consultation, it has become even clearer that the phenomenon of missing persons, and the legal issues that their disappearance generates, is not unique to this jurisdiction and that the existing legal framework for addressing those needs is often inadequate.

At an international level, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has mandated the committee of experts in family law to draw up proposals for a new legal instrument to address the issues surrounding missing persons. Closer to home, in the Irish Republic the Law Reform Commission of Ireland recently announced an investigation into the legal issues surrounding missing persons.

By and large, the Bill deals with reserved matters, and I have had to obtain the Secretary of State's

consent to its consideration by the Assembly. Given that, some might say that it should be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office to take the Bill through Westminster through the Order in Council process, or even by public Bill. However, I am pleased to say that it was agreed last year that the legislation should be progressed through this Assembly, given that the issues that the Bill seeks to address are matters of deep concern, not only to Members of the Assembly, but to the people of Northern Ireland. It is right that the Assembly has taken the lead in addressing those sensitive issues.

Before commenting on the provisions of the Bill and how it is intended to operate, I will set out in some detail those whom the Bill is intended to benefit. All of us in the Assembly are aware of the continuing legacy of the Troubles for our constituents. For one group in particular, the families of those known as the disappeared, the pain of losing a family member has been compounded by the fact that the location of the bodies remains unknown, except by those who abducted and murdered them.

A number of years ago, some of those families approached Ministers to see what more could be done to help them. They sought in particular measures to be put in place that would enable them to have the deaths registered and certificates made available to them. Over time, there had been a growing acceptance that no more bodies would be recovered. In those circumstances, obtaining official recognition of the death of the disappeared would at least provide some measure of closure for the families. It is from those initial approaches to Ministers that the present Bill owes its origins. I hope that the families of the disappeared who choose to avail themselves of the new law will find it of some consolation.

In recent months, we have all heard the media reports of fresh information that may yet lead to the remains of some of the disappeared being found by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. I am sure that we all wish to convey our support for the continuing efforts of the commission and the authorities, and the valuable work that they carry out. We urge those with any information to make it available to the authorities.

In considering the mechanisms available to enable the families of the disappeared to obtain death certificates, it became clear that there was a wider group of families for whom similar issues arise.

Every year, thousands of people are reported to the police as missing. The vast majority of those people are children who are absent from care for a short period, or others who turn up safe and well after a day or two.

However, there is a small number of people who go missing and whose fate remains unknown. There will be a high degree of certainty that some of them have died even though no bodies are found, or it may be that an individual simply leaves home without warning or explanation and is never heard from again. Once on the statute book, this legislation will be available to assist in all future instances when a person might disappear.

1.15 pm

At the heart of the Bill are clauses 1 and 2. Under those provisions, the High Court in Northern Ireland will be able to make a declaration that a missing person may be presumed dead from a certain date. Any person will be able to apply to the High Court for a declaration in one of two circumstances: when there is evidence that the missing person is thought to have died; or when the application is founded on the basis that a missing person has not been known to be alive for a period of at least seven years prior to the date of the application.

Before making a declaration, the High Court must be satisfied that the missing person has died or has not been known to be alive for at least seven years. In order for the High Court to have jurisdiction to hear an application, the Bill requires that the missing person had been "domiciled" or "habitually resident" in Northern Ireland prior to the date on which he or she was last known to be alive.

The existence of a close connection with Northern Ireland, expressed through the terms "domiciled" and "habitually resident", justifies the High Court having jurisdiction to rule on any particular case that comes before it. That means that the High Court can deal with the case of a missing person who is domiciled in Northern Ireland even if that person disappeared abroad.

However, that also means that the High Court will not necessarily have jurisdiction in every case in which a person disappears, having last been known to be alive in Northern Ireland. If a person was domiciled in Spain, for instance, it would be more appropriate for the Spanish authorities to deal with the case.

As an exception to the general jurisdictional rule focusing on the domicile or habitual residence of the missing person, clause 1 provides that the High Court may also have jurisdiction if the applicant is the spouse or civil partner of the missing person and if that person is domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland. That special rule for those applicants recognises the unique relationship that they have with a particular missing person, and that a spouse or civil partner is not free to remarry or enter into a civil partnership until a declaration of presumed death has been obtained. Although it is likely that most applications will be made by family members of the missing person, the

legislation would permit an application from a creditor or any person with an interest in the property of the missing person.

Once a declaration of presumed death has been made, the High Court will provide the Registrar General for Northern Ireland with the details of the missing person. Those details will be entered into a register of presumed deaths, which will be established and maintained by the Registrar General in accordance with clause 14 of and schedule 1 to the Bill.

Registration regulations made by the Department of Finance and Personnel will supplement the provisions of schedule 1, specifically by prescribing the particulars to be entered in the new register. As is the case with other registers that are maintained by the Registrar General for Northern Ireland, fees will be payable for the examination of entries, certified copies of an entry and the furnishing of information from the register.

At the time of making the declaration, the High Court will also have ancillary powers to make orders and determinations with respect to the person's domicile, or ownership of property in which the missing person has an interest. I do not expect that those ancillary powers that are provided for in clause 4, or the High Court's other powers to make property variation orders in clause 6, will be very often used. In Scotland, the comparable legislation has rarely given rise to such ancillary orders.

In formulating the terms of the Bill, the Department of Finance and Personnel has carefully considered what should be the legal effect of a declaration of presumed death. As Members will know, the consultation paper of January 2008 highlighted the issue of whether a declaration should automatically end the marriage or civil partnership of the surviving person. No one has suggested to the Department that an exception should be provided to the general rule for subsisting marriages. The legislation is, therefore, explicit in providing that the making of a declaration of presumed death ends any marriage or civil partnership to which the missing person was a party.

The general effect of clause 3 is that the declaration of presumed death, in so far as it is conclusive of the matters contained in it, shall be effective against any person and for all purposes.

That means that, in law, the presumed death of the missing person will be treated, or regarded in the same way as, a death that has been medically certified and registered in accordance with the normal death registration requirements as set out in the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

Given the recent media coverage of the Darwin case — the previously missing canoeist — Members will be understandably concerned about the possibility of fraud. It would be foolish to claim that it will never be

possible for anyone to obtain fraudulently a declaration of presumed death for a person, thereby gaining financial benefit either solely for the applicant or for the applicant and the missing person.

However, I am satisfied that, by conferring the declaratory jurisdiction on the High Court, there will be a thorough examination of the applicant's affidavit evidence, and, if necessary, the High Court can request further evidence or call witnesses. I am considering the introduction of a new provision to the Bill to empower the High Court to order a third person to disclose information to assist it in deciding whether to grant a declaration of presumed death. That new power would reduce further the scope for a person who is alive to be declared dead.

Clause 10 provides for "any person" to be able to intervene in proceedings and perhaps argue against the making of a declaration. In clause 9, the Attorney General's right to intervene is a further important safeguard against the possibility of declarations being obtained in circumstances in which, based solely on the affidavit evidence supplied by the applicant, it may not be appropriate.

If a declaration has been obtained fraudulently or there has simply been a mistake in presuming a person to be dead, the Bill allows the High Court to revoke the declaration. I doubt that that power will be exercised frequently. During the 30 years of the operation of the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, Scottish officials can recall only one instance in which a declaration of presumed death was revoked. In revoking or varying a declaration, the High Court will be able to make orders that, as far as is reasonable, return to the missing person any property or assets that may have been distributed on foot of the presumption of his or her death. Those provisions also facilitate the repayment of any capital sums paid out by an insurer or any other body — for example, pension trustees who provide benefits on the death of a person.

The extent to which the Bill establishes a new statutory jurisdiction and creates new procedures is evidenced by how little it affects the existing law. Current law enables the High Court, on application by a spouse or civil partner, to dissolve a marriage or civil partnership on the grounds of the presumed death of the other spouse or civil partner. Those provisions in the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and the Civil Partnership Act 2004 are rarely used and are repealed by clause 13. The other repeals and consequential amendments in clause 18 and schedules 2 and 3 are consequential on the main repeal of current dissolution statutory provisions.

Let me be clear about the limitations of the Bill: new legislation cannot help to locate the remains of the disappeared; it cannot turn back the clock or erase the

fact that those individuals were abducted and murdered; it cannot compensate for the anxiety, fear and grief that the families of the disappeared, and, indeed, the families of any person who goes missing, endure daily. The short Bill simply provides the structure within which decisions can be made and arrangements put in place that allow, as a first step, an authoritative judicial ruling that the person concerned may be regarded as dead and a death certificate made available to the family.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for outlining the general principles of the Bill in such detail, and I welcome today's debate. Over the past year, the Committee engaged closely with the Department on the development of the Bill. On 12 September 2007, the Committee received oral and written briefings from departmental officials on the background to the Bill.

As we have heard, the Bill's purpose is to provide a legal framework that will address the needs of the many families of those who go missing, including, unfortunately, the families of the disappeared. I reiterate the Minister's call for information that would lead to the recovery of remains, which would bring that aspect of the ongoing agony of the families to an end. I strongly support the Minister's call. Several thousand people each year are reported to the PSNI and other authorities as being missing. Many cases are resolved quickly, but, towards the end of 2007 some 68 people were registered with the PSNI as being missing over the longer term.

At the initial briefing, Committee members raised several issues with the Department, including whether someone who had previously been missing could claim their property back if it had been sold on and had passed through several hands in the meantime. The Committee also raised the delay in introducing legislation here, given that the provisions have existed in Scotland since 1978. We also mentioned how potential conflicts of interest between family members over the issuing of death certificates might be handled. Finally, the Department's views on the prevention of fraud were taken. The Minister referred to those issues in his statement.

The Committee also pursued with the Department issues around the placing of advertisements in newspapers following the making of a declaration of presumed death. We discussed where those advertisements would be published and whether details of a missing person would be removed from the missing persons' database following the making of a declaration of presumed death.

On 21 May 2008, Committee members received clarification from the Department on all of those issues along with a further update on the progress of the Bill. That update also included briefing members on the outcome of the consultation that was undertaken by the Department between 23 January and 15 April. The Minister also addressed that today in his statement.

More recently, on 10 September, the Committee received a helpful briefing by Assembly Research and Library Service on the detail of the provisions of the Bill.

The Committee recognises that, in general terms, the changes that the Bill will introduce will be welcomed by the public. However, members noted from the report on the consultation that at least two important issues may not have been fully addressed, which the Committee will wish to pursue. I welcome the fact that the Minister's statement addressed both of those issues. First, the Bill as it had been drafted did not include provision that would ensure disclosure of information relevant to the presumed death of a missing person by a third party, including Government bodies. Such provision would help the court to make a decision on the declaration of presumed death. I welcome the Minister's indication that that issue is to be addressed.

Secondly, as the Minister set out, further refinement of the details on insurance provisions is needed. It is quite obvious that when capital sums are paid out by an insurer, either by way of annuities or other periodic payments, it may be difficult for people to raise the amount of any premiums payable for indemnity insurance. The Committee also pointed out that unless there is conclusive evidence that the missing person were dead, premiums could be prohibitively expensive.

The Department has advised that work is ongoing on amendments relating to those issues, and we look forward to working with the Department in considering the outcome of that work.

Overall, the Committee is satisfied with the briefing and the clarification that the Department has provided to date. During the Committee Stage, members will engage with DFP officials and other stakeholders on the detailed provisions in the Bill. As part of its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee will carefully consider the evidence received from stakeholders, with the aim of ensuring that the Bill provides a robust mechanism for meeting the needs of the families of those from our community who are missing.

At its meeting on 10 September, the Committee reviewed its heavy workload for the current session and agreed to give priority to the consideration of the Bill. As regards the principles of the Bill, as set out by the Minister, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Hamilton: I support the Presumption of Death Bill. Because of the Bill's primary focus on the disappeared, few pieces of legislation will pass through the House that will have such widespread support or widespread sympathy for its underlying principles.

1.30 pm

The hideous crimes committed against the disappeared have caused years of anguish and distress for the victims' families. The awful violence, the absence of a body and the lies and deceit added to those families' injury and suffering. No measure will ease the pain of the families of the disappeared or bring an adequate sense of closure, especially for those families in which — despite many people's best efforts — a body has never been recovered and there is little prospect of finding remains. I echo the Minister's comments: in order to create a sense of closure for those families, anyone with information that could help retrieve the remains of the disappeared should come forward forthwith to assist the authorities.

During consultations, the Church of Ireland — among others — said that, although nothing can be done to ease the families' pain, practical steps can be taken to alleviate some of the remaining problems. It is because some of the families have submitted suggestions on how that could be done that this Bill is before us today.

Northern Ireland's legal framework was not designed to deal with situations such as the disappeared; this is a unique set of circumstances. Under Northern Ireland law, a person's death cannot be registered without a body or a coroner's certificate. In the case of the disappeared, this poses many real problems which must be resolved for a host of practical reasons to do with estates and so forth, as well as because of the need to bring closure. Although the Bill focuses mainly on the disappeared, changing the law will allow the deaths of other missing persons in Northern Ireland to be registered, whether they are presumed to have died at the time of their disappearance or on a subsequent date. During the Committee's work, I was staggered to discover that approximately 5,000 people are reported missing in Northern Ireland every year. Although the majority reappear, some, unfortunately, do not, and it is important to have legislation to address that situation.

I trust that the passage of the Presumption of Death Bill through the House will provide some deserved closure and comfort to the families of the disappeared, and to others as well.

Mr Beggs: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I welcome the Second Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill.

The modern history of Northern Ireland is, unfortunately, filled with tragedy for individuals and

families. The fate of the disappeared is one of the most harrowing aspects of the Troubles. Individuals were abducted and murdered by terrorist groups, and their bodies have never been found.

The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains has conducted useful work. Unfortunately, nine families are still suffering because their loved ones' remains have never been discovered. The Bill originally intended to bring closure for those families by establishing a procedure to register the deaths of individuals whose remains cannot be found. That measure will assist families in that tragic situation and, therefore, must be supported.

I welcome the fact that the Department has broadened the terms of the Bill to create a comprehensive piece of legislation that will not only address those families' needs for a death certificate but introduce a procedure to address the cases of other missing persons who are presumed to have died.

As the Minister indicated, the Bill is modelled on the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, which was enacted over 30 years ago.

That highlights that that type of legislation was needed, and was brought into effect, in other parts of the United Kingdom a considerable time ago. An equal need exists in Northern Ireland. The fact that a working model exists elsewhere should reassure us that it is possible to get the legislation right. We must carefully scrutinise what is being proposed, particularly if the Bill deviates in any way from the working Scottish model.

Close examination of the clauses that deal with a missing person's property and estate on the registration of death will be required, not to mention examination of the potential consequences of revoking that registration. However, those are technical matters that can be resolved in Committee and at other later legislative Stages.

A balance is needed to enable families to have closure, yet mechanisms are needed to minimise the risk of fraud, such as the recent case in England when an individual appeared to have taken his life but had in fact moved to Central America, thus enabling his spouse to draw down life insurance. The required balance is a tricky area that will need close scrutiny at Committee Stage.

In conclusion, I give a general welcome to the Bill and thank the Minister for bringing it to the House. I look forward to working with my Committee colleagues and the Department to scrutinise it further and to make any necessary improvements to it.

Mr O'Loan: Some of us may feel that the Presumption of Death Bill is an appropriate first action for the Assembly to take in this session. Given the level of

Assembly inactivity in recent times, many people have decided that it is a fair conclusion to presume that the Assembly has died. Many of us wonder whether the Assembly is capable of being resuscitated, but we will watch for that in the coming days.

I will leave the levity aside with that remark, because this is an important and serious matter, and I am clear that the Bill's principles are what we are discussing. The Bill's primary purpose is to confer on the High Court the power to issue a declaration that a missing person will be presumed to have died in either of the two circumstances that have been referred to — either that evidence exists that the person is likely to have died or that the person has not been known to be alive for at least seven years. Such a declaration would have the equivalent effect of registering a death, and I support that principle.

At the outset, as others did, I note that the Bill's origins relate to the disappeared. The Bill will, of course, deal with all cases of presumed death, but a primary motivation is the deaths of those who have become known as "the disappeared". They are people who were murdered by various paramilitary groups — mainly the IRA — and whose remains have not been discovered. It remains a shame and a scandal that that is so. There is a heavy moral responsibility on anyone with information about those remains to come forward. That responsibility sits heavily on persons in the Assembly, who either have such knowledge or know where it rests.

Those murders were actions that were grievously wrong in the first place. At the very least, the families of the disappeared are entitled to see their relatives' remains recovered so that they might provide them with a proper burial. Nine families remain in that situation, and the Presumption of Death Bill highlights a continuing situation that should not exist.

In the absence of that proper closure, some of those families have said that they want to be able to register the death of their family member. That is not possible under current law without the existence of a body — hence the current Bill, which will also serve other unfortunate cases.

As the Minister told us, the Bill is modelled on the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977. That Act appears to have functioned well and to have proved necessary.

Under our current law, a body must be present in order to register a death. In Scotland, we are told that there have been some 30 cases since 2000, which, pro rata, would mean that there would typically be one case a year here. The Bill allows anyone who has "sufficient interest" to apply to, and be heard by, the court — particularly a spouse, civil partner or close relative, and that seems sound.

I wish to raise one major concern. Unlike the Act in Scotland, the Bill places no duty of disclosure on Government bodies or agencies of information that relates to whether the missing person might be presumed dead. That is a serious and erroneous omission. It is essential that there should be such an obligation, and it should apply in particular to the police, Army and security services. The Minister may wish to respond to that point, and I shall certainly bring it to the Committee's attention for further consideration.

I want to know what law exists in England and Wales, including on the matter of disclosure. The explanatory memorandum states that the Bill is:

"compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998."

I want to know whether the Human Rights Commission has, or will be, consulted about disclosure in particular and the Bill as a whole. I regard that as essential.

The explanatory memorandum also mentions the seven-year rule, and I note that that could be altered by statutory instrument, requiring affirmative resolution. I mention that because the explanatory memorandum states that there is some discussion internationally about whether seven years is an appropriate period of time for a person to be missing and presumed dead. There have been situations, including the 2004 tsunami, whereby seven years has been perceived to be too long. The Committee should consider whether the seven-year period should be reduced. I take no fixed view — however, a case can be made for that opinion, and we ought to discuss it.

Although I have expressed a serious caveat about disclosure, and the Committee should seriously consider the seven-year period, I strongly support the principles of the Bill.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party's usual spokesperson on these matters is Dr Farry. However, he has been called away. Therefore, it falls to me to express the party's support for the Bill.

This is an important piece of legislation, which deals with a most sensitive matter, and I agree with all Members about general sympathy with the families of the disappeared, for whom the Bill may provide a means with which to bring one aspect of closure. Sadly, the fate of those missing individuals has been known for some time, but it has not been possible to issue death certificates. One cannot stress enough the fact that this legislation addresses only one aspect of closure. As other Members have said, it is critical that information is forthcoming to allow the disappeared's remains to be found in order that they might receive a Christian burial.

The Alliance Party generally welcomes this legislation, which represents a modernisation of the law. Normally, that is no bad thing, and it will bring us

into line with other jurisdictions. It is reassuring that we are relying on the Scottish model, which has been tried and tested for more than 30 years.

Sadly, when people disappear, there are sometimes circumstances in which there appears to be little prospect that they are alive. In some appalling circumstances, such as following a natural disaster, a major tragedy or a terrorist act, it is simply not possible to recover remains, and there may be considerable evidence to suggest that someone has been caught up in those events. In such situations, in order to bring closure to suffering relatives, there is a strong case for the law under which a death certificate may be issued to be reformed.

Although the Alliance Party welcomes the Bill's general principles, it wishes some aspects to receive further consideration. I agree with Declan O'Loan that the length of time after which an application can be made for a presumption of death should perhaps be revised downwards.

I am told that, at seven years, Northern Ireland would be at the upper end of the international scale. I am not sure what the Scottish Act says, but in certain circumstances I regard seven years as an unnecessarily long time.

1.45 pm

There are human rights considerations in relation to those who are left behind. In most cases of disappearance there is no prospect of a person returning. However, it happens in isolated cases. Therefore, although steps can be put in place to ensure that property is returned, it is important that the bar is sufficiently high that no one is declared dead when there is any evidence that they may still be alive.

For that reason, and in supporting what Declan O'Loan said, the Alliance Party supports tougher requirements on Departments and agencies to co-operate and share information. My party wants that provision in the Bill and will ask the Committee to explore how best to include it, and the other matters that I have raised.

For now, Mr Deputy Speaker, we support the Bill.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Members who spoke in the debate and welcome the support that the Bill has received across the Assembly. I will deal with some of the specific issues raised by individual Members.

The Chairperson of the Committee welcomed the Bill's provisions. I thank him for that and for the Committee's deliberations thus far. My officials and I look forward to continued engagement with the Committee and its members on the relevant issues.

Among the issues that he raised was the possibility of disputes between family members over property and its distribution. The Bill will not and cannot resolve all the tensions and disputes involving family members, but under clause 6 the High Court will be able to make certain orders relating to the transfer of property. If disputes were to persist, other remedies might be available under civil law.

He and other Members raised the issue of disclosure of information. As I said in my speech, I intend to address that issue. Responses to the public consultation on the draft Bill indicate that it must provide a mechanism for making relevant information available to the High Court for consideration in cases that are before it. Officials are liaising with colleagues across Departments both here and in the rest of the UK on the form and scope of such a disclosure provision. I hope that that addresses the point, which has been raised by a number of Members. It is certainly something that has been taken on board.

Insurance is another important issue that was raised and one that I will certainly address. My officials have reconsidered comments received during consultation on the provisions relating to insurance in clauses 6 and 7 of the Bill. In particular, they have considered the treatment of annuities and other periodical payments. At present, the Bill treats annuities and periodical payments as capital sums that should be repaid if the High Court makes a property variation order. Such payments are also subject to the right of life insurers to require a recipient of such sums to take out indemnity insurance. Insurance to cover repayment of what may be a small amount of money can prove difficult to obtain or might diminish the benefit to the recipient of the sums received.

Under the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, payments of capital sums by way of annuity or periodical payment are excluded from the recipient's obligation to repay or take out indemnity insurance. I have decided that the Northern Ireland legislation will follow the Scottish Act in that regard, and I will bring forward amendments to ensure that it does. In dealing with the issue, I am confident that the concerns expressed in relation to those provisions will be eased. As for dealing with insurance provisions, we are also considering how to simplify the unwieldy definition of "insurer" in clause 16 of the Bill.

Mr Simon Hamilton, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, emphasised that the Presumption of Death Bill will help a large group of families — not only the families of the disappeared. I am grateful for that emphasis and for his welcome for the Bill. I am also grateful to Mr Hamilton, and the other Members who contributed to the debate, for emphasising that the Bill will not solve the fundamental problem for families of the disappeared.

It will go some way towards meeting some of the issues that they have raised about closure, but the most important factor is still the return of the remains of their loved ones and the availability of information to allow that to happen.

Mr Beggs also welcomed the Bill's scope to include all families. He mentioned deviation from the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977. Departmental officials will be happy to explain the differences between the Presumption of Death Bill and the Scottish Act. I will not explain those details now, because Mr Beggs is not in his place, but, no doubt, they can be explained to him at a Committee meeting.

Mr O'Loan mentioned the disclosure provision, and I hope that he was reassured by my comments on that. He also talked about what is happening in England and Wales on the matter, but, as I understand it, there are no plans to introduce similar legislation there. However, that is a matter for the Westminster Government.

Mr O'Loan and Mr Lunn also raised concerns about the seven-year rule. I am happy to engage with the Committee on whether seven years is an appropriate time; such dialogue with the Committee will be useful. I also thank Mr Lunn for welcoming the Bill on behalf of the Alliance Party.

The short debate illustrates that the Assembly and the Executive have listened carefully to the families of the disappeared. The Bill is not the most high-profile issue that will come before the Assembly or elsewhere this week, perhaps, but it is an important and relevant piece of practical legislation that will, it is hoped, make some difference to a small group of people. Its progression will mean that Northern Ireland will have practical legislation on its statute book that can be used in the future.

I am delighted to move the Bill's Second Stage, and I am confident that it will serve the same function for Northern Ireland as it has done for Scotland. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill [NIA 23/07] be agreed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motions on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as business motions. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Roy Beggs replace Mr Sam Gardiner as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Rev Dr Robert Coulter replace Mr Basil McCrea as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr Sam Gardiner replace Rev Dr Robert Coulter as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [Mr McNarry.]

Resolved:

That Mr Ian McCrea replace Mr Jim Wells as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; that Mr Edwin Poots replace Mr Allan Bresland as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development; that Mr Alex Easton, Mr David Hilditch and Mr William Irwin replace Mr Alastair Ross, Mr Nelson McCausland and Mr Jimmy Spratt, respectively, as members of the Committee for Employment and Learning; that Mr Jim Wells replace Mr David Simpson as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and that Mr Allan Bresland and Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr William Irwin and Mr Stephen Moutray, respectively, as members of the Committee for Regional Development. — [Lord Morrow.]

Standing Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr George Robinson and Mr Jim Shannon replace Mr Simon Hamilton and Mr David Hilditch, respectively, as members of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Simon Hamilton and Mr Ian Paisley Jnr replace Mr Ian McCrea and Mr George Robinson, respectively, as members of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and that Mr Jonathan Craig replace Mr Alex Easton as a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee. — [Lord Morrow.]

Ad Hoc Committee: Draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

Resolved:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the proposal for a draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 4 November 2008.

Composition:

DUP 4

Sinn Féin 3

UUP 2

SDLP 2

Alliance 1

Quorum: The quorum shall be five Members, except when no decision is taken or question put to the Committee, when the quorum shall be four. A quorum shall be deemed to be present where Members are linked by video-conferencing facility.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee may determine. — [*Ms Ni Chuilín.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Republican Activity

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing levels of Republican activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

I am disturbed by the need to table this motion but, given current circumstances, it is, sadly, necessary. The disturbing escalation of republican violence has happened while the people of Northern Ireland are still adjusting to having normal lifestyles after 40 years of paramilitary atrocities and criminal activity. The resurgence in republican paramilitary attacks has, once again, heightened the level of fear and anxiety that exists in communities across Northern Ireland.

It is vital that we speak out so that we can provide people with hope and reaffirm our resolve to continue working for peace. Without reserve, my party condemns loyalist paramilitary activity as both criminal and immoral. The failure of loyalist paramilitaries to decommission their illegal weaponry remains a cause of concern for the entire community of Northern Ireland.

My party's motion focuses on republican terrorist activity precisely because the recent upsurge of such activity poses the gravest threat to both life and political stability in Northern Ireland. It is republican terrorist organisations that are intent on murdering police officers — an action that has the potential to destabilise profoundly our society and political institutions and, even worse, to result in loss of life.

2.00 pm

Republican terrorist activity is something that Members of the House will know all about. Indeed, many have experienced its devastating impact on their lives. Thousands of people across Northern Ireland, other parts of the United Kingdom and throughout Europe have suffered at the hands of the Provisional IRA, the INLA, the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA for more than 40 years. The connection between those organisations is well known. They are all from the one stable and share the same evil intentions and destructive methods —

Mr Burnside: Regarding republicans coming from one stable — some parts are on ceasefire and other parts are planning to carry out violence and killings against the security forces, as demonstrated by recent events. As a Fermanagh man, does the Member agree that it seems that, as the DUP and Sinn Féin are coming close to doing a deal on transferring policing and justice, voting for the DUP in Wednesday's by-election in Fermanagh would send out entirely the wrong message? Instead, it is better to vote for the Ulster Unionists.

Mr Elliott: My position and that of my party is quite clear on policing and justice. Indeed, that actually reinforces the position of the Ulster Unionist Party as we do not believe that these institutions are ready for it —

Mr F McCann: I have listened to you rhyming off a number of what you called republican organisations. However, can you tell us why you have not included the loyalist stable? That stable contains heavily-armed groups and has been involved in murderous campaigns against nationalists.

Mr Elliott: If the Member had been listening he would know that I quite clearly dealt with that in my preceding paragraph. Perhaps he should listen more carefully. I do not believe that these institutions, let alone the people of Northern Ireland, are ready for the transfer of policing and justice.

There are those of us who stood proudly against those individual terrorist organisations for the past 40 years. We, as members of Her Majesty's forces, did that in defence of democracy and freedom. Many from this community have lost their lives; many have friends and family still living in this community and who are present in the House today.

Just last week, those who made the supreme sacrifice during Operation Banner were remembered at a service in London. They were remembered before God, and their families grieved together. For many people, the action of republican criminals, hell-bent on murder, means that they can never forget the past and they continue to suffer the emotional heartache today.

There is a distinct possibility that the Troubles — which we worked so hard to get away from — are returning again. In recent times, we have seen multiple attacks on members of the security forces, including attacks in the villages of Rosslea and Lisnaskea, both in my own constituency. Worryingly, Semtex previously owned by the Provisional IRA was found by the PSNI following the attack in Lisnaskea.

Sinn Féin did not attend the PSNI briefing following that attack. Instead, the party issued a statement that failed to call for republicans to give information to the police. Perhaps one of the Sinn Féin Members here today will clarify why that was the case. Perhaps he or she will also use the opportunity to explain how Sinn

Féin Members believe that the people of Northern Ireland can trust them when their actions do not reflect true support of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and of the rule of law. That action again calls into question the link between dissident and mainstream republicans, which many believe exists. I indicated earlier that they all came from the one stable, and it appears that some, indeed, possibly many, have returned to that stable.

The escalation in republican violence means that the frequency of attacks is steadily increasing. Just last week, we heard of the lady in Lisburn who almost lost her life after republican paramilitaries placed a viable explosive device under her vehicle. Today, we have heard of another incident in Jonesborough. Innocent men and women seeking to live peacefully are being targeted by those who have a craving to spill blood, and who use political ideology to justify what is — in reality — nothing more than attempted murder. Sadly, I do not believe that I am alone when I say that things are going to get worse before they get better.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is not the nature of republican terrorists to show mercy, but to butcher anyone who stands in their way, man, woman or child. With that thought in mind, it is vital for the people of Northern Ireland to have confidence in the Members of the Assembly to stand up for peace and justice, while the cowards who seek to destroy it are plotting behind balaclavas in dark rooms. The very existence of the Assembly is a symbol of hope for the people of Northern Ireland. It is imperative that, as leaders who stand for equality and understanding, we are open and upfront in our complete and utter condemnation of republican violence. In doing so, we will allow the people that we represent to see that we are taking a stand against the evil that exists for no other reason than to bring us back to the days when the spilling of innocent blood was almost a daily occurrence.

I cannot stress strongly enough the respect and admiration that I have for the men and women who protect Northern Ireland daily, including the PSNI and the response services such as the Ambulance Service and the Fire and Rescue Service. Those organisations play a vital role in the society that they exist to serve, and each of them has suffered from republican violence.

Terrorist atrocities, such as the bombs in Enniskillen and Omagh, do more than cause death and destruction; they leave in their wake psychological damage and emotional turmoil that affects not only members of the public but those who work so hard to provide support and care for victims.

Following the end of the Troubles, the resolve of the people of Northern Ireland was acknowledged throughout the world, in particular by countries that

had suffered, or continue to suffer, at the hands of terrorists. We will not stand by as a virus in our society plots our downfall because the political realities are not to their liking. We have a right to live free from tyranny and oppression, and with the freedom to express our political preferences without fear of being murdered in our sleep for doing so.

For more than a generation, evil men and women held our country back from fulfilling its full potential. Some of those people have realised that their aim of forcing Northern Ireland into an all-Ireland reality by committing murder and creating chaos was pointless. However, it came too late for the thousands who lost their lives to republican terrorists' lust for blood. It should never have happened and we must never allow it to happen again.

I say with a heavy heart that there may be occasions when the Army may have to be recalled to support the services of law and order in the Province. That need not be widespread in Northern Ireland, but certain areas are becoming increasingly more difficult for the Police Service of Northern Ireland to handle.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "of" in line 1 and insert

"violent dissident republican and continued loyalist activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; welcomes the increased level of political and community support for the PSNI in the face of this threat; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the PSNI and looks forward to further asserting these principles through the devolution of policing and justice matters."

At this month's meeting of the Policing Board, the Chief Constable made it clear that the threat from so-called dissident republicans remains very serious, and events over the weekend illustrate his remarks only too well.

As Members are aware, since March 2008, dissident republicans have attempted to murder eight police officers. There have also been attempted bombings and continued attacks on police officers using blast and petrol bombs. In recent weeks, my constituency suffered such violence. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and the violence was roundly condemned by the great majority of people.

In its amendment, the SDLP notes and welcomes the increased community and political support for the PSNI. Last Friday afternoon, I met local people and Lurgan neighbourhood officers to discuss antisocial behaviour in nationalist areas of Lurgan. People were delighted to see the police and want their help to make their lives safer and better.

People from across our community have no wish to return to the violent tragic past. Many people have difficulty in calling those violent men "republicans".

I repeat to the so-called dissident republicans what John Hume once said to the Provisionals:

"You are not Irish republicans, you are extremists who have dishonoured and are dishonouring the deepest ideals of the Irish people. Can we remind you yet again that those whose inheritance you so falsely claim, laid down their arms in 1916 lest they cause any undue suffering to their Irish people."

I now turn to loyalist violence. It is a matter of serious concern that, despite the completion of prisoner releases in May 2000, there has still been no decommissioning of loyalist weapons. The loyalists' statement that weapons have been "put beyond reach" is unacceptable and meaningless, and is not in keeping with the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. As Sir Hugh Orde informed me at September's meeting of the Policing Board, loyalist weapons are still being used in criminality and in the loyalist community. All parties must condemn such activity and call on loyalist paramilitary organisations to decommission forthwith.

We should all be acutely aware that political vacuums are filled by violence. The dissidents think that they have spotted an opportunity this summer, with Sinn Féin blocking the working of the Executive and the DUP blocking the devolution of policing and justice. Selfish party brinkmanship and standoffs suits the dissidents down to the ground because they create the sort of vacuum in which dissidents activate the kiddie rioting techniques that they learned as Provos. Early devolution of policing and justice would put a stop to the dissidents' gallop. When they have to face a policing and a criminal justice system that is fully under local democratic control, they will be completely exposed.

The onus is on all of us — but especially on the DUP and Sinn Féin — to deliver the last piece of the jigsaw. The DUP and Sinn Féin must give leadership and accept the responsibilities of their offices. I support the amendment.

Mr Simpson: I support the motion. Along with places such as Lisnaskea, Lisburn, Londonderry, Jonesborough — only yesterday — and parts of Tyrone, Craigavon, in my constituency, has witnessed violence carried out by dissident gangs. It is correct that the Assembly should send out a clear message that those groups have nothing to offer except bitterness and hatred and that they can achieve nothing but death, destruction and division. Indeed, I have little doubt that the leadership of those groups know that.

Do they really think for one moment that Unionists will agree to a united Ireland because of a new campaign when they stood against the sectarian slaughter of the Provos? Do they really think that they will defeat the same United Kingdom security services that so successfully infiltrated, corrupted and compromised the Provisional movement at all levels from leadership downwards? Do they really believe that although British intelligence had its people at the very top of Sinn Féin and the IRA, it does not already have people in place in the dissident organisations?

I have no doubt that there are people involved in the dissident groups who suspect all of that. However, their hatred of their neighbour and the level of sectarian malice that they feel towards ordinary men, women and children who happen to have been born into different communities and who have different opinions from theirs is such that they are prepared take the risk and visit violence upon them.

For those and for many other reasons, it is essential that the Assembly utterly condemns dissident groups. We must also accept that more groups — such as the Continuity IRA, the Real IRA and the INLA — are working more closely together. Evidence is emerging that the republican organisation Éirigi is actively seeking to unite with Republican Sinn Féin, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and the Irish Republican Socialist Party with a view to providing political opposition to Sinn Féin and further accelerate the ongoing fragmentation of the mainstream organisations.

2.15 pm

Mr Storey: The Member refers to dissident organisations. Will he agree that the growth of those organisations stems in large part from the fact that the Sinn Féin leadership has spun its supporters a right old yarn about policing and justice? Will he further agree that the current artificial crisis that Sinn Féin has created in the Executive is more about Sinn Féin covering its back than about anything substantial?

Mr Simpson: Yes, of course, I agree with my friend's comments. There is no doubt that it is all a matter of Sinn Féin covering its back.

Let us be in no doubt: even though those groups cannot achieve their goals, they can succeed in causing murder and mourning in this Province. One cannot indoctrinate an entire generation of young people into hating all things and all people British — and train many of them in bomb-making skills and the use of weapons — and assume that one has not paved the way for the rise of yet another monster in the future. The issue cannot be ignored. It is imperative that Members on all sides of the House not only speak the right words of condemnation, but publicly co-operate with the police; encourage people to go to the police with any evidence about the activities of anyone who may be involved in that sort of activity; and support the police when arrests are made. It is now imperative that everyone in the Assembly takes that step. I support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the SDLP amendment because it reflects the current position. It is also worth noting that republican activity is perfectly legitimate — violent activity is not. I am an Irish republican, and I will continue to be active. The deputy First Minister is an Irish republican and will continue to be active.

Republicanism is a perfectly legitimate form of politics, and we will continue to strive for our ideals and objectives.

The motion notes the republican activity and violence throughout the North and condemns such activity. I have no difficulty in condemning any violent activity from whatever source, including on the part of dissident republicans. I have no difficulty whatsoever in doing that. In my constituency, there have been repeated attempts to murder police officers, and I have no doubt that further plots are in place at the moment. I appeal to anyone who has information about those plots to bring it to the attention of the PSNI. It is time to bring this matter to an end before someone is killed — otherwise we will fall into a downward spiral, and no one wants to go back to that.

I have spoken to the communities that witnessed the rioting of only a few weeks ago. They know only too well what conflict and violence bring. They followed the coffins of their loved ones out of those estates during the worst periods of the conflict. Two young children were shot dead in a mobile shop in those estates. I can assure the House that no one in those areas wants to go back to those days. However, Members must not fall into the trap that is being set for us by those involved in this activity. Mr Elliott called for the British Army to be brought back onto the street, but that would be disastrous. With respect to him, that call is armchair-general material. The PSNI Chief Constable has already stated that his officers will be able to deal with the current activity. Let the PSNI deal with it, and let us, as politicians, ensure that there is no space for those people to operate in, because they wish us to be at one another's throats and to see the peace process brought down.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that the PSNI is not able to deal with the current republican violence simply because it is still ongoing — a fact that the Member has himself acknowledged?

Mr O'Dowd: I can go only by the assessments given by the PSNI Chief Constable. I see a need for the entire community to work against violence, whether it comes from loyalists or dissident republicans.

I do not accept that republicans on this side of the Chamber are not doing enough. If people think that there is something further that we can do, let us hear what that is. Some people say that if republicans were to provide information, there would be no activity. However, if unionists were to provide information to the PSNI, the huge loyalist arms hauls would not exist, because the PSNI would seize them. We can throw allegations back and forth across the Chamber, but our job is to make politics work and to ensure that we have a political process built on equality and partnership in

order to move forward. Our job is to give leadership to the community at difficult and stressful times so that we can move forward. Knee-jerk reactions to activity do not help.

I have met senior PSNI officers in my constituency, and my party has also met them regarding ongoing activity. I have said privately and I will say publicly that some people in the so-called dissident organisations are state agents, and they have been state agents for many years. Why have they been allowed to continue their activity? Is there someone in the intelligence services who is as opposed to the peace process as the dissident republicans? The PSNI must be allowed to do its job without intelligence agencies withholding information from it for whatever reason, as we have witnessed in recent days. I have a distinct feeling that people in the British intelligence agencies are opposed to the peace process and want to bring it down. We have a responsibility not to allow that to happen.

In conclusion, I support the amendment because it reflects what is happening in loyalism and in the so-called dissident republican organisations. It also reflects the need for political parties of all views and domains to ensure that we take the reins of power and use them wisely. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Farry: First, I apologise to the House for missing the opening speeches, but I look forward to reading them in Hansard. My party supports the motion and the amendment, which I am sure will be accepted by the rest of the House. The motion is more rounded with the addition of the amendment, and it allows us to focus on the distinction between dissident republican activity and IRA activity. I would like to use the words “the former IRA”, but we are not quite at that stage yet, notwithstanding the progress that has been made. However, we must not forget that there is still a residual problem from loyalist organisations. Whenever the House discusses the problem of political violence, it is important that we do so in a balanced way and that we reflect that the problems come from a range of sources in the community, rather than one source in particular.

At the outset, it is important to recognise the progress that has been made over the years and to recognise that the level of political violence and outright terrorism has decreased substantially. That said, there is still a considerable problem, particularly from dissident republican organisations. We must take that threat seriously and ignore it at our peril.

The role played by the IMC over the years has been instrumental in building trust and confidence in our society. Rather than basing our judgements around rumour and innuendo, we have a more authoritative system of reporting on which we can base our judgements.

The Alliance Party is focusing on the immediate problem of terrorist threats, but we have always wanted to focus on a wider range of problems from paramilitary organisations that have been undermining our society. Most people think of the threat that terrorists posed to the security forces, to economic targets and also the sectarian killings that have occurred across the divide, but far too often we have ignored the problems of organised crime that have undermined the economy in our society.

It is not victimless crime, as some people have suggested. On the contrary, such crime has many victims, including all of us. It is crucial that we do not forget the social control that paramilitary organisations have imposed on their own communities through what have been falsely termed punishment beatings. Those organisations have tried to act as judge, jury and executioner. Coercion anywhere in society is to be regretted and must be challenged. Across that range of activity, some welcome progress is now being made.

In turning to the specific threat posed by dissident republicans, I pay tribute to the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in that regard. The PSNI has, in several cases, been successful in containing violence and dealing with threats as they have emerged. At the same time, we must acknowledge that several serious incidents have occurred in the past few months, particularly those that have been directed against individual police officers and against some people who have been mistaken for police officers. It is only through the will of God that we have not had a tragedy on our hands.

I have just returned from a lunchtime meeting with the Chief Constable at which we discussed the threat from dissident republicans, among other activities. I have no doubt that the police are extremely mindful of that continuing threat. I wish to give them my confidence and faith, and hope that most Members in the House will do likewise and give the police the opportunity to deal with the residual threat from dissidents, as is the appropriate role of police services in most normalised societies around the world. With the necessary resources and commitment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: Was the Member speaking to the Chief Constable in his capacity as prospective Minister for Justice, or is there some other reason for his boning up on policing?

Dr Farry: We are trying to have a serious debate about the serious problem of the threat of paramilitary organisations and terrorism. The discussions about the devolution of policing and justice are for another day. No doubt all political parties in the House, including Basil McCrea's party, take the opportunity to be briefed by the police.

Mr Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: My party supports the amendment to the motion.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Lord Morrow.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Proposed Commissioner for Older People

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress there has been in relation to the creation of a commissioner for older people post, in light of the current economic downturn and rising energy costs. (AQO 49/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The deputy First Minister and I are acutely aware of the pressures that rising costs, including energy costs, are placing on household budgets, particularly those households on relatively low incomes. In order to ensure that momentum is maintained in respect of the creation of the post of a commissioner for older people, officials have been asked to pursue the appointment of an interim advocate for older people, and that process is well under way. Interviews of potential candidates are scheduled for later this month, and, subject to a satisfactory outcome, it is expected that an announcement will be made during October. The advocate will help to identify and address issues that affect older people and will remain in post until the appointment of a commissioner.

We are considering, and have published on our website, a report by an independent organisation that assesses the potential roles and responsibilities of a commissioner for older people. We shall consult other Departments and our Committee on the relevant issues and, after that, we intend to introduce proposals for further public consultation on the roles and responsibilities of the proposed office. Thereafter, officials will work with the Office of the Legislative Counsel to prepare the necessary legislation.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his answer. However, his answer is inadequate. One would have expected much greater progress on such an important issue. There are thousands of older people in this community who are at their wits' end because of living conditions, fuel costs, and the cost of putting bread on the table. Surely it is imperative that the First Minister and his office work more rapidly to address such a bread-and-butter issue as creating an advocate for older people in this community, and to end the quarrelling that has bedevilled the Executive throughout

the summer, which people in the community find quite intolerable. Get on with the business of Government.

The First Minister: Not for the first time, the Member seems to be confused. Perhaps he did not hear what I said, so I will repeat it for him. We have already agreed that there should be an interim advocate for older people, because — as he should know — a legislative programme takes at least 18 months or two years to implement. Rather than delay the establishment of an advocate for older people, we have determined that we should proceed rapidly, and, as I indicated, we hope that that appointment will be made next month.

However, the Member seems to confuse the appointment of an advocate with the resolution of issues that are affecting older people. The appointment of an advocate does not remove responsibility from elected representatives, particularly Ministers, to examine the steps that they might take within the scope of their departmental responsibilities in order to ease the load that is being felt, particularly by older people in our society.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind those on all sides of the House that they should ask a supplementary question — not make a statement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the recent rises in gas and electricity prices, coupled with the rising cost of food, and in line with the letter issued by the deputy First Minister, will the First Minister agree to jointly push the British Prime Minister to return to the Executive the approximately £45 million-plus that was raised in tax and fuel increases, in order to redress fuel poverty, particularly for the vulnerable and the elderly?

The First Minister: That question emphasises the fact that there is a limitation on the steps that a devolved institution such as ours can take to change the price of a barrel of oil. Clearly, it is the Government of the United Kingdom that will have the greater influence on those matters.

I have read carefully the letter from the deputy First Minister, and a number of the points that he makes are worthy of further discussion. I shall certainly offer him support, not just on that particular issue, because there are legacy issues in respect of which there is clearly more that the United Kingdom Government could do. However, there are other issues that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has raised with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and with the Prime Minister, that we must push forward.

Ultimately, we can resolve many of the issues ourselves. We should not always look to other people to solve our problems if we have the means to do so ourselves. As the letter from the deputy First Minister

indicated, several of the issues that would help people in our society generally — not only older people — come under our responsibility and could be dealt with at the next Executive meeting.

Mr Gardiner: Will the First Minister consider making age proofing of all new legislation part of the normal legislative procedure, in much the same way that current legislation is subject to rural proofing?

The First Minister: I am happy to discuss that issue with the Member. If one examines the issues that surround fuel poverty, for example, one will see that, although 43% of our community is in fuel poverty, that figure is significantly lower for people aged below 60 to 74 — it is about 34%. Therefore, the older people get, the greater difficulty they have with the cost of living and fuel poverty, in particular. Fifty-six per cent of households headed by people aged 75 and over are in fuel poverty. Therefore, there is statistical evidence that we should take into account the age of people in our society.

Programme for Government Targets

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Department is performing against its Programme for Government targets; and how this performance is measured. (AQO 44/09)

The First Minister: In general, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is making good progress against its Programme for Government (PFG) targets.

In year 1 of the programme, those achievements already include extending the Northern Ireland Bureau's representation in New York to promote our interests and further develop key contacts in the United States. There has also been additional Budget provision to fund the appointment, from 1 September, of 14 additional panel commissioners and several other appointments to senior levels in the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission. Those additional resources are targeted at addressing the backlog of appeal cases.

All Departments have nominated a champion for children and young people to liaise on children's issues and to encourage Departments to ensure that the interests of children and young people are fostered and that their views are sought on policy and strategic issues.

Ilex has advanced the master plan for the development of Ebrington Barracks and is developing capital infrastructure projects for site transport, open space, car parking and event infrastructure. Although delivery on three of our targets has taken slightly longer than anticipated, we remain committed to delivering the

underlying policy goals. I am happy to write to the Member with a full list of the Department's achievements and to place it in the Library.

The performance of OFMDFM against its PFG commitments and targets is measured through a series of delivery agreements. Those delivery agreements set out the vision espoused by the public service agreement (PSA); the ways in which progress towards the achievement of the objectives and targets set out in the PSA will be measured; the strategy for delivery of the PSA commitments, including the management of identified risks; the key delivery milestones; and the key stakeholders in the delivery of the PFG commitments set out in every PSA.

Mr Moutray: I thank the First Minister for his answer. What is the current position on an agreed framework to monitor the delivery of the targets and commitments in the Programme for Government 2008-11, on which the Budget allocations are based?

The First Minister: Departments have been asked to put their PSA plans and efficiency delivery agreements on their websites. I understand that all but three Departments have already done so, and I expect the remaining three to do so by the autumn. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education are two of those three Departments, and they have a more onerous task in responding due to their size.

The third Department is OFMDFM, which has the more difficult task, because several of its PSA targets are cross-cutting and, therefore, require feedback from various other Departments. As far as the overall plan for programme measuring is concerned, the paper that deals with that subject is in what we describe as "brokerage" at present. It deals with the kind of issues that I have listed in the original answer. The Ministers and officials who are responsible for each of the PSA targets and the roles of OFMDFM, the Finance Department, the Executive and, indeed, each of the Committees are identified.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is useful to hear the First Minister outline some of those targets and progress that has been made towards the Programme for Government in other Departments. Will he comment specifically on the target to eradicate child poverty and outline whether there has been any movement to implement the recommendations of the child-poverty inquiry?

The First Minister: I am not sure whether, in my current capacity, I should give my standard reply on that issue because, at present, I act on behalf of OFMDFM. The definition of child poverty is one that, statistically, can never be reached because, clearly, a problem cannot be eradicated when it is always regarded by the statistical average. Therefore, apart

from the fact that a target has been set that can never be achieved, it is important that we deal with the subject of child poverty and all of the problems that people have lately had to face. Increases in housing costs and the price of food and fuel mean that it is more likely for people to get into poverty. The requirement for action is, therefore, all the greater on the part of the Executive, which is why they must deal with those issues.

Mr Ford: I welcome the First Minister's remarks. In particular, he referred to cross-cutting targets, which are his Department's responsibility. Given what he has just said about the difficulty with child-poverty targets, will he tell the House what has been achieved towards the longer-term economic development of the region; in particular, targets on R&D policy, which are key to progressing Northern Ireland's way out of recession and building its economy for the future?

The First Minister: The Member is perfectly right: the Executive and, indeed, the House agreed that the economy should be the number-one priority. We backed that up with a Budget to fund Departments that can help to generate innovation and to improve skills and education. Therefore, all of the introductory requirements are in place.

However, the cross-cutting nature of the Budget means that the measurement is much more difficult to achieve and to display. Work on that is ongoing. The Executive hope that that work can, perhaps, be statistically measured throughout the years, and that that will enable us to say that a particular percentage along the road towards meeting those targets has been reached. However, some targets that are set for the economy will require more long-term measures; for instance, that of improving Northern Ireland's gross value added. If there is improvement on those issues, it will not be statistically recognisable on a month-to-month basis. The benefits of the policies that have been laid down will be much more apparent in the long term.

Executive Meetings

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the meeting of the Executive, due to take place on 24 July 2008, was cancelled. (AQO 19/09)

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many meetings of the Executive have taken place since 15 June 2008. (AQO 43/09)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I want to answer questions No 3 and No 5 together. There has been one meeting of the Executive since 15 June 2008. That meeting took place on Thursday 19 June. The Executive meeting that had

been scheduled for 24 July was cancelled because there was no agreement that it should take place.

Mr McNarry: I thank the First Minister for his frankness and brevity, which tell the other story. Who has not come a cropper over promises that were engineered by Downing Street? Is it not a matter of how disappointments and let-downs are handled? It is maturity that counts. Are the Sinn Féin members of the Executive who are present not to be held to account for their immaturity, which caused the Executive to shut up shop for three months? Is that not acceptable?

2.45 pm

Will the First Minister agree with me that the majority of Members find the behaviour of Sinn Féin Ministers, including that of the deputy First Minister, both irresponsible and deplorable? Will he also agree that people's thoughts are fixed on the cost of heating, eating and water, on recovery from floods, on getting education right and on the impact of the credit crunch? They show little interest in the machinations of Sinn Féin and its fixation with policing and justice. The First Minister has confirmed why the Executive have failed to meet —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have made it clear that Members must ask supplementary questions rather than make statements. Have you finished asking your supplementary question? Have you another to ask?

Mr McNarry: I wished only to wind up my supplementary question by saying that the First Minister has confirmed why the Executive Committee failed to meet. Will he tell us when they will meet and what he intends to do should Sinn Féin refuse to attend?

The First Minister: I got the drift of the question anyway.

In the Assembly, each Member carries a heavy responsibility for what he says and does. Our community wants to see the Assembly and Executive working and to see us all move forward. I and my party are committed to working all the institutions of the Agreement, and that is what we will do.

The next meeting of the Executive is scheduled for Thursday, as the Member and everyone else in the House knows. I want it to take place. I have indicated to the deputy First Minister that it should do so, and I have identified over two dozen issues that should be on its agenda, including the very issue that the Member raised, and which the deputy First Minister has identified in his own correspondence.

The situation requires much more of me than grandstanding and scoring party-political points. There is no advantage to be gained by that. However, I will be deeply disappointed if the Executive do not meet on Thursday, and that disappointment will be reflected right across the community.

Mr Hamilton: Will the First Minister agree that, given present economic conditions, it is essential that the Executive meet on Thursday so that action can be taken, and help given to those in Northern Ireland who feel so much pain in their pockets? Those people will take a dim view of those who do not allow such action to be taken.

The First Minister: I have identified some issues relating to the credit crunch, energy costs and all of those matters which the Executive should consider. The deputy First Minister has done the same and he has published his views. The Minister for Social Development is also preparing a paper on those matters. I have spoken with my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and he has tasked his officials with finding possible ways forward. In each individual silo, there is recognition that we must deal with those matters, but we can only resolve them if we come together.

I add only one note of caution to what the Member says: even if those matters did not need immediate attention — and they do — I still believe that the Executive need to meet and to function, and we need to be able to show the people that the Assembly means business and is able to do it.

Mr Durkan: Does the First Minister agree that an Executive that cannot meet cannot credibly meet the challenges that the region faces? During the summer, he said, through the media, that he had passed several papers for the Executive meeting, and that the deputy First Minister had passed only a few. Can he update Members on the score in relation to that?

Did the cancellation of the July meeting of the Executive have an impact on the calendar of meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council? If it did not, would cancellation of this week's meeting have implications for that calendar?

The First Minister: The issue is more complex than comparison of statistics. On some of the papers for the Executive, the deputy First Minister and I are making genuine progress, and they are under consideration. We have sent some of them back to Ministers for their views on suggestions that we have made.

I have suggested an agenda that contains more than two dozen items, which is more than the Executive will be able to deal with on Thursday. That indicates that issues are piling up. However, it is not the case that Ministers are not doing their job. Ministers are not meeting to agree policy documents and general direction, which is an important element of their job, but all are working in their Departments to attempt to resolve the departmental issues before them.

Papers to convene meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and, perhaps more importantly, from our point of view, the British-Irish Council (BIC)

would normally have been presented for clearance at the Executive meeting on 18 September. There cannot be a meeting of the BIC or the North/South Ministerial Council unless the Executive clear those papers. If there is no meeting on Thursday, other institutions will start to freeze as well.

Mrs Long: I thank the First Minister for his comments. Will he assess the impact that this state of constant crisis has on the institutions' credibility with the public? I detect that the public are completely exasperated with the Executive's lack of progress and petty bickering. The Executive should be dealing with issues in a mature way.

The First Minister: It is clear that there is little patience in the community, particularly when it is under financial pressure, for an Executive that is not meeting. Statistically, I would not like to indicate the extent to which that reduces confidence, but it is clear that if the institutions do not operate and function properly, confidence decreases.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My party, too, hopes that an Executive meeting takes place on Thursday, and that the Executive meet based on equality, partnership and power sharing. Although other parties in the Chamber may think that we are squabbling over petty issues, we do not. I know that the SDLP has abandoned the principle of power sharing, but we have not.

Will the First Minister, who has, today and in the past, publicly stated his commitment to the institutions, publicly state his commitment to power sharing now and in future?

The First Minister: I thought that I had made it very clear that I want the institutions to work. Nobody in the Assembly could be in doubt about the nature of those institutions. In the fullness of time, when we have been able to stabilise democracy in Northern Ireland, I hope that we can normalise our democratic institutions. Whether we rely on a bill of rights or another process, we must move to a system that is based more on normal democratic standards.

I assumed that that was the SDLP leader's message. I do not think that his message was that he wanted to leave behind power sharing per se. It is a fact of life that the Executive cannot be formed without power-sharing arrangements, because no party has the strength to go ahead on its own. Unless the electorate, which decides the composition of the Assembly and therefore the Executive, changes its mind, there will be a form of power sharing in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future. I want to see power sharing exist in Northern Ireland on a basis that is more voluntary than mandatory.

Executive Response to August Flooding

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the Executive responded to the flooding that occurred in August 2008. (AQO 55/09)

The First Minister: After extremely heavy rain on Saturday 16 August, flooding occurred in locations across Northern Ireland. To ensure a co-ordinated and effective strategic response, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment convened a meeting of the crisis management group on Sunday 17 August with senior officials from the relevant organisations and agreed a range of response measures. In parallel, the Minister of the Environment agreed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that a scheme of emergency financial assistance should be made available to district councils, including payments to affected householders. Ministers Wilson and Murphy convened a further crisis management group meeting on Monday 18 August to review progress and agree further actions.

In the following days, officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister maintained contact with the key responding organisations to ensure that any remaining issues were addressed.

The Minister for Regional Development has commissioned consultants to report on the flooding of the Broadway underpass. That report is expected to be completed within two to three months. By Friday 12 September, district councils had paid emergency financial assistance grants to 1,431 households.

Lord Browne: I thank the First Minister for his informative and detailed reply. There is no doubt that the disastrous events of August were characterised by fluvial and pluvial flooding after exceptionally high rainfall. Unfortunately, as the First Minister is aware, many areas in Northern Ireland have been flooded at least twice in the past 15 months. In order to reduce the risk of flooding in the future, does the First Minister agree that it would be appropriate to commission an independent review of the flooding emergency that took place in June 2007 and August 2008, and that the review should be similar to the Pitt Review that took place in Great Britain after similar flooding there?

The First Minister: The Member's background as a geography teacher is beginning to show through.

I am aware of Sir Michael Pitt's report, which has been published and is being considered by Her Majesty's Government. Although the report deals almost exclusively with flooding in England during 2007, undoubtedly there will be lessons that we can learn from it, and perhaps we will be able to follow some of its recommendations.

After the flooding in June 2007, the Executive immediately charged the then head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Sir Nigel Hamilton, with the task of carrying out a full review and report, which he presented to them with action plans for each Department to implement. Many of those action points had been put in place before the most recent flooding event.

However, some matters still need to be addressed. A key issue is the creation of a three-digit telephone number so that a single telephone call will enable people to contact any Department or agency that deals with flooding. People have emphasised to me the importance of communication. Individuals were able to make contact, and departmental representatives visited households, so they could see their problems being resolved. However, there is massive frustration if that initial contact cannot be made. When the Department of Finance and Personnel instigated the three-digit telephone scheme, it was due to be implemented in December 2008, but I believe that the Department hopes to get it up and running during October. That scheme will be in operation in the event of future flooding.

All Executive Ministers have received copies of Sir Nigel Hamilton's report, and they each have an action plan for their Departments. Aside from the issue of the underpass, on which the Minister for Regional Development has already initiated a review, it appears that all other matters ran more smoothly this time than they had in June 2007. I hope that this is not a cycle that we have to experience annually in order to get it right.

Mr K Robinson: Will the First Minister explain in detail how the Executive can respond to anything if they do not meet? Does the First Minister agree that urgent action needs to be taken to make available a flood map for Northern Ireland similar to that which is available elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: The Executive comprise a collection of Ministers, each of whom has departmental responsibilities; Sir Nigel Hamilton's report is available to all those Ministers. They know their individual responsibilities, and they are in a position to ensure that their Departments carry out the necessary work.

I am happy to consider the issue of a flood map. That may fall within the remit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and a quiet word in the Minister's ear might produce the appropriate response.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flooding: Assistance to Farmers

1. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance her Department and the Executive will provide to those farmers affected by the recent flooding. (AQO 114/09)

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department will consider an aid package for farmers who have lost their crops as a result of the recent flooding. (AQO 12/09)

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department has taken to help farmers affected by the floods in August 2008. (AQO 90/09)

19. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what methods are in place to allow her Department to make speedy calculations of crop values, lost as a result of the flooding in August 2008; and if she will compensate quickly for the loss of crops. (AQO 9/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 1, 3, 6 and 19 together.

I have great sympathy for farmers who suffered losses as a result of the flooding on 16 August. During my visits to those areas, including farms, affected by the widespread flooding, I saw at first hand the impact and distress caused. Although I was not able to visit every location, I am focusing on assessing the issue of assistance to farmers and directing the development of flood-management policy and response, including that of the Rivers Agency.

Farmers whose homes were flooded can avail of emergency assistance from the Executive; they are entitled to receive a payment of £1,000 to help to restore their homes and to ensure that they are made habitable as quickly as possible.

In response to reports of severe damage, particularly to arable crops, I have asked my officials to carry out an assessment of flood damage to crops in areas we know to have been flooded. Officials are assessing damage in other areas of the countryside as reported to us through the Department's helpline. Those assessments are well under way and most of that work was completed by 12 September. I intend to make the

results available to my Executive colleagues so that we can jointly consider the way forward.

The flooding of 16 August is estimated to have cost the North's crop sector £452,000. That figure includes cereals at a cost of £97,000; potatoes at a cost of £293,000; carrots at a cost of £49,000; and cabbages at a cost of £13,000. Those costs are based on inputs used to establish and maintain the crop up until the date of flooding. There is no compensation or reimbursement available for crop or other losses. However, in tandem with the damage assessment by my officials, I am considering funding options that would allow for some measure of relief. Those options include a one-off hardship scheme and a long-term loss evidence-based compensation scheme.

There is a statutory basis for the creation of a one-off hardship payment scheme under the European Commission's (EC) *de minimis* scheme. The EC provisions limit the payment to any single beneficiary to €7,500 within any three-year period. Any such scheme would have to pass the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) economic appraisal, and the Executive would have to agree to the scheme and to securing funding for the hardship payments involved. However, it is important to note that a hardship scheme would not allow for significant losses to be addressed and that will negatively impact on any consideration of the necessary business case.

A longer term, more focused compensation approach will also be considered. That option can be pursued if we can demonstrate that the damage was caused by an exceptional occurrence; that would require more detailed evidence of actual losses. There may be provision for the prompt introduction of such a compensation scheme under EC block exemption regulation rules, and that is being investigated. I have asked my officials to examine as a matter of urgency how we can bring forward less-favoured area compensatory allowances payments from March to January; that will help farmers as well.

In answer to Mr Burns's question, my Department has conducted a detailed assessment of the damage to crops, and information and statistics are available on farm costs and crop yields. Those data are collected through official surveys run by the Department and cover farms of different sizes and types across the North. Many of those statistical surveys rely on the voluntary co-operation of farmers who are selected at random for participation. If approached in the coming weeks by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) staff, farmers are urged, now more than ever, to assist in that important work.

As Members will appreciate, that is work in progress; any Executive decision regarding aid can be properly informed only on completion of the damage-

assessment exercise. In the meantime, I urge farmers whose crops have been affected or who have suffered other losses to register flooding damage by contacting DARD on 028 6634 3172. That is vital: we can assess damage only if it has been reported; we cannot assess damage if nobody gets in touch. I ask farmers to contact the Department if they have suffered flood damage, *Go raibh míle maith agat*.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. *Go raibh míle maith agat*. My supplementary question was in relation to funding options, and I think that the Minister has covered those.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's response. What contact has the Minister had with her ministerial colleagues with regard to bringing forward a multi-agency approach that will bring a report to the Executive requesting a financial package to alleviate the hardships of many of those farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department is concentrating on the assessment necessary to establish how much funding is required. I am aware that, given current financial circumstances and the credit crunch, there are many calls on the Executive's budgets and resources, and there are many difficult decisions to make. However, I will want to discuss this issue with Executive colleagues when the full assessment is available.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's response and acknowledge her commitment to the farming community in Northern Ireland. The Minister does, however, have the power to initiate an aid package for farmers who have suffered as a result of the flooding. Will the Minister listen, and respond positively, to the particular plight of the Ulster Farmers' Union and not be held back or dictated to by any UK Government or EU official, and get assistance to farmers as speedily as possible?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I met stakeholders, including the Ulster Farmers' Union, during the week of the flooding. I am looking at all the options available to the Department, and I will do my absolute best and put a strong and robust case for help for farmers. I will listen to all concerned and try to ensure the best outcome.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister will know that, on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I wrote to her concerning this matter, requesting that she urgently present to the Executive an emergency scheme to fully compensate farmers for losses incurred as a result of flooding; that, while that scheme is being developed, she provide those farmers assessed as being most seriously affected with an interim advance on their single farm payment and a payment under the *de minimis* aid for the agriculture sector; and that she facilitate a full briefing of all

public-sector organisations that were involved in the tragedy of 15 and 16 August. How is the Minister dealing with those requests?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department is considering all the requests that have been received, and the assessment, as I said, is being undertaken. With regard to the single farm payment, a derogation would be required in order to allow the Department to pay an interim advance, and, as the rule stands, there is no facility for paying an advance.

I am mindful that part-payments add to administration and have a negative impact on the payment programme overall. The Department is considering other ways in which payments can be prioritised to affected farmers, and how the less-favoured area compensatory allowance payments can be brought forward to January 2009 in an attempt to alleviate financial pressures on farmers. The Department is, therefore, examining all available options in order to achieve the best deal for farmers.

Dangerous Dogs Legislation

2. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the proposed changes to the dangerous dogs legislation.

(AQO 45/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In the Assembly on 20 November 2007, I announced a review of dangerous dogs and dog-fighting legislation. Since that announcement, my officials have been carrying out a scoping exercise on existing legislation with regard to all aspects of dog control, including dangerous dogs. This included examining the wide range of comments made by Members, district councils, the PSNI and a range of stakeholders. My officials have also engaged with their counterparts in Dublin and Britain.

Many of the issues that were raised during the scoping exercise centred on the enforcement of dog-control legislation, rather than necessarily calling for new legislation. As enforcement of the legislation is crucial to the Department's review, and many of the issues raised are about public safety, there have been calls for the PSNI to have a greater role in the enforcement of dog-control legislation.

After discussions with the PSNI and councils earlier in the year, I established a working group to draw up a memorandum of understanding that would clearly define roles and responsibilities, and provide a mechanism for co-operation in enforcing the current legislation. Having met the working group on 1 September, I am delighted to say that the memorandum of understanding is expected to be finalised soon.

The Department's review is ongoing. Once the scoping exercise is completed, I will consider a number of policy options, including new legislation.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister detail what, if any, changes will affect local councils' responsibility on the dangerous dogs legislation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: At this stage, councils are responsible for the local enforcement of dog control. My Department cannot pre-empt the outcome of the consultation. Under the Local Government Act 1972, district councils can already make by-laws according to the particular requirements of their areas. It would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome of the review, but it will be comprehensive and wide-ranging, and the control of dogs in public places will form part of my consideration.

I had an excellent meeting with representatives of all 26 district councils. They have several good ideas, some of which present challenges. My Department wants to ensure that district councils feel that they are playing a full part in the process and that their views are being taken into consideration.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How will the memorandum of understanding improve the situation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The memorandum of understanding is a fundamental component of my review of the dog control legislation. It will clearly set out the enforcement role of councils under the Dogs Order 1983, and it will detail the PSNI's role in tackling dog fighting as set out in the Welfare of Animals Act 1972. That will enable both parties to act swiftly and effectively, and it will remove some of the current concerns and ambiguity.

In addition, the memorandum will detail the mechanism through which the district councils will approach the PSNI, and vice versa, to secure full co-operation and support in incidents that involve dangerous dogs presenting a risk to the public or to council staff. It will clarify certain enforcement powers that, until now, have been unclear — for example, when seizing dangerous dogs that have been located as a result of breaking up a dogfighting ring — and the enforcement of current legislation will, therefore, be much more effective.

I am delighted with the progress that the council representatives and the PSNI have made on the memorandum, and I am grateful to them for their efforts. Even the process of drawing up the memorandum brought the enforcement bodies together, and both commented that they found the process beneficial and a useful forum in which to discuss mutual concerns. If, as a result of the review, I decide that new legislation

is appropriate, the memorandum will be amended as necessary to take account of the new legislative proposals.

Mr Cree: What proposals exist to address the issue that not only certain breeds of dogs are dangerous and, therefore, many dogs could fall outside the scope of the regulations?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are conflicting views about the effectiveness of banning dogs based on their breed or type, and my officials have discussed the issue with breed experts and district councils. It is a complex problem that requires careful and detailed consideration, and perhaps further discussion with experts and those with responsibility for enforcement. I also raised the matter during discussions with stakeholders. However, until the issue has been fully examined, I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the review.

Farm Modernisation Programme

4. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what will be offered to farmers under the farm modernisation programme; and what steps her Department is taking to make the application process straightforward. (AQO 104/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The draft list of eligible items is available on the Department's website. Financial support will be paid up to the maximum amount available for each item or 40% of invoiced eligible expenditure, whichever is less, subject to an overall cap of £5,000 per farm business.

My officials have met industry representatives frequently over the past months, and they have drawn up a list of items under the scheme that will be of value to farmers in several ways: the introduction of new technologies; animal health and welfare; occupational safety; increased business efficiency; hygiene control; and the enhancement of environmental status and energy efficiency.

I am keen that the application and procurement process should be as straightforward as possible, and, to that end, my Department will ensure that bureaucracy is kept to a minimum.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister has anticipated my supplementary question on the possibly prescriptive list of items that qualify for support.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Several areas of support have been discussed. I encourage Members to look at the extensive list of items that is available on the Department's website. However, that list is in draft form, and I would appreciate feedback on it.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister confirm that, under the farm modernisation programme, the maximum grant available to each farm business is £10,000, as set out in the measure sheets of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the farm modernisation scheme, the maximum amount of grant is £5,000, which is 40% of total expenditure. Financial support will be paid up to the maximum amount available for each item or 40% of invoiced eligible expenditure, whichever is less. Other schemes are in place that could bring that amount up to £10,000, but the ceiling under the farm modernisation scheme is £5,000.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has agreed that the maximum amount under the scheme is £5,000, a relatively modest sum. She stated earlier that she would seek to keep bureaucracy to a minimum. Will she state how that will be done? In many cases in the past, it seems that farmers have spent so much on accessing grants that it has barely been worth it.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The past, thank God, is in the past. I am now looking to the future and to ensuring how a service can be provided that is fit for purpose for the farming and rural community. My Department will use reference prices for the grants so that farmers will not have to get a number of quotes and, hopefully, the amount of bureaucracy can be minimised.

Several stakeholders, including the UFU, were keen for the limit to be £5,000 to allow the maximum number of farmers to avail themselves of the scheme. Although £5,000 might appear to be a modest amount, we want to try to enhance the livelihoods of as many farmers as possible through the scheme.

Mr P J Bradley: DARD advised the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development that a further £5 million would be added to the farm modernisation programme. Has the Minister secured that £5 million, and if so, was any funding taken from other agriculture schemes? I am concerned that some farmers might lose out if moneys were switched in that way.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We want to be sure that the available grants are spent. If there are areas in which the Department does not receive applications for grants, we will want to ensure that funding goes to areas in which a lot of applications have been made.

An amount of £2 million has been made available from the focus farms scheme. I do not have the full details, but flexibility is needed in the programme to ensure that money is spent and does not go unspent at

the end of the programme. The Department will shift money as the year progresses and we review the programme.

If there are areas that need further moneys, we will reconsider the overall package. Funding for the rural development programme comes from the overall budget of £530 million.

Adult Literacy

5. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to address the issue of adult literacy for farmers and other people in contact with her Department. (AQO 129/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department has a range of measures to improve access to its services for all farmers and others. Those include a customer service improvement programme, which seeks to improve the Department's service delivery through several major projects. Dissatisfaction with the volume, complexity and consistency of the Department's written communications is being addressed through a written communications project. Almost 600 staff who communicate in writing with the Department's customers have received plain English training, which aims to deliver the benefits of simplifying and improving the consistency and presentation of the Department's written communications with customers.

That will lead to fewer queries and complaints and improved understanding of the Department's service delivery among customers. Plain English principles are now being applied to all the Department's new publications, and best practice in written communications across the Department has been rolled out in the Veterinary Service, which will simplify key high-volume letters and guidance notes.

The Department's customer service improvement programme is also improving access to services through a new service delivery model, DARD Direct, and through the addition of new service delivery channel options. For example, the registration of cattle births and deaths via the telephone was successfully piloted in County Fermanagh earlier this year and, for the first time, applications for the new countryside management scheme could be made by telephone, which avoids the requirement to complete a form.

The Department is also replacing almost 100 office-based telephone numbers in telephone directories with 11 new numbers related to DARD's main areas of work. That will simplify the system for callers and, I hope, make it easier to find the right point of contact. In addition, an increasing range of services are available online.

My Department is also committed to supporting the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), which leads on the delivery of skills, education and training in the North and has committed significant resources to this issue.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise has worked with DEL to incorporate skills training within all level 2 education and training programmes for students who do not have a GCSE grade C in English or maths.

The Department's work is encouraging; we continue to explore ways in which to improve our services and increase accessibility. That improvement programme will include a focus on adult literacy, not only in relation to the Department's documents and publications but during face-to-face contact.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Minister for her response. When will the House see evidence of that improvement?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is already evidence of improvement to the Department's service delivery. DARD Direct — the new service delivery model — has been piloted in Fermanagh, and the Department will make a decision on its roll-out in the North after the equality impact assessment has been completed and all responses have been carefully considered. Plain English principles have been applied to the Department's recent publications, such as the booklet for the new countryside management scheme. Furthermore, as I mentioned previously, the application process was paperless and could be completed by telephone. I look forward to future improvements.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. However, the Minister did not mention individuals who want to improve their literacy by attending classes. Will she consider — as one method to improve adult literacy in rural areas — better and more accessible childcare facilities in the rural community? That measure would help people to attend classes.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Absolutely. The Member knows that that issue is close to my heart. The Department wants to improve literacy levels and extend people's choices in rural communities in areas of education, training and work. If possible, we will establish that support.

The average level of literacy in the North lags behind the average on these islands. The Department recognises that that can pose problems for farmers, and I acknowledge the ageing population of the farming community and the challenges that it faces. The Department wants to examine its options in conjunction with its partners, such as the Department for Employment and Learning.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's comments on the use of plain English; that is essential to avoid

mistakes and unnecessary bureaucracy. Will the Minister ensure that forms are shortened in order to make them easier to complete? What proposals will the Department make to allow greater flexibility to farmers who make genuine mistakes when completing forms?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That issue concerns me. However, penalties for incorrect completion of integrated administration and control system forms and single farm payment forms are imposed by Brussels — the Department is not involved in the application of those penalties.

In conjunction with the Department of the Environment, DARD has established a working group to reduce bureaucracy and red tape and to make forms shorter and simpler. Where possible, we will try to make those forms easier for farmers, and others, to understand.

Rural Development Programme and Funding

7. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress in establishing the new delivery mechanisms for axis 3 of the rural development programme; what elements of the wider programme will open; and when this will occur.

(AQO 105/09)

13. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the distribution of rural development funding between council clusters.

(AQO 121/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 7 and 13 together.

Axis 3 of the programme has progressed well, and, to date, we have established seven council clusters and seven local action groups. Those groups have worked with consultants during the summer, and we have received seven local rural development strategies. I want to thank, publicly, everyone involved in the development of the strategies, including the rural stakeholders, local action groups, councils, councillors and consultants.

My officials have completed an initial analysis and have held meetings with lead councils and consultants to discuss the strategies and, where necessary, strengthen them. I hope that we will soon be able to improve the completeness of the strategies and enter into contracts for initial allocations of the funding that I previously announced in the Assembly. My officials reported that all areas are working towards opening calls and establishing the necessary structures to enable us to hit the ground running.

Axis 1 of the rural development programme is partly operational. The marketing grant process began

last December, and the recruitment of focus farms started last month. A tender process is under way for agents to deliver the remainder of the axis-1 project. Farm modernisation, benchmarking, supply chain and farm-family options — including reskilling — will open over the course of the next few months.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. What effect does the Minister believe the present economic situation will have on the uptake of the axis-3 measure?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: To help to promote the rural development programme and its uptake, it is important to promote the opportunities and benefits that can be derived from the programme under its various measures. To that end, an advertising and publicity campaign will be launched over the coming months aimed at advising farmers, rural communities and the public at large of the various funding measures that will be made available. Under axis 3, the campaign will highlight opportunities for rural people to avail themselves of funding to promote prosperity in local communities, create employment opportunities, encourage tourism and encourage sustainability through diversification projects.

As well as a centrally driven publicity campaign, local action groups and councils will be encouraged to promote axis-3 opportunities in their specific areas and to seek local applications for funding. As part of the Programme for Government, my Department was allocated £10 million to tackle rural poverty and social exclusion. My officials are working to develop a framework for the efficient and targeted allocation of that funding, building on the findings of research that was commissioned in spring 2008 and subsequent discussions with other Departments and stakeholders.

A range of priorities has been identified, including fuel poverty, rural transport and access, community development and rural childcare. Officials are developing potential programmes for those and more general poverty and exclusion issues that face rural communities. I hope to approve the final framework for action before the end of September 2008, with the first scheme — the rural childcare programme — launching before the end of the year. I also hope that actions to address rural fuel poverty — in conjunction with the Department for Social Development — can be implemented soon.

Mr Ross: It is fairly clear that there is a gross imbalance in the distribution of funding among the various council areas. Will the Minister inform the House whether an equality impact assessment was carried out in respect of the distribution of funding?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Many of the programmes that are administered by my Department are subject to equality impact assessments.

I believe that the Member was referring to the animation funds that were offered to councils to encourage them to set up programmes. Those allocations were based on a variety of measures and indicators to try to ensure that money went to areas that needed it most. From that point of view, there certainly was an equality basis to the process. We had to ensure that areas that were most financially deprived received the funding that was available to them.

Mr McFarland: How much of the axis-3 funding can be claimed for administration purposes through the delivery mechanisms?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I do not have that figure to hand. From memory, I think that it is about 10%. If all of that money is not used, it can be put back into programmes.

I have been advised that the figure is up to 20%. As I said, that money can go back into programmes if it is not spent on administration.

Bluetongue

8. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's measures to protect against the bluetongue disease.
(AQO 91/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In light of the outbreaks of bluetongue in northern Europe since August 2006 and in England in September 2007, all susceptible animals imported from outside this island are isolated, housed and restricted on the farm of destination. Those animals are post-import tested twice before the restrictions are lifted.

Over the past month, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) identified four separate consignments of imports to England from the continent that contained bluetongue-infected animals. As a result, I re-emphasised my message to the industry here — the risks of importing must be carefully considered, particularly in order to assess the possible costs to the business of the importer and to the wider industry.

Following my announcement in May 2008 that I had decided to purchase a supply of vaccine for use in an emergency, my officials have been working with the vaccine manufacturer Merial to supply almost two million doses of vaccine. It is anticipated that the vaccine will be available in October 2008. However, under EU rules, a vaccine can be used only in an area that has disease and is part of a protection zone. It is, therefore, essential that farmers do not become complacent. The best preventative measure is not to purchase animals from bluetongue-affected areas.

I and my officials continue to liaise closely with our counterparts in Britain and the South to monitor the bluetongue situation. We are working closely with the South to co-ordinate our preventative actions to protect the entire island from bluetongue.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Rural Library Services

1. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to develop library facilities for the 34% of the population who live in rural areas, and are currently served by mobile libraries.
(AQO 35/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): The mobile library service is currently served by a fleet of 29 mobiles, operated by the five education and library boards. The service is highly valued by its clients in rural areas, and I am aware that it provides a much-needed service.

When the Northern Ireland library authority is established, there will be business managers and district managers in each area with responsibility for developing and maintaining partnerships at a local level and with other statutory services and the community and voluntary sectors. The Department has provisionally profiled funding of £540,000 over the next two years for the purchase of mobile libraries, subject to business cases being submitted and approved.

There are no plans to make significant changes to the delivery of mobile library services in advance of the establishment of the new library authority in April 2009, which will provide a catalyst to review and develop current services that range from book lending to free Internet access and, in some areas in Fermanagh, post office services.

Mr Gardiner: I am disappointed with the Minister's response. I would prefer that he consider the matter now, because a high number of responses in the May 2006 rural-proofing report, 'Northern Ireland's Libraries: A Framework for Change', indicated that mobile libraries were the best option for rural populations. I would prefer that more work be put into that, and that more libraries, particularly in rural areas, should be established as soon as possible.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am sorry that the Member feels disappointed. Perhaps I should outline the number and spread of mobile library provision: Belfast has two mobile libraries, plus one vehicle for nursing-home visits; the North Eastern

Education and Library Board has seven mobiles; the South Eastern Board has five mobiles; the Southern Board has four mobiles, plus two for housebound people; and the Western Education and Library Board, which, significantly, is much more rural than most other areas, has eight mobile libraries, three of which serve housebound people.

Of course, that provision will be subject to review, and representation can be made to the boards in advance of April 2009 and to the library authority after April 2009. Therefore, if the honourable Member or anyone else feels that more could be done in rural areas, I encourage them to make such representations, and their cases will be listened to.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has DCAL worked specifically with senior citizens' groups to promote the provision of mobile libraries in rural communities?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I mentioned several partnership areas, particularly in rural areas, in which the boards are attempting to promote partnership arrangements. Senior citizens' groups, although not exclusively, are among the most frequent users of mobile libraries, and they may make whatever representations they wish. The boards are keen to set up partnerships, such as those that I mentioned in Fermanagh, and I am sure that they would also be keen to do so in the honourable Member's constituency.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his general commitment to the Library Service; however, given the number of libraries that have been closed in recent years, is he fully aware of people's fears and concerns about the service's future? Those people would like confirmation that there will be no further diminution of library services in rural areas. Will the Minister offer such an assurance?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I shall attempt to recap briefly, concentrating on the Member's area, which is covered by the Western Education and Library Board, but also the rest of Northern Ireland.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, for example, recently discontinued visits to schools by public library mobiles. However, there may have been a perception by the board that the Western Board had started a new service when the Southern Board services had stopped. That is not the case. The Western Board added two new stops at schools to its existing schedule three years ago and now stops at 12 schools. The boards have informed me that there have been no significant changes to mobile library services in other board areas.

The South Eastern Board also has public library mobile stops outside five schools. That service is additional to the schools library service and operates

after school hours and outside school premises. I understand that there is some concern about the provision of library services, particularly in rural areas. I encourage Members and the public who have concerns to contact the relevant board if they feel it is not providing an adequate service. However, at the moment, there appears to be a reasonably adequate, well-used service. I hope that there will be no further library closures in Northern Ireland.

Cultural Venues: Summer Opening

2. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many (i) museum; (ii) historic and (iii) heritage-related venues have been open to the public and tourists during the summer months.

(AQO 33/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Of the areas in which my Department has a direct interest — the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland — the Member is aware that the Ulster Museum is closed for major refurbishment and will reopen in the summer of 2009.

The other sites in the national museums estate: the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, the Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh, and the Armagh County Museum have been open throughout the summer months and remain open.

My Department also has funding responsibility for the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium. Both the Armagh Planetarium and the Astropark at the Observatory have been open during the summer months.

With regard to other local and voluntary museums: information available to my Department indicates that 34 non-national museums were open, mostly for the summer months. Of those, 22 are open all year. The other 12 are seasonal and are open during the summer.

There are hundreds of other historical and heritage sites in Northern Ireland which are open throughout the year, the Giant's Causeway being the prime example. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency provides access to approximately 183 historical monuments and 13 natural heritage sites across Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for that information.

The Minister is aware of the highly successful European Heritage Weekend that many people have recently enjoyed, which involved the free opening to the public of private buildings and historical sites all over Northern Ireland.

Will he undertake and investigate with his Department of the Environment ministerial colleague a possible extension of this popular and innovative initiative?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question, which raises a pertinent and topical issue.

The weekend past was the eleventh year in which Northern Ireland heritage sites have participated in the Europe-wide programme. The Member is right: Northern Ireland is deeply involved in the initiative. I urge all Members to take the opportunity to visit historical sites in their own areas. No MLA ever declines an opportunity for a photo call, which I am sure that the local press would be happy to facilitate.

I congratulate Armagh City and District Council for its participation in the event. I mentioned the Planetarium and the story of European space exploration. Therefore, the European Heritage Weekend scheme is excellent, it is in its eleventh year, and I am happy to accept the honourable Member's suggestion that I talk to my colleague at the Department of the Environment about how to recognise and expand the scheme in the future.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister use his influence and position to urge the Ministry of Defence to develop a museum and heritage site at St Patrick's Barracks in Ballymena to reflect the role, activities and history of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment in that town? If necessary, will the Minister commit to providing some resource funding to enable such a project to go ahead?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his innovative question; it is a project worth pursuing. We do not know what is planned for locations such as St Patrick's Barracks and other bases, but the principle of establishing a military-type museum there, with its long tradition, should be supported and recognised. I know, for instance, that the Ministry of Defence is already speaking to National Museums Northern Ireland.

At this early stage, I do not want to commit to resources that I may not be able to meet, but it is a worthwhile suggestion, and I am happy to facilitate any dialogue that may take place and to look at developments beyond those discussions.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that the simultaneous closure of the Ulster Museum and City Hall is detrimental to tourism development in Belfast?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for her question. The closure of City Hall is a matter that she should take up with some of her colleagues, a number of whom, as well as being Members of this legislature, sit on Belfast City Council. It is difficult when large structures that are visited and used frequently by the indigenous population of Northern Ireland and by visitors must close for major renovation, particularly if they are in the same locality. I understand the Member's frustration at those closures.

One good thing is that the Ulster Museum will, it is hoped, reopen in about eight months — in time for the next tourist season. Belfast City Hall is a matter for the city council authorities, but it is hoped that those renovating such large, major structures that tourists visit will co-ordinate their work to ensure that domestic and overseas visitors experience the least disruption possible.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Shared History and Culture

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the upcoming commemorations of the Plantation of Ulster as an opportunity for greater understanding by communities of a shared history and culture. (AQO 120/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I encourage the use of the commemorations as an opportunity to enhance knowledge and understanding of an important period in our shared history and culture. My Department is involved in facilitating a variety of activities on the Plantation of Ulster, which include a documentary series, exhibitions and the publication of educational resources.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister, not only for his answer but for his visit to my constituency of South Belfast on Saturday and for the useful work that he did there. Given the Plantation's historical importance and its global implications — in some ways, the Plantation of Ulster was used as a template for colonialism — does the Minister agree that it is important that our commemorations be academically based, properly funded and involve all communities? Does he agree that, in that context, they will represent an opportunity for community development and community relations here? If the commemorations are managed properly, they will have tremendous tourist potential.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. I was happy to visit his constituency on Saturday. The MITRE Trust sports injury clinic at Musgrave Park Hospital is an excellent facility. I enjoyed the visit; it was tremendous.

3.45 pm

I hope that when the Member and others see the outline of the presentation on the Plantation of Ulster their concerns will be resolved. For example, the Ulster-Scots Agency plans to republish the Reverend George Hill's historical account of the Plantation of Ulster at the commencement of the seventeenth century. It will be accompanied by digital images of the Raven Phillips maps that are held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. The Linen Hall Library is planning an exhibition of contemporary books and pamphlets, and it also plans to hold at least one public lecture.

We will also have presentations in other areas, and I hope that the Member's concerns will be eased by the professionalism of those holding the commemorations. I hope also that the Member will join me in ensuring that everyone plays their part in commemorating what was a most significant part of our history.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answer. On the related theme of the Flight of the Earls — and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council has done some work already relating to the Flight of the Earls and the Plantation — is the Minister prepared to meet the O'Neill Country Historical Society, which is based in Benburb, to discuss plans to mark battle sites and trails in that area? Such work would highlight both events.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The short answer is yes; of course I am prepared to meet that group and discuss its proposals. It is imperative that we try to ensure that the history of Northern Ireland — including its history in the mists of time — is done in a way that stacks up historically rather than being portrayed in the way that it sometimes is. I am more than content to have the meeting suggested by the Member.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate the number and type of events that are being planned to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the Plantation of Ulster? Will he indicate the geographical spread of those events and the bodies involved? Furthermore, will he confirm that BBC Northern Ireland and UTV will be encouraged to cover that anniversary in a way that mirrors their approach to the recent and equally notable anniversary of the Flight of the Earls?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have already outlined some of the areas raised by the Member, and I hope that he heard that information.

I understand that Northern Ireland Screen is partly funding a documentary series on the Plantation. I hope that the anniversary will be represented across the area where the Plantation of Ulster occurred, and I look forward to seeing that happen. I expect any such representation to be accurate and to give us a broad view of the past 400 years so that everyone across Northern Ireland can feel that the representation is accurate and that the information presented in it stacks up.

I expect that the representation will be something that school children, as well as those of us who are much older, can see as portraying a sense of pride and a sense of belonging in our historical roots, which go back so much further than others do. I expect that to be the case and I certainly look forward to it, as I hope the Member does.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Minister's recognition of the need for greater understanding of a shared history and culture. In that context, will the

Minister comment on the role of Loughmacrory gaelic football club in the recent twentieth anniversary commemoration of the deaths of three IRA terrorists at Drumnakilly? That commemoration included a children's GAA competition that was named after two of the terrorists, as well as events in the GAA club room. Does not such activity militate against the creation of a shared and better future?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question; he raises relevant and timely points. I hope that Members across the Floor of the House, as well as people from communities across Northern Ireland, will reflect on the issue that the Member has raised, just as I have done over the past few weeks. When there is positive movement among GAA clubs, it is right and proper that we welcome it, as I did on Saturday in south Belfast.

Equally, there should be no avoiding areas where there has been no progress, and where it would appear that a club's property is being used to commemorate acts of violence and terror. The Member has alluded to one such instance, and I have been informed of several more. In fact, over the past few weeks such has been the volume of incidents allegedly taking place on GAA property that I have written to the provincial director of the Ulster Council of the GAA, drawing his attention to the situation.

Where we see progress and people moving forward positively, we should, and have, recognised that progress. However, we must condemn those who refuse to move and situations where there are those who still appear to try and mix politics and throwbacks to violence with sport. I am awaiting a response from the GAA on those incidents. I hope that we can move into a future in which sport remains the preserve of athletes and where other issues are left in the past.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Elite Facilities Programme

5. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on implementation of the elite facilities programme. (AQO 94/09)

12. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much public investment his Department intends to make on elite facilities in the lead up to the London Olympics. (AQO 72/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will take questions 5 and 12 together with your permission, Mr Speaker. The elite facilities capital programme is a competition that is being managed by Sport Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department. Stage two of the programme was launched on 25 June 2008. Fourteen projects were short listed, and applicant organisations

have until 28 November 2008 to submit their outline business cases.

The range of facilities under consideration includes: cycling; fencing; table tennis; and volleyball. Also included are: basketball; sailing; athletics; rowing; tennis and equestrian facilities. North Down Borough Council has been selected as the preferred developer for the 50-metre swimming pool, and work is progressing on that project. The 2008-2011 budget provides around £145 million for all sports, including £111.6 million for capital funding, some of which has been provisionally assigned to the proposal to develop a multi-sports stadium. Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the allocation of the capital budget and will work closely with project sponsors on the delivery of the programme.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer. I am sure that he will join me in congratulating all of the competitors residing in Northern Ireland who had success at the Olympics with the British and Irish teams.

I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, specifically in relation to the aquatics centre. With respect to the generalities of moving forward on the elite facilities programme, I am conscious that the timescale between now and the 2012 Olympics is tight. Will the Minister assure the House that his Department will work closely with Sport NI to process the outline and final business cases as quickly as possible, thus ensuring that we can deliver as much as possible ahead of the Olympic Games?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. I join with him in congratulating each of the competitors from Northern Ireland who performed so well. Preparation time is an issue that the Department is acutely aware of, and we will want to work closely with those who are successful at the end of November.

There has been much speculation about whether a velodrome will be built following the success of Wendy Houvenhagel, or whether different types of facilities will be built in other parts of Northern Ireland. When we reach 28 November, we will be clear about the likely outcome of the competition. At that time, the Department will be working speedily and comprehensively, building a delivery mechanism to enable us to take advantage of whatever we can get from the 2012 Olympic Games, whether that is providing facilities for training or for visiting teams.

A whole range of prospects is opening up for Northern Ireland in advance of 2012, and I have no doubt that the honourable Member's constituency is one that will take supreme advantage of that.

Mr Burns: I welcome the investment in the elite facilities programme for athletics, and I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council.

However, does the Minister agree that we must also seriously increase investment at grass-roots level, to encourage the next generation of athletes to become involved in sport in the first instance?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Again, the short answer is yes. The honourable Member refers to Antrim Borough Council, which has submitted an application for athletics that has progressed to stage two of the elite facilities capital programme. Progress will be made towards the end of November. However, I cannot comment on the success of that or the other applications. Yes, we must work closely to benefit as many athletes as possible in Northern Ireland. We have seen the success that concentration of effort and skill can deliver.

I was outside the Building today with karate enthusiasts who have returned with medals, and that is what can be achieved when excellence is married with the resource applied. We must, and will, deploy all the resources necessary to ensure that that success is replicated.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I hope that the Minister will join me in congratulating our Beijing Paralympics competitors. Michael McKillop and Jason Smyth who have acquired gold medals in the past few days.

However, as regards preparing for such major competitions in the future, will the Minister concede that there is an east-of-the-Bann bias in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure? West of the Bann, facilities are not being earmarked for development for training centres or centres of excellence. I refer the Minister to Youth Sport Omagh, which has an eight-lane international-standard floodlit running track, Omagh Leisure Complex and, also in Cookstown, Mid Ulster Sports Arena. I would like the Minister to concede that there is an east-of-the-Bann bias in the geographical location of facilities being developed.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Coming from where I do, and representing the constituency that I do, that was one of the first questions that I put to officials when I saw the list. The answer is fairly straightforward and dramatic. Twenty-seven original applications were entered into the competition, and three were from the west of the Bann. Unfortunately, only the entry from Coleraine Academical Institution met the criteria. However, it is vital that sporting excellence is seen to be delivered right across Northern Ireland — north, south, east and west. The entire country of Northern Ireland should benefit.

Any individual or group, the other two unsuccessful applicants or anyone else who feels that there is the possibility of delivering some form of facility that can help develop sporting excellence, should pursue other potential funding opportunities with Sport NI. I, and

other MLAs who represent constituencies in the west, will do our best to try to progress those applications so that sporting excellence is spread across the country.

Mr McNarry: With the demise of the Maze stadium, will the Minister confirm that there will be more money set aside and available for other elite projects?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the honourable Member for his question — even though it seems a little presumptuous. As yet, I have not made a statement about the Maze stadium. However, a paper will be prepared for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take to the next Executive meeting, which I hope will be sooner rather than later, and that will enable us to make progress.

4.00 pm

Whatever the outcome of the current process, we must ensure that all of those sports benefit. That outcome is very close and, hopefully, we will seal the deal by making the announcement very soon.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Republican Activity

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the increasing levels of Republican activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland — [*Mr Elliott.*]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “of” in line 1 and insert

“violent dissident republican and continued loyalist activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; welcomes the increased level of political and community support for the PSNI in the face of this threat; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the PSNI and looks forward to further asserting these principles through the devolution of policing and justice matters.” — [*Mrs D Kelly.*]

Lord Morrow: Needless to say, I support the motion. It is regrettable that there are some who seek to muddy the waters on the issue. The motion is a genuine attempt to address and articulate the serious situation that is developing in our country. It is regrettable that some seek to play politics with the matter. I refer particularly to the SDLP, who, rather than standing up and being counted, always duck and dive and try to give a reason why they cannot be precise in supporting a motion and condemning the IRA in whatever form.

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

The situation in our country is deteriorating by the day — an indication that the PSNI needs the full support of the community. Sinn Féin has told us that it supports the PSNI, but it has more to do — people are not judged on what they say but on what they do. The challenge facing Sinn Féin is to clarify what lengths it will go to to support the agencies of law and order. Does Sinn Féin support those agencies to the extent that its members are prepared to go to local police stations and give the names of those that they believe are involved in these activities? Those involved in such activity are either former colleagues or, perhaps, still colleagues of those in Sinn Féin. It strikes Members on this Bench that there is collusion — at the very least — between Sinn Féin, the Provos and the dissidents.

There have been a number of arrests in the immediate aftermath of very serious incidents but, significantly, no one has been charged. Thankfully, no one lost their life in Lisnaskea, but the situation could have been more serious. Police were responding to an emergency call and were ambushed by a rocket attack. The officers might have been murdered if the device had detonated properly.

After the incident, the Deputy Chief Constable announced that the bomb contained Semtex explosive

that had been owned by the Provisional IRA. One is left wondering how that Semtex got to the dissidents. The folk on the Benches opposite know who those dissidents are because they are either former colleagues or, as I have said, current colleagues. The Deputy Chief Constable said that the device was similar to those used during the Troubles. He thought that the Semtex looked like it came from old stock, and that it was Semtex which came into the Province around the time that the IRA got its supply.

We know that dissidents have had access to weaponry due to the passing of personnel. Therefore, I am not surprised that they have access to Semtex. I was led to believe that the IRA had put its weapons beyond use in an effort to embrace the new dispensation that we are hopefully entering into. If the SDLP and Sinn Féin want to clearly and unambiguously demonstrate their intolerance for violence, both now and in the future, the amendment should be withdrawn and the motion should have no ifs, ands or buts.

Members may want to score a few political points against one other, but this is neither the time nor the place to do so. I suspect that there will be plenty of opportunities to do so in the future. However, the SDLP should not play with people's lives. It should state clearly that it is on the side of law and order. The SDLP cannot be on both sides, because there is no place for that. The reasonable and rational response would be for the SDLP to withdraw its amendment and support the motion unequivocally. Much more could, and should, be said today, but time does not permit it. Five minutes is seldom long enough to explore the issues.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. In supporting the amendment, I find it incredible that the motion makes no reference to the ongoing loyalist violence and criminality that remains a scourge on communities across the North. The last Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) report to deal with loyalist activity — and the DUP and the UUP give much weight to those reports — concluded that mainstream loyalist organisations were continuing to engage in violent activity, including gun and bomb attacks. I did not hear the UUP or the DUP mention those attacks during the debate, but again, we were told that we should not mention any of that because to do so would only muddy the water.

The IMC report says that criminality is widespread among some of the organisations, and that it includes racketeering, loan-sharking and drug-dealing. I did not hear the DUP or the UUP mention any of those activities during the debate — let us not mention any of that; it would merely muddy the water. Loyalists continue to recruit and carry out punishment attacks and have shown no willingness to put their weapons beyond use — however, let us not mention all of that, for it is only muddying the water.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No.

Are the proposers of the motion not aware of all that, or do they find some violence more acceptable than others? Let me make it clear to everyone: as far as Sinn Féin is concerned, there is no place in this society for any violent or criminal activity whatsoever. Sinn Féin is equally clear in that it supports the PSNI, the rule of law and the court. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board that holds the PSNI to account and as someone who carries out their statutory responsibilities fully and effectively.

Sinn Féin is also clear in its condemnation of the armed actions carried out by so-called dissident republican groups. It is important to make a clear distinction between what the motion refers to as republican activity and the actions carried out by those micro-groups. I do not regard the actions of those organisations as republican activity. In the current political dispensation, there is an alternative to armed struggle. The actions being taken are futile — they are counterproductive and anti-republican. The attacks will not deliver republicanism's objectives, which is why the republican community has overwhelmingly endorsed Sinn Féin's strategy and rejected those micro-groups.

The people in our community and across the 32 counties of Ireland who support us recognise that the only republican activity that will achieve a 32-county socialist republic is the kind of activity being carried out daily by Sinn Féin activists the length and breadth of Ireland. As we all know, the days of majoritarianism are over. Political unionism does not do equality, power sharing or partnership government very well, despite signing up for it. Well, their days of one-party rule are also over.

With that in mind, I repeat Sinn Féin's call for organisations to desist from their activities and leave the stage. Sinn Féin leaders have stated that position publicly and consistently. After all, we are now in a new political dispensation, with equality, human rights and partnership arrangements at the heart of Government institutions. I hope that the debate will encourage unionist leaders to take the same robust approach when dealing with the ongoing violence that emanates from their community. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Spratt: I support the motion. Over recent months, we have witnessed an escalation in attempts by dissident republicans to bring havoc, mayhem, injury and death back to the streets of Northern Ireland. The most recent incident was an attempted murder attack last week, which, but for the grace of God, could have resulted in serious injury or death.

As someone who served in the Royal Ulster Constabulary for more than 30 years, I know how

PSNI officers feel when they are being targeted by terrorists. The sole target group for dissidents are the PSNI men and women who are tasked with protecting us all. I wish to put on record my gratitude, and, I hope, that of everyone in the House for the efforts of PSNI officers who courageously go about their daily duties in the midst of such threats. For that reason, the proposed reduction in the transitional allowance paid to PSNI officers should be scrapped immediately. Our police officers continue to face a serious threat; therefore, the payment must continue to be paid at its current rate. I urge the security Minister to act immediately to stop the Police Negotiating Board's agreement from being implemented.

Individuals who target police officers endanger more people than just those officers; they endanger a farmer in rural Rosslea who discovers a bomb, a schoolteacher in Lisburn, or innocent passers-by driving through Lisnaskea on a Saturday night. Such individuals have no regard for the sanctity of human life. Furthermore, the dissident terrorist has no respect for the majority of Northern Ireland people. A return to violence is not what people in our communities want. They want the Assembly to exercise good government over them in a peaceful and stable environment. Of course, instability is exactly what will feed such organisations within dissident republicanism. That is why Sinn Féin should sit at the Executive table on Thursday and make decisions for the betterment of Northern Ireland.

Much of the dissident activity has been focused in the west of the Province. I spoke to my colleagues from Fermanagh and South Tyrone and to members of the public when I was in the area with my colleague Arlene Foster, and I know that they are alarmed and disgusted by the recent attacks in the Fermanagh area. The county has suffered greatly at the hands of the provisional IRA, and many of my former colleagues in the RUC paid the ultimate sacrifice. The last thing that the decent people of that county want is a return to violence on the streets. It is, therefore, vital that the proposed reduction in the number of police stations is not advanced in that area. Police stations provide a vital service to vulnerable border towns, and they offer an operational and physical, visible reassurance of every aspect of security.

I commend my party leader, the First Minister, for taking time to visit officers who suffered in the recent attacks in Fermanagh. Good morale among PSNI officers is vital, and his commitment and interest shown in the stories of those officers will be a significant morale boost to the force in general.

We do not want the peace on our streets to disappear. I hope that this week's events will show politics working effectively in this devolved Administration. I support the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion and to give it my full support. The motion is relevant to the wider debate about whether the Assembly and Executive should consider the devolution of policing and justice powers. It is essential that the Assembly and all the parties in it unequivocally and explicitly affirm their absolute and unwavering commitment to the democratic process, the rule of law and the maintenance and promotion of a stable and violence-free civil society in Northern Ireland.

Political maturity and a party's democratic credentials are deeply bound up with the reaction to the maintenance of good civil order. There must be more than just lip-service. A politically mature party must actively engage with the realities. Political maturity means more than just condemning violence and telling dissidents to "catch themselves on". It means working actively with the forces of law and order — the forces of law and order that belong to all peaceful political parties and who are governed by the political parties in the Assembly — to eradicate the dissident republican threat to democratic government and to the well-being and safety of all our citizens.

Serious issues were raised today by Mr William Frazer, who lives in my constituency and who has a public profile. It has been widely reported in the press that, in his view, the IRA was aware of a dissident republican bomb targeting the security forces in Jonesborough in south Armagh. Sinn Féin has risen to prominence on the back of IRA power; it achieved its place at the conference table through its proclaimed ability to end IRA violence. My constituent Mr Frazer alleges that the IRA was aware of the existence of a dissident republican bomb targeting the PSNI, and, although the IRA was not party to that activity, it appears that it did nothing about it, nor did it do anything to stop the bomb.

It is that lack of active, engaged and affirmative support for the Police Service and for the safety of the public that causes people in the unionist community to question the wisdom of transferring policing and justice powers at this time. Sinn Féin's attitude causes people in my community to ask, quite rightly, just what and who are we dealing with. The increase in dissident republican activity and its spread across the Province gives serious cause for concern. It does not create the right climate in which the transfer of policing and justice powers can be debated in the necessary cool and rational way.

The recent dissident republican bomb at Ballyskeagh, between Lisburn and Belfast, and other incidents in north Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland, takes that activity squarely out of border areas and the west of the Province. It serves to remind us of the problem.

We should not need reminded, because what happens in the west of the Province and in border areas is as important as what happens in Belfast. People in the west and in the border areas very often feel that people in Belfast and in the east of the Province do not properly understand their alarm at republican activity. It is clear that after recent events, they do now.

I ask Sinn Féin what sort of example it is setting. It is holding up meetings of the Executive and the business that affects the lives of ordinary men and women on all sides of the community divide in Northern Ireland.

The political instability that Sinn Féin is generating gives comfort to dissident republican gunmen and bombers. That party should give a signal that it respects the integrity of the Assembly as a democratic institution, and does not regard it purely as a bargaining counter in its ongoing political negotiations. I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I support the amendment because I and my party believe that it will make for a better resolution. We believe that the original motion is slackly worded in its reference to "republican activity", and conspicuously fails to include reference to loyalist paramilitarism. The motion, as amended by the SDLP, is equally strong. I believed that it would be accepted by the whole House, and was surprised to hear what Lord Morrow said. Before he spoke, I believed that the amendment was going to command the support of the House generally.

I ask Lord Morrow not to divide the House on the issue, because that will not send out a good signal from the Assembly. The SDLP amendment is absolutely strong in its condemnation of paramilitary violence from all sources, and I ask the Member to give the support of his party to that amendment.

It is most regrettable that we are discussing such a motion 14 years since the first IRA ceasefire. A loyalist ceasefire came soon after, with words, we recall, of "abject" apology. The matters that are under discussion belong in the past, but there is good reason to discuss a motion on continued activity by paramilitary groups, because it remains a very serious problem. As well as the obvious serious threat to life, a number of serious incidents have occurred over recent months.

The latest IMC report states that there has been one victim every five days. There have been shootings, bombings, and the use of incendiary devices. The PSNI reports that there have been 46 such incidents in just a four-month period, up to July of this year. Both dissident republican and loyalist paramilitary groups are active, albeit in significantly different ways.

Dolores Kelly rightly referred to the devolution of policing and justice. I shall refer more generally to the connection between organised violence and the stability of the political institutions. There is such a

connection; it is not a simple one of cause and effect, but it is nonetheless, real and important.

There is rarely such a thing as mindless violence — it has a context. The more successful we make the political project, the more it is seen to be solving our social problems. The more politicians of all parties are seen to work together, the less space there is for others to argue that violence is the only dynamic for change. The failure of the two parties in OFMDFM to co-operate is leaving an empty space, which others will use for their own ugly purposes.

I will comment separately on republican and loyalist activity. One should never forget the extent to which dissident republicans are driven by political ideology. They fundamentally believe in the illegitimacy of Northern Ireland, and the Irish state, and that they have the inherited the right to oppose the status quo by force of arms. They are prepared to risk their lives for that belief, and are prepared to take the lives of others, including civilians.

We cannot and should not forget that we have recently marked the tenth anniversary of the Omagh bombing. That bomb was deliberately planted in the street of a busy market town on a Saturday afternoon. I am entitled to remind Sinn Féin that, for many years, they used exactly the same language, and shared the ideology, of the dissident republicans.

Earlier today, I heard Conor Murphy condemn the 100 lb bomb at Jonesborough, using exactly the same words that the SDLP used in relation to the IRA. I mention that because more needs to be heard from Sinn Féin to demonstrate that it has fully repudiated the ideology of violence. I noted what John O'Dowd said earlier in the debate, when he rightly said that republican activity is a perfectly legitimate form of political activity, but that violence is not, and that he had no difficulty in condemning violent activity. However, much of what comes from Sinn Féin, particularly in the way in which it deals with the past — or fails to deal with the past — and how it deals with commemorations relating to the past, stands in stark contrast and contradiction of that language. We need to hear from Sinn Féin clearly that violence never is — and never was — the way forward.

John Hume was right when he said that Ireland consisted of its people and that they would be united only by agreement. Dissident republicans are determined in their attempts to murder police officers. I condemn that and pray that they never succeed. However, should they ever succeed, the Assembly must not be drawn into an inappropriate response.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr O'Loan: To deliver fully its political role and functions, the Assembly must leave the actions of all paramilitaries to one side.

Mr Moutray: I represent one of the areas where the upsurge in republican violence has been most noticeable. In Craigavon, we recently witnessed disgraceful scenes where, using tactics that they learned from the Provisional IRA, dissident republican groups sought to lure the police into the area with a message about a suspect device and employed young people as a decoy so that gunmen could open fire on the police.

I condemn and denounce such activity that takes us back to the dark days when such events were a regular occurrence. I empathise with the victims of that particular crime and those who sustained injuries. I commend the police on their handling of the escapade and their attempts to safeguard the local community — their officers were functioning and operating in a difficult and volatile environment.

On this occasion, cars were damaged, people and police officers were pelted with petrol bombs, blast bombs, stones and bottles but, most distressingly, the lives of officers were put at risk when live rounds were fired. That is totally unacceptable, and I wholeheartedly support the PSNI and the courts in their attempts to implement the rule of law and bring those who participated in such activity to justice, not only in Craigavon but across Northern Ireland and beyond.

The legacy left by the past of mainstream Irish republicanism continues to haunt the people of Northern Ireland. Although moving on is paramount, we must not forget what has gone before. That past still casts a long shadow over the Province, which is further reason for the remaining vestiges of the republican movement's structures to be put away for good. The debate affords an opportunity for the House to speak with one voice. For some Members, voicing condemnation of such violence and demonstrating support for the rule of law, the courts and the PSNI will come very easily.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the meetings between the First Minister and leading members of the DUP with loyalist paramilitaries, which were held to try to take the guns out of circulation and out of politics, show a commitment by the DUP and unionism to reduce loyalist violence? Does he also agree with Hugh Orde's statement that the main threat to peace in Northern Ireland is from dissident republicans?

Mr Moutray: I concur with my colleague's comments. I have no hesitation in condemning violence, regardless of its source.

At times, democrats will criticise individual officers, operations and decisions made by police personnel, but we will support both the police service and those who risk so much to deliver that service. For others, that is

a relatively new experience. It is good that, instead of giving political cover to those who murder police officers, Sinn Féin has begun to condemn such people. However, it should never have been any other way — they should not expect praise.

There are people who appear utterly incapable of ever living side by side with their neighbours. There are those who have no faith in the strength of their arguments, no regard for the will of the people and no confidence in the democratic process. Such people still believe that death and destruction is the way to achieve their ends — they are wrong. Just as the Provisional IRA were wrong, the dissident republicans are wrong. It is the duty of all democrats to condemn them. That is right and proper and must be reaffirmed in the debate.

4.30 pm

It is also the duty of all democrats to support the legitimate forces of law and order in the pursuit of such people. That must include support for investigation and for the use of intelligence, apprehension of suspects, operation of the courts and imposition of sentences that match the severity of the crimes that have been committed. It must also include a call from the Chamber for the maximum possible sentence to be imposed on those who are responsible for those activities. My party has no difficulty in signing up to all of those elements. I hope that every side of the House will do likewise. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the debate and the opportunity to contribute to it. When Sinn Féin endorsed the Belfast Agreement in 1998, splits emerged in the republican movement. It became clear that there were elements that were unhappy with the prospect of a return to Stormont and the sight of Sinn Féin Ministers administering British rule in Northern Ireland on behalf of the British Crown.

Shadowy groups emerged, such as the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA. The Omagh bombing gave a terrible demonstration of the devastation that could be created by a relatively small number of fanatics who have little support. The past 10 years have been relatively peaceful — certainly, more peaceful than the three preceding decades. That has largely been due to the sterling work of the security forces, who have worked tirelessly to ensure that people who advocate violence for political ends are not given the opportunity to regroup and impose their will on the rest of us. I pay tribute to the bravery of all the people who played their part throughout the years — not least the men and women of the RUC and the UDR, with whom I served for 14 years during the height of the Troubles — in defending society from fascists who seek to impose their will through the use or threat of terror and the force of arms.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member agree that his party made a huge mistake when it signed up to the agreement which let terrorists out of jail? Had those terrorists still been in jail, there would not be so many active dissidents now.

Mr Armstrong: In 2002, we brought down the Executive, and we were not going to go back until —

Mr T Clarke: You let them out of jail.

Mr Armstrong: OK, right.

In recent times, a worrying trend has emerged. There has long been an undercurrent of violence and intolerance among republicans, particularly younger elements, which manifests itself in attacks on Orange Halls. However, there are clear signs that much more serious and sinister developments have taken place.

Since March 2008, so-called dissident republicans have attempted to murder eight police officers. There have been gun attacks on police officers in Londonderry, Dungannon and Craigavon, and a rocket attack on police officers in Lisnaskea. Last Wednesday, an attempt was made to plant a bomb under a policewoman's car in Lisburn. Orchestrated rioting has been witnessed in Londonderry and Craigavon; firebomb attacks in mid Ulster; and illegal activity in Ballymena.

Only last Saturday, in a chilling throwback to the days of the bandit country, a bomb consisting of 100 lbs of Semtex was discovered in Jonesborough in south Armagh. It is clear that there are members of the republican and nationalist community who do not want their own people to live normal lives or to benefit from normal policing. Community leaders in those areas must work to ensure that ordinary people have a voice and that it is heard.

Terrorism has nothing constructive to offer anyone in Northern Ireland. It never did. It is the duty of everyone who wants a normal society in Northern Ireland to give their full support to the PSNI and to pass to it any information, however small. It is also imperative that the full force of the law is brought down on those who seek to hold Northern Ireland to ransom and to drag it back to the awful past from which it has only just started to emerge.

The police must be free to pursue anyone, however politically inconvenient it might be. The courts must also ensure that the punishment fits the crime and put those fascists away where they can do no more damage.

Mr Irwin: Members will agree that dissident republicans pose a significant threat to the safety of everyone in Northern Ireland. In my constituency on Saturday, a roadside bomb was discovered outside Jonesborough and defused by Army bomb-disposal experts. It is obvious that those who planted the bomb were intent on murdering PSNI officers. That is a totally despicable and disgraceful act. The device did

not explode and no one was injured; we thank God for that. The community in the surrounding area now has a duty to assist the PSNI in tracking down those responsible for the device and to ensure that they face the full rigour of the law.

Those who planted the device are described as “dissident republicans” and they have been active in south Armagh and across the Province. The PSNI has been successful in thwarting many planned attacks; however, we must be alert to the fact that such ruthless individuals may one day slip the net and cause carnage. The threat that they pose is not simply to the police: the danger is to anyone and everyone, and therefore the onus is on communities in which such individuals are known to assist the PSNI to get those criminals off the streets.

We think of the booby-trap bomb planted in Lisburn last week. Had it exploded, it would have been catastrophic and might have resulted in the loss of a life.

For many years, the police came up against a wall of silence in parts of my constituency when they investigated terrorism. Communities wrongly chose not to break that silence: no doubt some individuals were afraid to speak. Times are changing, and information is more forthcoming: the PSNI can confirm that, no where more so than in south Armagh. The challenge to the community in south Armagh, and throughout all of Northern Ireland, is to give a clear message to dissident republicans that they have no safe haven anywhere and that they will not be tolerated. Democracy demands it and lives depend on it.

I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I ask the party opposite to use its undoubted influence to stop dissident republican activity recurring. In recent days, my party and others have demonstrated their commitment to ensuring a peaceful future by playing an active role in encouraging and supporting those who wish to use violence to leave it in the past. I urge the party opposite to do likewise. I appreciate that one of its north Antrim members can speak from personal experience about assault, and I hope that he will demand a stop to assaults such as he and others have suffered.

There is also a major problem in that the unionist community feels that it cannot accept devolution of policing and justice to a local Minister as long as republican activity continues. When they see the party opposite refusing to participate in meetings of the Executive, I understand why my constituents tell me that they feel that they are being subjected to blackmail and bullying. They consider that to be undesirable republican activity. I assure unionists that my party will not be blackmailed or bullied by childish behaviour.

Over the summer, there were several attacks by so-called dissidents, the most serious of which have

involved the attempted murder of PSNI officers. I challenge Members opposite to stand as one and demand the cessation of dissident republican violence and to work in communities to achieve that. By that I mean reporting all violent acts and giving the names of culprits to the appropriate authority — the PSNI.

I am more than happy to state publicly my support for our policemen and policewomen; I applaud them for the job that they do, often in difficult circumstances; and I demand a stop to the murderous attempts on their lives and on those of others.

I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Alliance Party for supporting the SDLP amendment. I understand the reservation expressed by the Ulster Unionist Party in relation to it, which concerns the devolution of policing and justice powers — something that it found unacceptable. Of course, we differ from the Ulster Unionists in that, but we understand that they agree with the substance of the amendment, leaving aside the issue of devolution of justice and policing powers.

It has been an interesting debate, in which Members have firmly expressed their opposition to political violence from whatever quarter, whether from so-called dissident republicans or loyalists. Violence does nothing to assist the situation. Rather it makes the situation much worse: it destabilises political progress; it ruins people's lives; young people end up in prison; people are wounded or killed; property is damaged; and communities become divided once more. We do not want to see that recur.

Ms Anderson said that, as far as republicans are concerned, there is now an alternative to the armed struggle. There has always been an alternative. There should never have been an armed struggle in the first place. Nonetheless, one accepts that, in the context of Sinn Féin and where that party is at present, that statement represents the position that it now holds. In unequivocal terms, John O'Dowd and Ms Anderson expressed their abhorrence of the political violence perpetrated by loyalists and, in particular, republican dissidents. That should be welcomed as a valuable and important issue to arise from the debate. One should not carelessly carp or criticise that.

It is important that we move forward in the new political dispensation. If we ruin the new political dispensation through fighting, bickering and quarrelling, and by failing to resolve, and compromise on, issues, we will poison the atmosphere and create a situation in which those people, whether they are dissident republicans or loyalist paramilitaries, can thrive. That will be a consequence of our failure to create a successful and genuine partnership. I have said before that if we use the language of ill will in the Chamber, we create a poisonous atmosphere outside. Let us be mindful of

the language that we use. Let us create goodwill through the institutions instead of ill will, which we are creating at the moment.

I do not believe that a meeting of the Executive on Thursday will change the minds of dissident republicans — far from it. They are not interested in that; rather they are interested in the success of this project. If this project is successful, such groups will have no future whatsoever. However, if this project is unsuccessful they will have a future. That is the problem; if we allow society to slip back to violence, we will reap a terrible dividend.

This has been an important debate because it has isolated those in the community who continue to support political violence. It is important that our amendment be accepted. I once again entreat Members to accept the amendment, because it gives the motion shape and form. As Dr Farry said, it makes the motion more rounded, because it focuses on aspects which are absent from the main motion.

We have made political progress; let us not throw that away or give the people who malignly hope to undermine that an excuse to do so. Let us move forward. I welcome support for the amendment. I welcome the condemnations of violence from all round the House. It is important that we stand up against the anti-democratic forces that wish to divide the community once again.

4.45 pm

Mr McNarry: It is probable that those intent on provoking a resurgence of terrorism are the same or close to those republicans who planned and caused the carnage in Omagh town. The same people are close to republican terrorists who mingle with us now in our cities, towns and villages. They are close to murderers, about whom the BBC's 'Panorama' programme will tonight disclose key evidence, previously withheld, which points to Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) mobile-phone monitoring at the time of the Omagh bomb having failed to be passed on to RUC detectives. We will have to see that programme before we can confirm in our minds the trailers that we have been listening to.

In light of tonight's 'Panorama' programme, without being presumptuous, it would surely be a serious, missed opportunity for the Assembly, were its Members not soon to join together in calling for an inquiry likely to satisfy, and meet with the approval of, the families of the victims of the Omagh atrocity. We tried before, when the five Whips of the main parties met. We could not agree because Sinn Féin would not agree to a five- and all-party motion being brought before the House. Surely this time we will get it right and agree to come together.

Would it not be strange if this Assembly did not make a clear and unequivocal statement at this time about the threat of terrorism? Alban Maginnis has said that we should not let things slip. Slip? Who is going to let things slip? What do we do if things slip? Go back to where we were, or tolerate the threats that have been implied throughout this debate? No. We need more than clarity. We need to see this secured.

Is it not correct that, in addressing the threat posed by increasing republican activity and violence across Northern Ireland, we address the motion as it is today, which offers the Assembly a clear, unambiguous occasion in which to make a dignified statement? Moreover, it affords us the chance to reaffirm as the House — the House of representatives — our explicit support for the rule of law, the courts and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I have used the words “across Northern Ireland” advisedly, because I refer to republican violence. Only last week, we saw the first evidence of republican activity extending outside the border areas and the west of our country into Ballyskeagh, which lies between Lisburn and Belfast.

That is what I have written in preparation for this speech; however, when dealing with terrorists, additions have to be made. The addition, which has been referred to by my colleagues, and in particular my colleague Danny Kennedy, is that only last night they came again into Jonesboro — back to the border areas.

It is important, therefore, that the Assembly affirms its belief in democracy and the rule of law. If we are to do that, then we must practise it. The failure of the Executive to meet over the summer and transact public business has helped to create a power vacuum in which republican terrorists can operate, have operated and will continue to operate, because that vacuum is like lifeblood to them.

It seems to say that democracy is not working; it is not delivering. It seems to say that democracy is falling down and is not effective. That is entirely the wrong message to send out from this House.

Earlier today, Mrs Kelly spoke and, very eloquently, proposed the amendment. Nevertheless, I have to ask: when is a republican a republican? Mrs Kelly seemingly wanted to demonstrate that SDLP republicans — and they claim that they are republicans — are different from Sinn Féin republicans, which in turn, seem to be different from so-called dissidents.

David Simpson took up that point, and he put the question back succinctly when he spoke about the level of sectarian malice that has always emanated from republican terrorists and will continue to do so. David Simpson named all the groups; he put all the republican groups together. Why did he do that? Was it so that we have to start all over again, with those groups going back to the one that they came from?

That would be to go back to more murder, more hatred, and more — as we saw only last night — of what could have happened. However, it is not more and it is not anything to do with what the people want. The people are asking — indeed, have been demanding — that all that be left behind. We must put a stop to any such notions of going back.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I am sorry, no.

I regret that John O'Dowd talked about Irish republicanism's legitimate voice. Has there been, or will there ever be, a legitimate republican voice that has not made itself illegal because of its attachment to violence and to murder? Only a few weeks ago, when houses were being flooded, the question of the troops assisting arose. Mr O'Dowd's Irish republicanism could not allow troops to come in to help people; he said that they would not be welcome — such a shame.

I understand where Stephen Farry is coming from. He made the point that he supported the motion and that he would support the amendment as well, so we will see how he votes the first time around. He made the distinction between dissidents and former IRA. Perhaps later he will tell me to which former IRA he refers. The IRA is not former; it is still in office. According to some, they have said that it must desist and go away, but we have not heard anyone from that side of the table say that the IRA must disband — and “disband” is the key word.

I say to those unable or unwilling to understand unionists that we call loyalists, loyalists. To us, a republican terrorist is a republican terrorist. There is no differentiation between definitions. That is why our motion is explicit: we are alarmed at the increase in republican terrorist activity. How can others really, truthfully and convincingly move on when republican terrorists are active? Such a notion — and this must be taken on board — cannot be sold to unionists and has not yet been bought by them.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the debate. This is, of course, the place to reject and repudiate republican terrorist violence, and to do so in the way that we have done today — in a non-violent manner.

I ask the House not to divide — I ask Members to support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 49.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty,

*Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher,
Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness,
Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann,
Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell,
Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness,
Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd,
Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey,
Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr O'Loan and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke,
Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds,
Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey,
Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson,
Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increasing levels of Republican activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.07 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Murder in Dungannon

Tuesday 16 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before we begin proceedings, I once again remind Members that they should not attempt to enter or exit the Chamber through the doors behind the Speaker's Chair, which some Members did yesterday. New arrangements have been put in place for Members to enter and exit the Chamber through the doors on the right and left of the Officials' Boxes. I hope that Members agree that those measures are safer and more convenient.

Mr Speaker: Ms Michelle Gildernew has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Gildernew to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call other Members from the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak. There will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or for a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded.

I remind Members of the requirements under Standing Order 73 about matters that are sub judice. Members should be conscious that criminal charges have been brought on this matter, and I am particularly anxious that they say nothing that may prejudice any possible future court proceedings. If that is clear to all sides of the House, we will proceed.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My statement this morning is in relation to the brutal murder of Eamonn Hughes on Friday night in Dungannon. I convey my sympathies, thoughts and prayers to the Hughes family — to Eamonn's wife, Eileen, and to his children — on his brutal murder. The murder is especially poignant given that it came on the night that the family were celebrating Eamonn's daughter Siobhan's eighteenth birthday. I know that the family is grieving and is deeply traumatised by the awful murder, as is the entire community in Dungannon and the wider community.

The murder must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. I reiterate the appeal that I made on Saturday for anyone who has information to bring that to the PSNI. I know that charges have been made, but I want to ensure that Eamonn's family get justice. That is especially relevant considering that Eamonn's father was murdered 18 years ago and Eamonn spent the last 18 years fighting for justice for his father, Francie. I hope that Eamonn's family do not have as long to wait for justice for him.

The entire community is behind the Hughes family, which is grieving along with the rest of us. Eamonn was an absolute stalwart of the community. One can read the death notices from different community groups, including the Lourdes Diocesan Pilgrimage Committee of which Eamonn was a member and which has done a huge amount of work to bring sick people to Lourdes.

Eamonn will be deeply missed in Dungannon and by the Tyrone community. We sympathise with his

family and we want to ensure that Eamonn's murderers are brought to justice. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Lord Morrow: I also pay my condolences to the Hughes family. The murder of Eamonn Hughes has cast a very dark shadow across Dungannon and South Tyrone, and, indeed, across the whole of Northern Ireland.

It must be said that the brutal murder of that man, and the way in which he was done to death, is nothing short of disgraceful and deplorable. It conveys a message to the community as a whole that we must throw our lot behind the PSNI in its attempts to bring to justice those who are involved and engaged in those sorts of activities. I am aware that the matter is now sub judice in that people have been charged. Therefore, Members may not be at liberty to say everything that they want to say; but a state of lawlessness seems to be beginning to raise its head and reach right across the Province.

Just yesterday in the Assembly, Members talked about the situation in which dissidents and others are active. We want to send out a clear message — as representatives in the Assembly — that we are wholeheartedly behind the PSNI in its attempts to bring everyone engaged in those sorts of activities to justice.

In the past, there have been other serious incidents in Dungannon — the attempt on a policeman's life, for which no one has been brought before the courts. That tells me that the police are having difficulty receiving the information that they require. A clear message must go out that we, as public representatives, are not going to withhold any information from the PSNI that will assist it in doing its duty and bringing those who carry out those deeds to justice. It is easy to condemn the murder, which we will all do sincerely. However, we have to go a stage further and show our abhorrence. The best way to do that is by fully supporting the agencies of law and order, which is the PSNI in this particular case.

Mr Elliott: Like others, I put my and the Ulster Unionist Party's sympathy for the Hughes family and for the murder of Mr Hughes on record. Quite clearly, the community in this Province and in the Dungannon and South Tyrone area has suffered a great blow because of the murder.

Unfortunately, in today's society, knife crime and similar criminality is becoming much too common. I trust that the community, not only in Dungannon and South Tyrone but throughout the entire Province, will rally to support the Hughes family, both to act as a comfort to them and in the hope that justice will be served.

Mr Gallagher: On behalf of the SDLP, I add my sympathy to Eamonn Hughes's wife, Eileen, his daughters and son, and the entire family circle.

As has already been said, this is the second tragedy for the Hughes family, after the murder of Eamonn Hughes's father Frank, who was a taxi driver. Like other constituency Members, I got to know Eamonn Hughes through his pursuit of the truth into his father's killing.

Having just come out of shock after the death in March of Sean Fitzpatrick, who lived a few doors away from Eamonn Hughes in Lisnahull, the neighbourhood is again in shock. I hope that the future will bring both families the comfort of justice.

As elected representatives, Members must redouble their efforts to strengthen policing arrangements, particularly at community level, not only in Dungannon but throughout Northern Ireland. We must continue to work towards putting in place arrangements that ensure that the truth is revealed about all past events, particularly those that concern the deaths of innocent victims of the Troubles.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The meeting was held in Belfast on Thursday 26 June 2008. The Executive were represented by Jeffrey Donaldson and me, and the Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, and the Minister of State Seán Power. This statement has been agreed with Minister Donaldson.

The chairperson and the chief executive of the Loughs Agency, Mr Tarlach O Crosain and Mr Derick Anderson respectively, presented a report to the Council on developments since the previous meeting in May 2008.

Ministers noted that the first commencement Order relating to the 2007 Foyle and Carlingford fisheries legislation came into operation on 1 June 2008 and that two further commencement Orders are being considered and will be reported on later in the year. The commencement Orders are required to bring into effect provisions that extend the functions of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission on licensing and development of aquaculture and on conservation and protection of fisheries in Foyle and Carlingford.

Ministers noted that the agency had purchased a 17 m catamaran at a cost of approximately £300,000, the delivery of which is anticipated before the end of 2008. The new boat will be used to collect the management data required for the sustainable development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough.

Ministers also noted that the agency's successful biodiversity week, which was held in May, involved 37 events and attracted the participation of more than 1,500 people.

The Council received a presentation on the Loughs Agency's financial-assistance strategy for sustainable angling and marine tourism. To date, 25 applications have been recommended for funding support, including angling events, the provision of drying

rooms at tourism-based accommodation and habitat enhancements to encourage the natural development of fish stock.

The Council approved five sets of regulations. The first prohibits the sale in the Foyle and Carlingford areas of salmon and sea trout caught by rod and line.

The agency believes that the introduction of that legislation will reduce the opportunities for the disposal of illegally caught salmon and sea trout for gain, and will encourage the conservation of stocks by legitimate anglers.

10.45 am

The other regulations approved by Ministers are designed to help with the conservation and protection of the native oyster in Lough Foyle.

The Council also considered a Waterways Ireland paper, included on the agenda at the request of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell, and approved its proposal to grant a 99-year lease to Galway County Council in respect of an area of land in the River Suck valley in County Galway.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will be held in November 2008. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: I am disappointed at how little content there was in that short statement.

The Minister referred to "financial assistance", much of which appears to be based around tourism here. Is any financial assistance for the fishing industry being discussed?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To qualify my statement, there had been a meeting of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission in May in order to clear up a small amount of business before the summer recess. That is why there were a limited number of items on the agenda.

The Member's question relates to tourism and protection of stocks. I said that 25 projects had been approved. I presume that he is talking about the hardship payments to the commercial salmon fishermen on the Foyle, which were discussed at the Council meeting. The Loughs Agency made the first payment, totalling €2.5 million, to affected fishermen in December 2007. The second stage of payments, totalling €600,000, was paid in April 2008. The final stage of payment is expected in spring 2009.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she provide more detail on biodiversity week and outline the potential for the aquaculture sector in Carlingford and Foyle? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: International biodiversity day was celebrated on Tuesday 22 May 2008 and the celebrations were extended to become the first ever national biodiversity week, which ran from 17 to 25 May.

The aim of biodiversity day was to celebrate Ireland's biodiversity and to promote awareness of the need to protect our natural environment. As part of the Irish celebrations, six biodiversity hubs were selected, including the Foyle catchment area. A total of 37 events were scheduled in the Foyle area over the week, which attracted more than 1,500 visitors. The schools programme was fully booked — 32 schools sessions took place — and the week was a resounding success.

On the question of aquaculture development, during the NSMC meeting in May the Loughs Agency presented its plans for aquaculture in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. I believe that there is significant potential to develop the sector, which is already valuable in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. The transfer of aquaculture licensing powers to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission will allow aquaculture operations in Lough Foyle to be licensed through the Loughs Agency for the first time, which is an important step in ensuring a transparently good standard of practice in relation to husbandry, hygiene, fish welfare, disease control and environmental impact.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her short statement. I note that 25 applications have been recommended for tourism, angling and marine tourism. Has there been any discussion with, or approval from, the Planning Service on those applications that require such permission? Has that been dealt with? A difficult situation is developing around tourism and planning developments.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his question. I queried the same thing, because I accept and understand the potential difficulties. Very few physical construction projects are involved, so planning permission was not a serious issue for the agency and did not delay any of the applications.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement.

I have two questions regarding the new catamaran that the Minister said the Loughs Agency had purchased.

From where did the funds for the purchase of the new boat come? Furthermore, and more importantly, will the Minister provide a breakdown of the arrangements that are in place for the sourcing of funding to maintain and staff the vessel?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The funding for the boat came from the budget of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights

Commission, and it cost in the region of £300,000. The vessel was purchased second-hand in New Zealand in an effort to keep costs down. The boats that were carrying out the agency's work are no longer fit for purpose; they are unable to go into the shallow waters of the Foyle. The new boat was necessary in order to carry out the agency's work effectively.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to sustainable angling and conservation of stocks. There is evidence of a significant reduction in salmon runs, particularly on the Foyle and into upper reaches such as the Strule and Owenkillew rivers. At the Council meeting, were discussions held on that problem and on what action the Minister can take to ensure that stocks are enhanced for the future?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: That was not discussed at the meeting. However, if the Member wishes, he can write to me, and I will be happy to provide him with the information.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the conservation and protection of fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. One of the first regulations bans the sale of salmon and sea trout that are caught by rod and line. Is that necessary, since it concerns such a small amount of fish?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The agency decided that it was necessary to ban such sales. We are trying to conserve and protect salmon and sea trout stocks in the area. The knock-on benefit with regard to legally caught fish — including salmon — has a positive impact on the area. There were enough cases of illegal fishing to concern the agency and prompt it to do something to rectify the situation. Since the regulation was introduced, we have seen a great improvement in conservation, and it has had a positive impact on the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries areas.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to maps — or a map — of the Foyle basin. My information is that there were three maps: one lodged with the Irish Government; one lodged with the Northern Administration; and one lodged with the Foyle Fisheries Commission or its successor. Has the Minister any information about the detail of those maps or their whereabouts?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am aware that the maps, apparently, exist. They were drawn in 1952. The Loughs Agency — which, prior to 1999, was known as the Foyle Fisheries Commission — managed the rights on behalf of the two Governments. I understand that three maps were lodged with the Governments. Despite recent searches of the DARD library, the Northern Ireland Assembly Library and our archived records for the

time, departmental officials have been unsuccessful in locating the Northern copy, but we are still working on it. I do not have any up-to-date information but will be happy to inform the Member when I do.

Mr Poots: I note that the meeting took place, and — given the costs, expense and staff involved in holding such meetings — I question whether it is necessary to hold meetings merely for the sake of doing so.

The Council received a presentation on the 25 applications that were recommended for funding support. How many of those applications applied to Northern Ireland? What capital projects are taking place in Northern Ireland as a consequence?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We were required to hold the meeting because regulations had to be put in place for this year's fishing season, and the NSMC must approve those regulations; the meeting was necessary. I can return to the Member with details on the 25 applications for funding. We did not go into the specifics of each case, so I do not have the information today. However, I can furnish him with that information. I do know that few capital projects were involved in the 25 applications.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Have any realistic estimates been made of the levels of salmon and trout that are being caught illegally? Having worked with some anglers in the South Down constituency and visited their hatcheries, I believe that the statement will be welcomed. Will the Minister reassure anglers and others involved in that sport that the initiative will have a speedy impact on the conservation of that sport and leisure activity?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The initiative is already having a positive impact on the sustainability of stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. I do not have the specific figures requested by the Member, but I believe that there was a lot of illegal fishing previously. The measures that have been taken are necessary in order to enhance and conserve fish stocks and to ensure that there is a fair and equitable system in place for everyone's enjoyment of angling in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement and I thank her and her ministerial colleagues for the work that was done during that meeting, some of which, helpfully, advanced work in another sectoral format.

The Minister referred to the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries legislation — specifically to one commencement Order that is already in operation, as well as another two that are to follow, which she said will be reported on later in the year. Does that mean that those Orders will come into operation later in the year? Will the Minister tell us what issues must be resolved before commencement dates can be set? Does the Minister

have any feedback on how the legislation that has come into operation has worked during its first quarter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: At this stage, it is proposed that the primary legislation will be commenced in three stages. The first commencement Order, which relates to miscellaneous amendments to the 1952 Foyle Fisheries Act, came into operation on 1 June 2008, and it enables the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission to make regulations relating to aquaculture.

The aquaculture licensing provisions will commence as soon as the mechanisms that are necessary to deliver an effective aquaculture regulatory system have been established by the Loughs Agency. Provision will also be made for the operation of the aquaculture offences provisions in respect of Lough Foyle to be delayed until aquaculture licences have been issued, to ensure that the existing, unregulated operators there are not penalised pending the roll-out of licences. The agency has striven to ensure that no one will be disadvantaged as a result of the regulations being introduced and that operators are still able to carry out their work. That is also important for conservation and fish protection.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned that there will be restrictions on salmon and sea trout fishing. I am concerned about that on behalf of those who enjoy fishing as a sport as well as those who create tourism potential from it. Just last week, my colleague Maurice Morrow managed to catch a 16 lb salmon — not in Carlingford Lough, but elsewhere. That salmon is almost the size of him, and that should give an idea of how big it is. *[Laughter.]* He has not invited me to share his salmon yet, but I hope that he will do so shortly.

What discussions has the Minister had with angling clubs to get their support for exploring the tourism potential of salmon and sea trout fishing? I ask that question because she referred to 25 applications that have been made to the Loughs Agency's financial assistance strategy, some of which will have been made by angling clubs. To me, it seems to be contradictory to restrict fishing for salmon and sea trout but, at the same time, encourage angling clubs — I am trying to understand how she will marry those two strategies. Furthermore, what contact has been made with some of the major fishing organisations to seek their co-operation on those matters?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is a lot in there, so I hope that I can cover it all — never mind the one that got away. *[Laughter.]*

In effect, the regulations are trying to do away with the illegal rod-fishing of salmon and sea trout.

That will ensure that fish stocks are maintained for all the purposes that the Member mentioned: for angling

clubs, tourism, and all the other opportunities that are available. It is not just a matter of conserving stocks for tourists; it is a matter of ensuring that local people can experience the enjoyment of fishing and that there are fish to be caught. Therefore, the regulations are very carefully drafted to maximise people's enjoyment of angling and fishing.

11.00 am

Before such regulations are introduced, there is a great deal of consultation between the Department and angling clubs, and others. Advertisements are placed in the local press to ensure a good, transparent mechanism for introducing regulations.

It is important to regulate how stocks are managed and to ensure that there are benefits for everyone. For example, anglers can purchase carcass tags and, if those tags are unused, the money paid for them can be refunded. That ensures that people from all walks of life — particularly young people — can be assured that there is a point to going out and sitting on a river bank for hours, and that they catch something in the end.

It is important that stocks of fish be conserved for everyone, and that the few individuals who are involved in the illegal catching and taking of fish are prosecuted. The Loughs Agency has worked very hard to ensure that there is a fair and equitable system across the board.

Lord Morrow: I agree that conserving salmon stock is vital. Before I rose to speak, I was reading the provisions of my fishing licence.

Does the Minister believe that what she has outlined today will be significant and sufficient enough to ensure that salmon stocks are preserved? The Minister has said that the first of the measures prohibits the sale — in the Foyle and Carlingford areas — of salmon and sea trout caught by rod and line. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what new resources she intends to introduce so that that prohibition can be enforced, because there is a stipulation on a fishing licence that an individual angler can take only two salmon a day?

Moreover, will the Minister tell us why it is believed that salmon are running later in the season or, in some cases, out of season? Will she inform the House of measures that she has taken to deal with that matter?

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

Policing of the measures will be vital if they are to be properly implemented. Therefore, can she tell us what new resources will be introduced to ensure that they are policed?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Member has asked four or five questions. I presume that he does not need to travel to the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas, and that

there are plenty of opportunities to practice his angling skills in his own constituency.

The Loughs Agency is carrying out important work to ensure the regulation of stocks. There are resources in its budget for the employment of river-watchers and bailiffs to ensure that there are no illegal catches of salmon and to ensure the conservation of stocks. I am content that that work is being done and that the budgets are in place to enable the agency to carry out its very important work.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that the Department retains lead responsibility for Neighbourhood Renewal, now and in the future, to ensure that social deprivation is tackled in our communities and that there is joined-up delivery.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of my party, I thank the Business Committee for supporting the inclusion of the motion on the Order Paper and for facilitating this debate.

We all understand that neighbourhood renewal must be a genuinely cross-departmental programme if it is to be truly successful. On 5 June 2008, the Committee for Social Development heard evidence on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal programme.

From our own direct experience of working with groups in the community and voluntary sector, and through our request for additional information from officials, Members have ascertained quickly that there are huge gaps in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal across the board.

In March this year, the Minister announced that she was committing £60 million over a three-year period to 36 communities, some of which are the most disadvantaged in the North. Neighbourhood renewal funding aims to tackle multiple deprivation through a focused approach on local needs that have been identified by the communities.

On 10 March, the Minister said:

“Neighbourhood Renewal requires that all Departments support renewed efforts to improve the delivery of better services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including health, education and training. My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments”.

Members can all agree with that statement. A cross-departmental strategy that is regularly reviewed, closely monitored and, above all else, funded and actioned, is imperative in addressing multiple deprivation in our communities.

Sinn Féin believes that community development leads, and is essential to, community empowerment. There are many outstanding examples of that in all our communities throughout the North.

The promise made many years ago by the Department for Social Development (DSD), which retains the lead responsibility for the community and voluntary sector through its voluntary and community unit, has failed, and there is much uncertainty about future funding. In addition, the Minister for Social Development suggested that other Ministers should come in and pick up the tab for the programme from next March. That is totally unachievable, particularly given the lack of initiative from DSD to realise it.

Direct rule Ministers held quarterly meetings of the cross-departmental group tasked with delivering neighbourhood renewal. Since taking up office in May 2007, Margaret Ritchie has called two cross-departmental meetings — one in August 2007 and one in July 2008. It is a sad indictment that a locally elected Minister has placed tackling social deprivation in disadvantaged communities so low on her list of priorities. Furthermore, the Minister has never raised the issue at an Executive meeting, although I am sure that we will hear today that she intends to bring a paper to the Executive — a familiar mantra.

In the process of trying to garner information, the Committee for Social Development devised a questionnaire on neighbourhood renewal. The evidence gained from some of the respondents made it clear that, despite their evidence and efforts, there is a lack of true partnership, particularly as regards the role of, and investment from, other statutory bodies. There has been a lack of leadership on the programme, and communities involved in neighbourhood renewal partnerships feel that other Departments, and some of the statutory bodies, are simply playing lip service to the implementation of neighbourhood renewal programmes.

The delivery of the much-needed services that were identified by the communities in their action plans is absolutely crucial. Furthermore, respondents to the questionnaire recognised the potential in the concept of neighbourhood renewal to sustain and develop communities, and they are now waiting to see how that will roll out. Undoubtedly, expectations have been raised, and we are in danger of dashing those expectations unless we can ensure that true and genuine partnership and delivery is driven and resourced properly.

Some additional comments from respondents pointed to the disappointment that the whole process was more top-down than bottom-up. Communities have demonstrated a clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal. However, that has not been matched by agencies and Departments. Indeed, the Minister has yet to issue any guidance to other Departments and agencies on their roles and responsibilities for neighbourhood renewal. We must hear what the Minister intends to do about the transfer of urban regeneration, and that includes the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local government, which must be explained further.

Will the Minister ensure that equality mechanisms are in place before the transfer begins? That will ensure delivery from councils based on objective need, rather than any attempt at political carve ups. Will the Minister give the Assembly details of how all posts will be secured and what commitments have been made from other Departments? There is no real evidence of how it will work out practically.

The community and voluntary sector deserves better support, and it has detailed what it has done. The House needs to hear the details of how neighbourhood renewal is going to be implemented and supported by other Departments. We need to hear what the Minister has done to secure the resources and commitment of other Departments in the entire process. Unless that happens, neighbourhood renewal will be under serious threat.

Unfortunately, we were not in a position to review the September monitoring round in the Committee because the officials failed to bring that information to us. There is a lot of uncertainty about what money is available and what can be done. The community and voluntary sector has expressed its views, and we must support that sector. We must also support the Minister in ensuring that there is a joined-up approach. Unless that can be done properly, the programme will be under serious threat and the communities will, once again, be totally disillusioned with what we are delivering. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Simpson: I wish to say at the outset that I am speaking in this debate as a Member of the Assembly and not as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

In the past, the Minister has described neighbourhood renewal as the Executive's flagship strategy for addressing deprivation in local communities. That is a commendable attitude, born of an acknowledgement that many areas across Northern Ireland are in great need of help. All Members of the Assembly could point to parts of their respective constituencies where action is required.

However, I believe that the proposal of the motion is premature, because departmental officials will appear before the Committee on Thursday to answer questions about neighbourhood renewal. We hope that a number of questions will be put forward and given clarification at that meeting. At this stage, we cannot support the motion.

There is also something amiss in that all the signatures attached to the motion are those of Sinn Féin MLAs. I say that not as a unionist or a democratic unionist but as someone with a personal interest in seeing Northern Ireland and her people enjoy a better, more peaceful and prosperous future. It is ironic that — from early summer at least — Sinn Féin has been threatening to walk away and pull down these institutions unless its political wish is fulfilled.

Why is Sinn Féin making that threat? Is it to secure better healthcare for the old, the sick and the infirm? Is it to secure a better future for children growing up in poverty? Is it to place more emphasis on jobs and investment? Is it to give senior citizens a better life? Is it about giving greater dignity to people with disabilities? No, it is not. That threat is an attempt to cover up the fact that Sinn Féin negotiated so badly in the St Andrews meetings. Only the most indoctrinated member of Sinn Féin could fail to see the bitter irony of Sinn Féin MLAs now proposing a motion such as this to the Assembly.

Neighbourhood renewal is a vital ingredient in how we will shape the future of the Province. One of my council areas in Craigavon has benefited greatly from money that has come through projects in Lurgan, Portadown, and elsewhere.

11.15 am

Having said all that, I have already raised several issues with the Minister, and I trust that she will be able to address some of them today. There are concerns that there is not enough departmental buy-in to the renewal programme. If responsibility for the programme is passed down to councils, how will that operate? If the mechanisms are not working at this level of government, what guarantees are there that they will work at council level?

My party and I agree with the proposal to devolve responsibility to councils, but there are concerns that such a move will mean that momentum is not kept up. Furthermore, some areas in the Province have found that money has been slow in coming to them; indeed, some have still not received any money. I should like the Minister to clarify those issues in her response today. At this stage, my party is not in a position to support the motion.

Mr Cobain: I support the motion. The neighbourhood renewal programme has generated much debate in the past five years, and in the past three years in particular.

It is important to remind ourselves of the strategic aims of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, which were set out five years ago. They are to develop confident communities that are able and committed to improving the quality of life in their areas; to develop economic activity in the most deprived neighbourhoods and connect them to the wider economy; to improve social conditions for people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods through better co-ordinated public services and the creation of safer environments; and, most importantly, to help to create attractive, safe, sustainable environments in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships were supposedly established to focus Departments and to allow communities to examine and distribute particular budgets in a way that they thought would be best for

them. The partnerships aspired to take on the big issues, such as housing, health and education, which have an effect on deprivation levels. On paper, they looked the business; they gave communities real hope and, crucially, intimated that they would create joined-up government with cross-departmental responsibilities, thus offering the opportunity, for the first time, to get the approach right. We were also promised new thinking and the flexibility to involve communities in a real, meaningful way. Communities were led to believe that the neighbourhood renewal programme would involve proper engagement with all the relevant Departments and agencies.

Mr F McCann: The Member and I have attended several meetings, outside the Assembly, on neighbourhood renewal with communities and DSD representatives. Sadly, Mr Simpson made a political speech and tried to turn a debate on neighbourhood renewal into a broader debate. Does Mr Cobain agree that both he and Sinn Féin Members have continually raised this matter at meetings of the Social Development Committee? Does he agree that all the concerns that both he and Carál have voiced today have already been raised and that this is not a new-fangled matter that has only been raised in the Assembly?

Mr Cobain: Thank you very much for that point, Mr McCann. Everyone who is committed to tackling social deprivation — and I will expand on this point later — has grave concerns about devolving responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils. It saddens me that despite numerous initiatives and strategies, nothing has really changed; nothing has really been done to improve the lives of the most deprived communities throughout Northern Ireland. The new approach that the neighbourhood renewal programme offered has never been implemented, and Departments other than DSD have not lived up to their responsibilities.

The main issue is that none of the Departments has bought into neighbourhood renewal. Likewise, the health boards, the housing associations and the education and library boards have not bought into it. None of the big drivers that could have made a difference to social deprivation have bought into it. Departments talk about tackling deprivation, but their representatives do not even attend the necessary meetings, and no sanction is imposed on them.

As a direct result of its failings, DSD now seeks to wash its hands of the issue by passing responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils as part of the review of public administration. Had neighbourhood renewal been a success, we certainly would not be toying with the nonsensical idea of transferring the programme to local councils. I am disappointed that people think that transferring responsibility to councils will make a difference.

Many issues, including education and health, have an impact on deprivation.

Mr Newton: I may have misunderstood the Member, but will he clarify that he said that the Health Minister — his party's own Minister — has not bought into neighbourhood renewal and does not support the strategy?

Mr Cobain: All Departments, including those for which the four DUP Ministers hold responsibility, have not bought into it. This is not a matter of point scoring. We are talking about the poorest and most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. On numerous occasions, I have witnessed crocodile tears being shed from the party to my left, but when it comes to helping to sustain those communities, we get no help from it.

I am concerned that councils do not have the wherewithal to deal with the neighbourhood renewal initiative. The notion of placing an additional resource burden on councils to provide funding is absolutely ludicrous. More importantly, we will get nowhere without having a long-term strategic plan to tackle deprivation. Furthermore, it takes between 10 and 20 years to plan for long-term action on education and housing matters.

How will a council tell the Department for Social Development to spend additional money on housing in a particular area? More importantly, how will a council influence Caitríona Ruane to spend additional money on education in particular areas? What mechanism will be used for that? What could a Belfast City Council member — or any other councillor — do that Margaret Ritchie, who is a member of the Stormont Executive, could not? I do not know how a councillor will be able to get departmental representatives to turn up to meetings and engage with people when a Minister, with all her powers, cannot manage it.

Mr A Maginness: I am mystified by the motion, and I question the motivation of the Members who proposed it. In essence, the motion states that the Minister for Social Development should retain the leading role in relation to neighbourhood renewal policy. The Minister indicated months ago that her Department will retain that role, so I am slightly puzzled by the purpose of the motion.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development said, the motion is premature. The motion is meaningless, and it is politically motivated in the most partisan fashion. Sinn Féin should erect a big "wailing wall", and it should name it the "DSD wall". All Sinn Féin Members could go to that wall and graffiti it with anti-Ritchie slogans, stating that Margaret Ritchie did not produce the houses, and that they are determined to prevent her from producing them, because then she would become popular, and they do not want that, so they do not want any houses to be built.

Sinn Féin could say that it does not want £6·6 million to go to North Belfast, or £12·8 million to go to West Belfast. I am sure that Fra McCann would be glad if that money was removed from West Belfast, because he was happy with the original budget for DSD — which had to be amended — which stated that there were sufficient funds for the social housing programme. Mr McCann stood up in the House and said that that budget allocation was adequate, yet the Minister of Finance came back and said that it was not, and that he was giving more money to the Minister for Social Development.

Mr F McCann: Alban Maginness is misquoting me. I have always argued, whether in meetings of the Committee for Finance and Personnel or elsewhere, that there should be a proper budget for housing. The reality is that Mr Maginness's party —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat. Please continue, Mr Maginness.

Mr A Maginness: Members should read Hansard to see what Fra McCann said.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member recall that Mr McCann used the words: stop whingeing and take the money?

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to my friend for that quotation. It had slipped my mind. *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I must have the Floor.

What the Minister for Social Development proposed is, in fact, what was collectively agreed by Sinn Féin, DUP and Ulster Unionist Ministers in the Executive.

Mr Cobain: Does the Member believe that deprived communities throughout Northern Ireland would be better off if neighbourhood renewal was devolved to local councils?

Mr A Maginness: Yes. The operation of neighbourhood renewal should be at local council level. People at that level know where the problems are and how to tackle them effectively and efficiently. Mr Cobain is absolutely right. We should be very vigilant, and we should be determined that the Executive pull their weight — the Northern Ireland Executive, not the Housing Executive — in order to ensure that everyone at local and council level is involved fully in the implementation of local plans.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot; I am running out of time.

Councils are best placed to deal with neighbourhood renewal. We are talking about neighbourhoods, rather than vast areas, in which councillors and communities can work together with the statutory bodies in order to make a difference. That is what we must do. Over the next three years, £60 million pounds, which should be effectively and efficiently directed towards deprived

communities, will be available. That is what we all want, despite the political banter in the House. We all want to improve communities. Local involvement is the best way to achieve that aim, but there is an onus on all the Departments represented in the Executive to combine their collective efforts. They have all signed up to neighbourhood renewal, and they must implement it.

This motion is simply another knocking exercise, and should be treated as such. It is not a proper motion for the House to discuss.

Ms Lo: When the neighbourhood renewal strategy was first mooted, I was a member of the South Belfast Partnership Board. The Chinese Welfare Association, for which I worked at the time, was one of the beneficiaries of neighbourhood renewal funding. The association built a community centre under the scheme's capital programme.

I recall the huge enthusiasm of community groups in south Belfast at the time. They conducted surveys, formed focus groups, and worked with the consultant to produce an action plan. People were very excited, and saw the strategy for the first time as a long-term and holistic plan to tackle the complex and multi-faceted nature of deprivation in an integrated way in their neighbourhoods, which were in the worst 10% of disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland.

11.30 am

The fact that the strategy set out to deal with not only the physical renewal of neighbourhoods, but regeneration in community, economic and social spheres made people hopeful that it was going to make a real difference. People were also hoping that it would maximise the effectiveness and responsiveness of public services and resources, and create genuine partnerships between the statutory bodies and the communities, so that they could work together.

However, from listening to communities and to the evidence presented to the Committee for Social Development, it is quite clear that there have been difficulties with implementing the strategy over the past few years. People talked about the lack of commitment from other Departments, poor attendance by representatives of statutory agencies, and the lack of clout of the departmental representatives who do not seem to be able to have any influence in their Departments when decisions are being made.

There is an absence of ring-fenced, matched funding. The Departments all seem to be paying lip service to that but are not coming up with the cash that will make a difference. Lack of clarity was mentioned by a number of people in relation to setting budgets in some areas, as was the fact that budgets were mostly set by the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO), rather than by the neighbourhood renewal partnerships, through communities working together. The application process

for funding is far too lengthy and bureaucratic — I remember the difficulties faced by my organisation and others when applying for funding for projects.

Although the Alliance Party supports the transfer of community planning to local government, our concern is that if the strategy is given to local communities, without any departmental lead on the action plans, and as it was so difficult for DSD to make other Departments come up with the goods, it will be difficult for local councils to make the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) meet their commitments in the strategic plan and meet priorities in their Departments. The issue is not about the transfer to local councils but the failure of other Departments —

Mr Durkan: Does the Member appreciate, particularly given the protocols that attach to such things, and the operation of the ministerial code, that a Minister for Social Development cannot indict another Minister, or indict a health trust, or any other local management entity that is under the authority of another Minister? However, local government can hold health trusts and other bodies in their local area to account and can indict them for not turning up to meetings and for not contributing meaningfully to targets that have been set in the Programme for Government.

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for his intervention. The issue is not about transfer to local councils but about the failure of Departments to buy into the idea and meet the obligations as set out in the action plans. The Department for Social Development has been working very hard to lead on the issue. I have worked with BRO's south and east team for a long time, and it is essential that the interdepartmental group redoubles its efforts to provide strategic direction to councils and their Departments to ensure that the strategy achieves its aim of renewing deprived communities, and does not, yet again, raise expectations, only to let those communities down.

The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Hilditch: As already stated, today's motion may be somewhat premature, and, therefore, difficult to support. However, social deprivation affects one in six people. I agree with the Minister when she says that it is simply unacceptable that the life chances of some in our society are determined by where he or she lives.

Although I am committed to making neighbourhood renewal work, there are aspects of the scheme that cause me great concern, such as co-ordination funding and governance.

We are lifting neighbourhood renewal from years of failure, and many Departments appear to have washed their hands of the strategy. The targets that have been set suggest that we should proceed with caution. Targets

by 2010 include a 25% reduction in the rate of births to teenage mothers aged under 17 and the creation of 6,500 jobs, of which 55% will be in deprived areas. Achieving such targets will be possible only if resources are made available and with crucial local input.

The Minister said that responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal projects will rest with local councils and that the policy will rest with DSD. I have no doubt that local authorities will be able to deliver those projects and are best placed to do so; however, questions must be answered on issues such as resources and why there has been no consultation to prove that passing responsibility to councils is a good idea. Despite those questions, it cannot result in failures worse than those to date.

In June, it was said that it would be inconceivable for education initiatives to be delivered at local level. It is unfortunate that some people hold that opinion, because local councillors have strong working relationships with their local schools, hospitals, employers and residents and are therefore aware of the problems on the ground in their boroughs and districts. However, they do not have the power to achieve the targets set for education, health and employment.

The transfer of the delivery of neighbourhood renewal projects to local authorities would mean that local government officers and councillors would make deprivation a priority for Departments and partnerships to tackle. Furthermore, that means that areas of deprivation would be identified throughout urban and rural districts and boroughs — not just in urban areas.

The only commitment to neighbourhood renewal has come from the community: all Departments have shown minimal interest. There has been a lack of meetings to discuss the way forward; minutes have not been shared; partnership boards have lacked commitment from other Departments; and consultants have not achieved what was expected of them.

It has been recognised that DSD put much effort in at the start — all of us appreciate its attempts and realise that it does not work alone on neighbourhood renewal. However, no forward work programme has been developed, and it is time for the Departments to work together to build new confidence and faith in the policy.

To be successful, neighbourhood renewal requires leadership and control. A cross-departmental group should be encouraged with more attention, guidance and motivation from the Executive to push neighbourhood renewal to the forefront. More flexibility across all Departments is required so that they can commit time and move resources, if necessary, to make it work. We must learn from successful projects, such as the Enniskillen Neighbourhood Partnership, as well as from those that have failed. We must start to monitor the impact of completed projects — no surveys have

been done to find out whether finished schemes have brought any benefit to disadvantaged communities.

Neighbourhood renewal and its projects can work, and the whole strategy is worthwhile. It has the potential to help to improve the 36 deprived communities for the 280,000 people who live in them. We must thank the Minister for the amount of groundwork that has been done recently, and we hope that the inter-agency approach to advance neighbourhood renewal in our communities will start to work. It is time for Departments to build on that and to drive the strategy to the centre of Government. I am hopeful that the Executive will urge for the joined-up delivery of neighbourhood renewal and that the long-term spiral of social deprivation can be challenged and eradicated.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The debate is timely as it comes when there is much confusion over the future of neighbourhood renewal. That the Minister for Social Development is trying to abandon the Government's strategy for tackling social deprivation and pass it to local councils is an indication of the lack of ideas in her Department on how to deal with the strategy. The situation on the ground is getting worse and many groups fear that their funding will be terminated.

Mr P Maskey: The "wailing wall" of which Alban Maginness spoke could be extended to the same size as a peace wall, due to the number of people in Belfast who are on protective notice because they have not received letters of offer to deliver neighbourhood renewal in their local areas. Well over 100 people are on protective notice, so perhaps, in the mouth of Christmas, that "wailing wall" could be extended?

Mr F McCann: Looking at the reality —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No; I have heard enough from that end of the House.

Things are getting worse for many people, and many groups fear that their funding will be terminated. If that were to happen, it would have disastrous effects for people in the community who desperately need the services that those groups provide. I have had numerous meetings with DSD officials, and I found them to be genuinely committed to neighbourhood renewal and to the development of a broad community sector. Leadership and commitment to safeguard the delivery of neighbourhood renewal is lacking from those at senior level.

In fairness, other Departments must share some of the blame, because they have refused to buy into neighbourhood renewal. The position is a far cry from that of 2003 when senior departmental officials were out selling the idea to community groups and local politicians.

To be honest, it was difficult to buy into yet another new programme when so many had come before it. However, after many hours of discussion had taken place and commitments were given, it seemed that we were being offered a new beginning in community and economic development. For the first time, it seemed that the Government had got it right. Neighbourhood renewal offered legitimate partnership between the community and Government, with the community having a say in the allocation of departmental resources in their areas.

I remember the first time that I heard the phrase, "bend to spend".

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No. DSD officials used that phrase to explain how resources could be bent to suit the needs of local communities. I also remember the same officials denying that "bend to spend" was ever used in that context. Fred Cobain and I were at the meeting at which that was said. We were also told that a cross-departmental committee would be established, which the Minister for Social Development would chair, to ensure that other Departments bought into the concept. That buy-in was crucial to the development of neighbourhood renewal. That was to be the guarantee that all relevant Departments would come to the table with the resources necessary to ensure the success of the new strategy.

When devolution was established, many people believed that it was the new beginning needed to strengthen communities and that neighbourhood renewal would be the delivery mechanism to deal with the severe deprivation that exists in many communities throughout the North. Neighbourhood renewal partnerships that were set up were empowered to deal with the serious problems of community safety; delivery of community services; local health issues; low educational attainment in schools; economic development; local sports; and many other issues that impact heavily on areas of severe social deprivation.

What have we got for our efforts? What has been delivered by way of a broad strategy for neighbourhood renewal? It is a good strategy, which, if it were delivered properly, could tackle social deprivation? The answer is quite clear — nothing has been delivered. Commitments have been broken and promises reneged on. The community was not found wanting in its commitment to the strategy; nor were several other sectors that made up the neighbourhood renewal partnerships.

What happened to the ministerial group meetings that were supposed to ensure the delivery of neighbourhood renewal? Under direct rule, meetings took place every four to six months. The first meeting under the current Minister took place on 9 August 2007. However, the group did not meet again until 28 July 2008.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member want direct rule back?

Mr F McCann: Perhaps direct rule Ministers had more interest in developing the strategy to tackle deprivation than the current Minister.

Some Members: Oh!

Mr F McCann: July 2008 marked almost one year since the first meeting of the ministerial group. Is that the way in which to run the Department's key strategy on social deprivation?

How many times has neighbourhood renewal featured on the agenda of Executive meetings? Recently, an official stated that neighbourhood renewal has not appeared on the agenda as an item for discussion. However, the Minister has indicated her intention to present a paper on neighbourhood renewal at the earliest possible convenience. That statement highlights the Minister's lack of commitment to neighbourhood renewal. Eighteen months into her appointment, she has not put the issue on the agenda for discussion, despite the fact that many groups face closure due to lack of funding.

What happened to the guidance that was supposed to be given to other Departments? The Department stated that guidance on neighbourhood renewal has not been issued to other Departments, yet it is for other Departments to determine the most effective route down which to deliver neighbourhood renewal. One of DSD's key commitments was that other Departments would be directed at ministerial level in order to ensure buy-in to neighbourhood renewal. That is another failure by the Minister to promote her Department's strategy —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr F McCann: I gave way, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I should have said that I wanted to speak for seven minutes.

The broad point that I make, on which Fred Cobain touched, is that councils should not run neighbourhood renewal projects. If Departments will not listen to the Minister, they will hardly listen to councils.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you, Mr McCann, for resuming your seat.

11.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: Looking at the list of urban wards that fall into the 10% most economically deprived wards in Northern Ireland, as measured by the Noble index, I understand why the Members opposite have tabled the motion. I note their concerns and agree that this subject deserves more attention. Like my colleagues — and Mr Maginness — I am not entirely convinced that that is not premature at this point; however, the matter is deserving of discussion.

The Committee for Social Development is still considering urban renewal, as Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Brady and Mr McCann are aware. We await responses from the Department, and, at present, we do not know the precise detail of the format by which the local councils will administer the scheme. It is for those reasons that I feel Sinn Féin is jumping the gun, so to speak. I am also a little confused by the argument that it puts forward. It is highly critical of DSD, yet wants that Department to retain what appears to be full control. Is that not contradictory?

The scheme faces considerable problems, which have been outlined by Members. It could be argued that the fact that groups are encountering those problems gives credence to the proposal to hand management of the schemes to local councils, once they have been restructured.

There is a perception among community groups that DSD is too detached from the issues faced in deprived wards. From the papers provided to the Committee, and from listening to groups, it is evident that urban renewal partnerships are losing their enthusiasm for neighbourhood renewal schemes. DSD has failed to deliver in many instances. TSN areas are being used, and that means that pockets of deprivation are being missed because of a lack of local knowledge in the Department.

Such local knowledge can be provided by councils. For example, Belfast City Council has introduced the strategic neighbourhood action programme (SNAP), an initiative that is the forerunner of community planning. Tying a programme, such as neighbourhood renewal, into community planning and other schemes run at council level, gives it a greater chance of delivering tangible results. It is at council level that great strides have been made, through local initiatives, in areas such as combating graffiti and antisocial behaviour. I have witnessed positive examples of that in my own Ards Borough Council area.

As with everything, money is the key. Unfortunately, delivery of infrastructure has not taken place in many areas. I ask the Minister to look carefully at the issue of neighbourhood renewal. She should not take its transfer to councils off the agenda; rather she should address the glaring problems. She needs to look at what the scheme does not deliver and ensure that a more refined policy goes to local councils. There must be clarity in delivery and advice available to the partnerships. The method of transition needs to be considered carefully to ensure that when responsibility is handed over to councils, it is smooth and does not adversely affect delivery of the scheme. The Minister needs to ensure that budget follows function.

Surely the whole purpose of the review of public administration is to give greater responsibility to councils

because of their greater ability to deliver at a local level. Yet we are debating a suggestion to retain an initiative that could be better delivered at local council, rather than at regional, level. Local councils can take the lead and consult directly with the community. Consequently, local identity can be enshrined in the projects.

However, much work remains to be done. I look forward to debating the issue again, once the Committee has had an adequate opportunity to consider the Department's full proposals for the transfer of the scheme.

Mr B McCrea: Does any greater challenge face the Assembly than tackling the multiple levels of deprivation that exist in many of our communities? Is it right to give responsibility for that to those who do not have the resources to deal with it? To put it bluntly, where will the councils get the money to deal with the issues that they must tackle? The whole idea of having a devolved Administration is to have a local person in charge — someone who can bring together multiple agencies to tackle multiple deprivation.

Mr O'Loan: At last, a Member gives way to allow me to make an absolutely essential point.

Community planning is a central pillar of the new scheme for local government as proposed by the review of public administration. None of those Members who have spoken against the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local government — and they belong to the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and Sinn Féin — appear to be aware of the concept of community planning or the capacity and scope that it offers to local areas.

The Minister has rightly and wisely devolved that significant power to local government, because she knows that decisions, such as retaining policy issues and supplying resources where required, are best made on the ground. The parties that I named have councillors who are members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), which has demanded and argued for strong local government. Those parties are self-contradictory; they must make up their minds about where they stand on local government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrea will have one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. One extra minute may just about make up for that intervention. When I have the courtesy to give way to a Member, I expect him or her not to abuse the opportunity. I am quite happy to engage in a debate.

What difficulties do we face in addressing the problems of neighbourhood renewal? Do we not understand what is happening? In that case, would local focus help? Or rather, is it that many cross-

cutting issues must be tackled, which can be dealt with only at Executive level?

I am on record as saying that I have the highest regard for the Minister. This is not an opportunity, despite what other Members have done, to score party political points. This is an opportunity for the Executive and Assembly to start to do the job for which they were elected, which is to tackle the endemic, systemic problems facing the most vulnerable people in our society. It is not a job that we should not delegate to other people. We should take the lead, and I expect the Minister, who is responsible for social development, to do that. I am quite sure that she can.

I want to try to depersonalise the problems that we face by using the example of a recent by-election in Glasgow East. Many constituents there face problems associated with inner-city, post-industrialised areas, such as multiple levels of deprivation, and look to find a way out.

Mr Cobain raised the issue of education. The Scottish system is comprehensive and fully engaged, and yet 20% of people are still unable to break free from the situation in which they find themselves. We need to find a clever alternative that works together with people.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, Mark, but I have already given away once before.

One of the most disappointing aspects about the Executive and the Assembly is that there is no unifying vision or determination to tackle the real problems that affect real people. I see nothing to suggest that we are going to work together to resolve those issues. We need multiple Departments working together, and that requires leadership.

Finally, we face a challenge: are we going to stay in our silos and try to do a good job for our own particular bit, or are we going to spread our wings and work together to find ways to sort out the plight of the most unfortunate members of our society? I expect Ministers to rise to that challenge that faces the Executive and the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: It is interesting that the whingers in Sinn Féin have not congratulated the Minister for Social Development for her success in getting more money for social housing, which she had to fight for. It is also interesting to hear Fra McCann call for direct rule Ministers to return and to manage neighbourhood renewal. In his contribution, Fra McCann let the cat out of the bag. He said that many people are on protective notice, because from Sinn Féin's point of view, the money is for development staff — jobs for the boys and the girls.

I am not taking away from the many good people who work in the community and voluntary sector.

However, allow me to give an example from my constituency. Under direct rule, the neighbourhood renewal panels comprised, quite substantially, either Sinn Féin councillors or former Sinn Féin councillors, because they stacked the residents' association meetings the year before.

I wrote to David Hanson two years ago, when the neighbourhood renewal plan was going forward, to advise him against funding a particular project. That project entailed the spending of £47,000 on an office in the Court ward, one of the most deprived wards of Craigavon, which was to be managed by — guess who? — a Sinn Féin councillor and his wife, acting as development workers; unpaid, of course. Do you know what has happened? It has closed down already. It had not even been in existence for six months. David Hanson gave money to that group against the knowledge of local people and protests from me, and it has failed miserably.

Many Members in the Chamber can be heard criticising the community and voluntary sector — for example the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland — for throwing money at, and parachuting into, local authority areas and spending money without consulting local councils. Now those Members want to do the same. They want to have a Department that does not have the same local knowledge as local councillors continuing to parachute into local authority areas. What nonsense.

We now know the truth of the matter. Sinn Féin voted for a Budget that was not going to tackle deprivation. The policies on tackling deprivation and building a shared future have been stuck with Sinn Féin advisers since March or May of this year — and I suspect that those are some of the papers that were referred to by Peter Robinson yesterday.

Sinn Féin has a lot to answer for on the doorsteps of deprived communities. How many people's lives have improved in West Belfast where Gerry Adams has been MP for 20 years? Not many at all. Let us ask the people on their doorsteps how their lives have improved. It is alright for Gerry and the boys — they can go to Donegal on their holidays to their holiday homes. They can go fishing during the summer and send nice letters — or make paper planes out of them and fire them across the Chamber — to Peter Robinson to tell him what we already know. Will Gerry send them a message, or will he agree to a meeting this Thursday? Let us see whether he has the guts to meet Peter Robinson and our Minister, Margaret Ritchie, across the table to tell them what Sinn Féin is going to do to tackle the real problems in our community.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Craig: I do not know how to follow a speech such as that. When I read the motion, I read it with

bewilderment, and I took advice from a few others who, I think, were equally bewildered.

The motion states that responsibility for neighbourhood renewal should remain with the Department for Social Development, or that that Department should retain a lead role in neighbourhood renewal. What is abundantly clear is that the one thing that will not change, no matter where neighbourhood renewal is devolved to, is that the Department for Social Development will have the lead role in it. That Department funds neighbourhood renewal; therefore, it is that Department that will pull the strings. If the debate is not about that issue, what is it about? Is it really about who should deliver neighbourhood renewal?

I find it extremely ironic to have Sinn Féin stating that neighbourhood renewal should be kept within the Department for Social Development. I say that because I recall attending a Social Development Committee meeting in which a member of Sinn Féin lambasted the Minister and the Department for their handling of neighbourhood renewal.

Mr F McCann: I still do.

Mr Craig: If you are unhappy with that, why do you want neighbourhood renewal to stay with that Department? That makes no sense whatsoever.

Mr F McCann: It is part of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Mr Craig: Let us be honest about this. The Committee is now dealing with neighbourhood renewal, and it is premature; we have not finished that investigation —

Mr F McCann: Someone is not reading the strategy.

Mr Craig: Let me tell you something, when we look at the survey of those who are involved with neighbourhood renewal, what was one of the main criticisms? The whole process has been more top-down than bottom-up.

That is a fair criticism, although it is not necessarily a criticism of our present Minister; the criticism concerns how that process was handled under direct rule, where we saw the top-down approach time and time again.

12.00 noon

Who can turn that around? Who can deliver a bottom-up approach? There is nobody better fitted to do that than local councils. Local councils have used the bottom-up approach for years; they have details of, and contacts in, local communities. Is the party opposite me saying that their local councillors are not the best people to do that? Is it saying that they are not fit to deliver on neighbourhood renewal? *[Interruption.]* Is that the message that that party is trying to send out to its members?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must insist that remarks be made through the Chair, not over the Chair, under the Chair or past the Chair. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Craig: I never like to avoid the Chair.

As I said, I firmly believe in our party's local councillors, and I have every confidence in them to deliver on the issue of neighbourhood renewal. I am confident that whatever new councils may come into existence, they too can deal with that issue. It is an issue that needs to be dealt with properly; it is not an issue that should lead to jobs for the boys but one that must deliver for those communities that are suffering deprivation.

Mr McCausland: There is a great deal of truth in what Dolores Kelly and Jonathan Craig have said, and I identify myself with their comments. The criticism of the current system is largely as a result of people on the ground being disappointed by the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. I want to highlight a number of points that constituents have raised with me.

The Department for Social Development has indeed been funding a range of posts under neighbourhood renewal, and some of those posts fall into the category to which Dolores referred, while others are genuine community workers. That funding was scheduled to run out on 31 August 2008. A ministerial decision was requested in October 2007, in order to ensure that the process would be completed in good time before that 31 August deadline. Despite that request, a ministerial decision was not taken until March 2008.

That announcement stated that all posts would be put into three categories: in the first category, funding would be possible from DSD until March 2011; in the second category, funding would be possible until March 2009, with other Departments expected to take up the funding thereafter; and some posts would fall into a third category, in which funding would end. Bearing in mind that funding was to cease on 31 August, those categorisations were introduced in June 2008. However, the application form for future funding was not available until early July, four months after the announcement was made, with a deadline of 31 July set for its return. That gave people approximately three weeks in which to complete the form and only seven weeks before funding ceased.

However, DSD has been unable to process those applications in time for the funding's ending on 31 August, and it may yet be a number of months before decisions are received. That has left groups with three choices: first, they can let their staff go and cease their work; secondly, they can continue to pay wages out of their own reserves, even though DSD's position until recently was that community organisations should not have reserves; or, thirdly, they can pay wages completely at risk.

Never mind the months of being unable to answer staff queries about the future of their jobs, people who were benefiting from the services — the users — were coming in with queries about the work's future sustainability and the services of which they availed themselves.

There was, therefore, a difficulty with regard to staff who had, and still have, a great deal of uncertainty about the future, and with the uncertainty of the users of the services. There is also a difficulty with regard to those who have been put into category 2, because apart from some positive signs from the Department of Health, no other firm commitments have been made to continuation funding in other Departments. That is despite the fact that six months have passed since the ministerial announcement, and three months since the categorisation.

Therefore, even if the Department for Social Development comes back to a group with an answer in October, it is only a short-term relief, with the future as unclear as ever. If work of lasting value is to be done by community organisations, it has to be recognised that that is a long-term process. Sustainability is difficult enough at the best of times, but the continuation of support should be based on the merit of the work that is being carried out, rather than groups being faced with the possibility of having to survive the administrative difficulties that have been put in their way.

I have highlighted the difficulties with the current situation. It is better that this work in future be delegated to local authorities. That is where there is real experience of working with community organisations in local areas, and where, as was said earlier, there is real local knowledge of those projects that are delivering in those areas. If we go down that road, hopefully we will see a better delivery, a better outcome and a better result for communities across the Province.

Mr Shannon: I am very much against this motion. It is vital that the neighbourhood renewal scheme is given encouragement and attention, not exclusively by the Department for Social Development, but also by councils. Much could be better handled by individual councils in conjunction with DSD.

The reason why I make that statement is quite simply this: in the past two to three years, we have been involved personally with many community groups on the Ards Peninsula whose sole purpose was to enrich their own communities and to improve people's quality of life. Community groups and residents' associations have a role to play, but we as councillors also have a role to play in the councils with which most of us are involved.

While I know where, in Ards, one can go to learn many things in order to improve one's quality of life, the difference is that when one is working in the

community, as well as, perhaps, sitting on a council, it gives one a feel for what the people are after. Councils are part of the partnership of equals. They go a long way to improving the quality of life in areas, and there should be adequate funding to enable that type of work to be undertaken in each community group, no matter what their size.

It is with some surprise that we note that one in six people in the Province is living in deprivation. In 2006, David Hanson, the then Minister for Social Development, included parts of Ards on a list of 15 wards where just shy of 2,000 people did not have an adequate standard of living. In fact, Newtownards comprised a fifth of the list. It was found that the Glen, West Winds and Bowtown estates were areas of social deprivation. When we made the Minister aware of the matter — and credit where credit is due — he kindly came down to Newtownards to look at the Scrabo estate and the issue of deprivation. Part of the workshop group with the Scrabo residents' association is trying to regenerate and rebuild, and that is happening because we are all working together and councillors on the ground have the ear of the people.

The Minister is to be congratulated for her response and for ensuring that sufficient funding has been made available so that the Scrabo estate, along with all the other estates in Newtownards, can benefit.

With regard to the Enler project, my colleague Iris Robinson, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, has worked very hard, along with DSD and other Departments, to make things happen for the Enler estate and Dundonald in particular.

That is an example of what can be done when, on the ground, people and councils work hard. The councils are best placed to pinpoint needs and allocate funding, as well as to work continually alongside local people to help and encourage them.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all Members who participated in today's debate, although I must say that I was more impressed by some contributions than others. I note that the gang of four that tabled today's motion has tabled several further motions on a range of topics for which I have ministerial responsibility. I question that, but I look forward to those debates in due course.

My intention is that the Department for Social Development should retain the lead policy responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. Therefore, in that respect, I have no difficulty with the motion as tabled. However, under proposals in the review of public administration (RPA), as approved by the Executive in September 2007, I fully intend to transfer responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal to local councils — and I recall that few Members resiled from that stance during those debates. In fact, at that stage,

members of both Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party called for meaningful powers to be devolved to local government in order to strengthen it. However, the current situation is one of mists, frustration and confusion.

I want to ensure that neighbourhood renewal goes to the heart of communities and uplifts them, as it is supposed to do. The work should be carried out by local representatives in partnership with the communities.

Although I intend to transfer to the councils the responsibility for the delivery of the strategy, I wish to make it clear that it was always, and remains, my intention that the Department should retain responsibility for policy development and for monitoring the strategy.

It may be worthwhile to go back to first principles and ask what neighbourhood renewal is about. It is a structured attempt to address deprivation in 36 local areas across Northern Ireland through the provision of additional resources and services in line with the priorities identified by communities and local partnerships in those areas.

My Department has worked hard to establish local partnerships, and they, in turn, have worked hard to produce action plans for their areas. The partnerships vary in several ways, such as their development, action plans, and how specifically they presented their priorities. However, despite the uniqueness of each area of neighbourhood renewal, and the different speeds at which it moves, central Government officials are left to take most of the decisions on what needs to be delivered and by whom.

I contend that the process would be fine-tuned, and ultimately more successful, in the hands of local government, because it must be remembered that Ministers and civil servants at the centre of Government do not always know best. Local issues can be clearly identified by local councils, councillors and representatives and by the communities that they serve. It must not be forgotten that funding and staff will follow the function and the detail will be worked out. Those who work in local government have better knowledge and understanding of the 36 relatively small and tightly defined areas than central Government will ever have. Therefore, delivery at that level makes sense.

I contend that, if it makes sense to transfer the delivery of neighbourhood renewal to local government in 2011, it almost certainly makes sense before then. Therefore, assuming that the appetite exists in local government to take on the new responsibility, I propose to transfer those elements of delivery that can be transferred now.

I do not propose to do anything to cut across, or conflict with, the overall RPA process, and I appreciate that legislative and staffing issues must be resolved. However, I see no need to wait for some sort of big

bang movement in 2011. Through pilot programmes or partnership, real decision-making and the resources that go with it, can be transferred to local government before then.

12.15 pm

I will not attempt to force the policy on any local council that does not want it, but I cannot understand why a council would not want to take on more responsibility for delivering on what is, essentially, a local problem, as long as that responsibility is accompanied by the requisite budgetary and staff resources.

As for staffing, voluntary secondments, ahead of the full RPA transfer process, can be used, and I know that many staff in the Civil Service would welcome the opportunity to gain some experience in local government.

Members may well have concerns about the ability of councils to work with Government Departments, but DSD development officers are already working closely with other Government Departments in addressing the priorities that have been identified by neighbourhood partnerships. Moreover, local government will receive new powers in community planning, which will give councils a leadership role in co-ordinating the work of Departments and statutory agencies in their areas. The new legislation that is planned under the review of public administration will oblige statutory organisations to work with councils in the new community planning process. I reassure David Simpson, Fred Cobain and Basil McCrea, who raised those various issues, that that is my intention.

I have no doubt that the system will work better than the current centralised efforts to achieve joined-up government on the ground. Whatever the impression that might have been created at meetings of the Committee for Social Development, there is little evidence of reluctance on the part of councils to take responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. It is interesting to note that 22 councils responded to the Department, and none of them resiled or objected to taking responsibility for neighbourhood renewal because councils, NILGA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives want strong local government. Those viewpoints have been articulated in the Chamber on several occasions.

Contradiction is emanating from Sinn Féin, and I question why that is the case. That party is engaged in a political attack on me and my party.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Social Development: In October 2007, the Executive published the emerging findings of the RPA subcommittee, and that was followed by a number of stakeholder events.

A further argument that has been made is that some councils are not ready to take over responsibility for

neighbourhood renewal. I do not believe that that is the case in many instances. However, I will certainly consider concerns, where they exist. The new post-RPA councils will work within a framework of safeguards and protections to ensure that good decision-making prevails.

I wish to address some of the issues that have been raised during the debate. Carál Ni Chuilín was in the Chamber for part of the debate, but not the entire debate. Therefore, I question how interested she really is in neighbourhood renewal and in tackling disadvantage and deprivation. I am sure that she will appreciate that £6.6 million was spent on neighbourhood renewal in North Belfast over the past three years. I do not accept her criticisms at all.

Neighbourhood renewal was not making progress until devolution was restored. It is not interdepartmental bodies that will deliver success, but all of the people who work in partnership on the ground. I hope that that will happen at a local level. If expectations have been raised unduly, it was not I who raised them. I have said all along that the only measure that will deliver success is hard work, and definitely not slogans.

Fra McCann will appreciate that some £12.8 million was spent on neighbourhood renewal in West Belfast over the past three years. I always enjoy Fra's interventions, but the problem is that he usually contradicts himself shortly afterwards. He did so when he told me to stop complaining about my budget for housing and then, when I secured £205 million, he said that it was not enough.

Today, we have had more blubber and bombast from Fra, but he had no ideas. I do not think that he has ever had an idea in his political career, or any other career. He whinged about bringing a paper to the Executive. That is not the issue; my policy is concerned with delivery on the ground for those who need it, rather than for those who shout the loudest. My policy is concerned with minimising deprivation and disadvantage. I am sure that, because of the contradictions in Fra's contributions, we can expect him to become a big fan of the transferring of neighbourhood renewal to local government soon.

Michelle McIlveen made a reasonable contribution, and I take on board her comments that budget must follow function — which I did not say would not happen — and the need for properly refined policies. Local councillors, in conjunction with councils and the local population, can help identify key issues to help that process.

Basil McCrea mentioned the budget; I have addressed that matter. Neighbourhood renewal is delivered in 36 of our most deprived areas. Although each area is unique, they all seek to improve health services, education for our children and job opportunities, and create safer and cleaner environments.

The Sinn Féin Members in attendance could, perhaps, pass on a message to the Minister of Education. I wrote to three Ministers to seek their support for an interdepartmental buy-in to neighbourhood renewal. I received a substantive response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Employment and Learning. However, on 14 August 2008, I received a mere acknowledgement from the Minister of Education, who undertook to review the affected services and respond thereafter. I have not, to date, received a substantive response.

Nelson McCausland raised issues specific to North Belfast; I will respond to those matters at a later date.

My colleague Dolores Kelly made a robust contribution, during which she raised several issues. I agree with her entirely. She highlighted Sinn Féin's hypocrisy; it pretends to care, but it does not give a fiddler's about tackling deprivation. Furthermore, her comments about West Belfast are correct. In the past three years, the Department has allocated nearly £13 million in neighbourhood renewal to that area. What has Sinn Féin done? What has its MP for West Belfast done? I leave that question with the Assembly and Sinn Féin's MLAs — it is a question that they must answer.

In conclusion, I reaffirm my belief that the foundation of neighbourhood renewal is local participation and decision-making. For too long, regeneration has been done to communities — rather than done by communities. Neighbourhood renewal seeks to give the Government and communities the capacity to change the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

Sinn Féin argues to retain local community decision-making with Stormont civil servants — that is the wrong way to tackle the matter. Moreover, that party dislikes my approach to ensuring that funding is directed at those who need it most, rather than those who shout the loudest. I do not understand Sinn Féin's recent attitude to Government and its institutions. They even want a unionist justice Minister. This afternoon, as Sinn Féin listens respectfully to Gordon Brown, Her Majesty's Prime Minister in the Government of the United Kingdom, I imagine it will wonder where it all went wrong.

The motion calls on me to ensure that my Department retains lead responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. No alternative was ever proposed. Although we will retain policy responsibility, delivery will occur on the ground — where it can be best implemented. Neighbourhood renewal is a cross-departmental strategy. The alleviation of poverty and disadvantage is a shared responsibility, especially at this difficult time. However, some Members prefer to make barbed comments and fire political Exocets, rather than do the work that they were elected to do.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Under Standing Order 69(4), as the Minister is a councillor, should she not declare an interest?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister want to respond?

The Minister for Social Development: I have made that declaration in the Chamber previously; it is not a matter from which I resign. I have been a councillor in Down District Council since 1985. There is no problem with that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Further to that point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will you make a ruling on that issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the third time, I invite Mr Brady to speak.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Perhaps it was as well that there was a point of order — it will have given the Minister time to settle herself. She has been getting very exercised. I am sure that she will be pleased to hear that I was here for the entire debate and listened to it with much interest.

The majority of neighbourhood renewal partnerships are against those powers going to councils. They feel that they would be overwhelmed by another layer of bureaucracy. They consider that the whole area of neighbourhood renewal would become a subcommittee of a council committee for economic regeneration.

Fortunately, I am not a councillor, but it was interesting to sit here today and listen to all the councillors — on the other side of the House and in the SDLP — blowing their own trumpets. When neighbourhood renewal devolves to local councils, I wonder whether they will be in such a position to do so. Strong leadership is required, as is strategic lobbying in Departments.

All Departments must take responsibility for social deprivation and its alleviation. Such alleviation would surely lessen the burden on other budgets like health, social security, etc. Apart from the provision of funding, there are many other issues that impact on the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. Problems being encountered with the implementation and delivery of neighbourhood renewal are not all to do with the lack of guidance from the neighbourhood renewal unit, but also the lack of experienced staff at regional development office level. Skills and capabilities must be identified to ensure that the right staff are in place.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships should have a much greater responsibility for the allocation of their budgets. Long-term funding is needed to sustain projects and see them through. There is a need for one lead body and a single funding application process. The difficulties and logistics of completing a form and getting the money when and where it is most needed were mentioned earlier.

There is no doubt that communities have demonstrated a very clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal. However, that has not been reciprocated by other agencies and Departments. There is certainly a feeling that the whole process has been top-down rather than bottom-up, as Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned. DSD has not successfully lobbied for departmental matching funding — for example, neighbourhood renewal —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No. The Member has said enough today. *[Laughter.]*

As has been said, neighbourhood renewal has not yet been tabled as an item for discussion by the Executive. Guidance in respect of neighbourhood renewal has not been — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, Mr Brady. I am calling for order from the other Members while you are speaking.

Mr Brady: Thank you very much, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

DSD has not successfully lobbied for departmental matching funding. Neighbourhood renewal has not yet been tabled as an item for discussion by the Executive. Guidance in respect of neighbourhood renewal has not been issued to other Departments. Neighbourhood renewal needs representation at the ministerial table. The Minister appears to be opposed to capacity building and seems to be more interested in economic sustainability.

If I were to take a really cynical view, I might be inclined to think that initially, when neighbourhood renewal failed to remove deprivation, it was thrown out to the communities to make the best of a scheme that was not properly supported or financed — possibly in the hope that it might eventually self-destruct. If neighbourhood renewal is such a good strategy, why is the Minister preparing to ship it off to the councils?

During the debate, many points were made by different people. Alban Maginness is mystified; Jonathan Craig is bewildered. However, in their mystification and bewilderment, they went on to make very strong anti-Sinn Féin points that I totally and absolutely reject. The alleviation of deprivation is the key issue of neighbourhood renewal. It might suit those Members better if they spent more time thinking about the relief of deprivation.

David Simpson talked as a Member of the Assembly. It would have been interesting if he had talked as the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, because he might have given a different speech.

Fred Cobain supported the motion, and I know that he is much exercised by neighbourhood renewal problems, which must be urgently addressed.

Several Members used the word “premature”, which seems to be the DUP word of the day, although I am not sure in what context. Presumably, when those DUP Members are satisfied, having obtained details from the Department, they will explain that context, and we might get a straight answer.

Alban Maginness accepted an intervention from Dominic Bradley, who spoke about whingeing. Mr Bradley is no stranger to whingeing, although, in recent days, his whingeing has been somewhat muted about other issues.

Anna Lo, who has worked in the community sector —
12.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Tell me more.

Mr Brady: I will tell Dominic more any time that he wants. Anna Lo comes from a community —

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask Mr Brady to clarify his remarks, because many Members are somewhat mystified by his accusations?

Mr Brady: We do not have enough time to cover that subject. Obviously, mystification and bewilderment have descended on the Assembly today: Dominic is the third Member to be mystified and bewildered.

In his own inimitable style, Nelson McCausland agreed with all anti-Sinn Féin rhetoric, although it would be a surprise if he did not, so I will not dwell on that point.

The Minister took the opportunity to talk about all sorts of things — apart from neighbourhood renewal. We heard about the devolution of policing and justice, the mental and physical attacks on Fra McCann —

The Minister for Social Development: I did not say that.

Mr Brady: If the Minister reads Hansard tomorrow, she may find out. That is, of course, if she does read Hansard.

The Minister assured us that the lead responsibility for neighbourhood renewal policy decisions will remain with the Department. Current conjecture about how local government will deal with neighbourhood renewal is speculative, and it remains to be seen how that will work out. If neighbourhood renewal is such a success — and the Minister defended, and spoke glowingly about, it — why is she shipping it off?

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has finished.
Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 32.

AYES

Mr Adams, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Molloy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr P Maskey.

NOES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, 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, 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 Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr McCausland.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that the Department retains lead responsibility for Neighbourhood Renewal, now and in the future, to ensure that social deprivation is tackled in our communities and that there is joined-up delivery.

12.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.46 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Executive Matters

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.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern that the Executive has not met since June and notes the backlog of papers requiring due consideration by the Executive on important issues such as post-primary education, the Maze and PPS14; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meets to address important papers being brought forward by Ministers, to consider the regional impact of the economic downturn and measures which might mitigate its impact on households, businesses, employment and the regional economy including expediting the start dates for major public works agreed in the Investment Strategy, rejecting water charges and prioritising interventions against rising fuel poverty; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive; and reaffirms the recommendations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Report on the Inquiry into the devolution of policing and justice matters which highlighted issues which needed to be considered, examined or discussed by the Assembly and/or discussed by the political parties before the devolution of policing and justice.

The first part of the motion notes with concern that the Executive have not met since June. It also highlights that a number of known papers and issues have now been caught in a backlog. I understand from all parties and from everything that they have said this week — in the media and elsewhere — that they all want to see the Executive meet. Everyone seems to be blaming someone else for the Executive's not meeting, but we should all share the concern that it has not met. Therefore, I see no reason why any party would have a problem with the first part of the motion.

The second part of the motion calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meet to deal with important ministerial papers. Many Ministers have stated that issues that they want to see the Executive process and pass are being held up. Ministers must now tell their officials and the policy communities that are interested in the business of their Departments that they must await Executive approval.

Furthermore, everyone has expressed concern about the impact of the economic downturn and wants to see

the Executive implement measures that could mitigate that impact. Therefore, I would be very surprised if any party had a serious objection to the content of the second part of the motion. However, I will return to that later.

The third part of the motion calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive. The devolution of those powers is not an issue for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — or, indeed, the DUP and Sinn Féin — to privatise. The devolution of policing and justice powers has implications for us as a region and for the Executive, not least on the matters of adequate budget transfer to accompany devolution and the composition and remit of the proposed Department.

Other Ministers may see some of their functions transfer to a devolved justice Department. For example, the criminal justice review recommended that the Office of Law Reform, which is currently in the Department of Finance and Personnel, should transfer to the proposed justice Department. Other powers, such as licensing laws, currently under DSD's remit, could also transfer to the new Department. That is the case in the South, and such powers rest with the Home Office in Whitehall. Therefore, the transfer of policing and justice powers is a matter for the Executive, and I would be surprised if parties could object to that.

The fourth part of the motion reaffirms recommendations that have already been accepted in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's report. That report pointed out that several issues needed to be addressed, either by the Assembly or through discussion by the parties, before those powers could be devolved. Given that such sentiments have been accepted previously, I find it hard to see how any party could object to the fourth part of the motion.

This has been a summer of serious crisis, challenge and worry for many people. Uncertainty is gripping people at all levels: children in primary 6 and their parents about the procedures to be faced when trying to find secondary schools, and people working in public services, as there are stop/go indications about what will happen as part of the review of public administration. Reviews of reviews create uncertainty for people in public services as they cope with the effects of the efficiency savings demanded by the Budget and passed by this House. Those translate into service cuts. There is uncertainty for people in the community and the voluntary sector, who see their funding diminished with the downturn in EU funds, who see the reach of neighbourhood renewal leaving many people outside the target areas, and who see the loss of funding lines on which they have relied for many years. As a result of the review of public administration, the range of bodies to which the community and the

voluntary sector have, in the past, been able to go for slippage funding has disappeared, and the funding is no longer available. Furthermore, there is uncertainty for the private sector, as firms try to cope with the implications of the downturn in world markets and the loss of customer spending power in the home market.

On top of all that, political uncertainty has been foisted on the region. There was the uncertainty of the Executive being unable to meet, and the uncertainty of a senior leader of one of the parties in the Executive talking about withdrawing Ministers and threatening the collapse of the institutions. Another party prominent in the Administration threatened serious consequences, were that to happen. During that time, the Executive did not meet to deal with the issues that worry people.

Mr D Bradley: The Member referred to the uncertainty surrounding education issues. Does the Member agree that the stasis currently at the heart of Government has led not only to uncertainty in education, but to consternation in the whole education community, particularly among parents and teachers? Parents are asking questions about the future arrangements for transfer which teachers cannot answer, as they have been given no clear direction by the Minister or her Department. Does the Member agree that it is now far beyond the time for clarity for the sake of our children, their parents and teachers? Furthermore, does the Member agree that the Executive must meet forthwith to provide clarity about the future of our education system, and that that meeting must take place without further delay?

Mr Durkan: I agree with my colleague Dominic Bradley, who has ably amplified my point. However, education is not the only issue that finds itself locked in the current stand-off that is paralysing good governance in this region. We want the Executive to meet this week; they should have met before now. I believe that it will happen — not least because of the pressure that Sinn Féin must be feeling, because people are bemused by the tactics into which it has locked itself. However, Sinn Féin realises that if the Executive do not meet this week, it will lead to a further locking of business as regards the North/South Ministerial Council. Sinn Féin's tactics will — bizarrely — leave it in Trimble country, whereby its tactics against another party in the Executive, in effect, end up by grounding the business of the North/South Ministerial Council. That would be some achievement and victory for its tactics.

The SDLP wants to see the Executive tackle the issue of fuel poverty. The House passed a motion at the end of June, tabled by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, calling on the Executive to prioritise measures for fuel efficiency, to diversify our dependency on fossil fuels, to intervene with the Treasury and the British Government on the issue of

the VAT windfall from energy receipts, and to prioritise measures to combat fuel poverty.

The Executive that we called upon to do those things has failed to meet since then. Now we get a letter from the deputy First Minister — a fig leaf to cover the disgraceful dereliction of democratic duty that has prevented the Executive from meeting. We are told that the Executive could not meet because the First Minister went on holiday and that the deputy First Minister cancelled his holiday, awaiting the First Minister's return. Perhaps if an Executive meeting had been agreed, the First Minister would have come back from Florida — he would not then have had an excuse to stay on holiday.

Why were the relevant issues not being addressed through the Executive? That is the difference that devolution was supposed to make. We expected the Executive to meet during the summer recess; indeed, my party tried to have the Assembly reconvened to encourage the Executive to meet and deal with some very serious issues.

Part of our motion asks the Executive to reject water charges, and the SDLP is explicit in wanting the Executive to reject them. My party has always believed that there should be no separate or freestanding water charges. Water should be a visible component of rates; that is where water revenue should come from. The independent panel set up by the Executive also made that recommendation. However, Ministers have been working on a different plan.

Deferral of water charges was mentioned last week; that was the first time that Ministers admitted that the intention had been to impose separate freestanding water charges next year. They would not admit that during the Budget debate earlier this year. Indeed, part of the amendment that we tabled to the Budget highlighted its lack of clarity on the implications for water charges. The other parties that backed the Budget tried to ignore that issue and pretend that it did not exist. It is all becoming clear now. We understand that the Minister for Social Development —

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

Mr Durkan: There was an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You get extra time because of an intervention only if your speech is less than 10 minutes.

Mr Moutray: In debating the motion, I welcome its aim of highlighting the need for an immediate meeting of the Executive to discuss the many outstanding issues facing our society. The Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP want an Executive meeting to take place this Thursday. For the sake of the people of Northern Ireland, I — along with many Members in the Chamber — hope that progress will be made at that meeting. I want the Executive to address

the cost of living, which is of great concern to thousands of people across the Province. I want a Government and Executive that work — one that is committed to discussion, debate and dialogue and, ultimately, to making decisions on issues that affect the electorate.

My party has been committed to the process since its formation at St Andrews. Throughout the process — and particularly in recent days — we have demonstrated our commitment to partnership government and our dedication to delivering for the electorate on education, planning, health and housing.

No one party has a majority, which dictates that there will be partnership government. The Executive is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland; it plays a pivotal role in decision making in our society. Given the economic problems that we face — such as the hike in electricity and gas prices — it is unfortunate that Sinn Féin is dragging its heels. Sinn Féin should stand up to the challenge, allow the Executive to meet on Thursday and get down to real business. That would enable our Executive to deal fully with the economic downturn and assist those who have been worst affected by the credit crunch.

I put the challenge again: get down to business. The issues facing the electorate are far too serious to be subject to political point-scoring. The Government and Executive can deliver as they have done in the past. They have delivered free travel for the over 60s; they have implemented a rates freeze across the country for the next three years; in a time of flash-flooding, they issued one-off payments of £1000 per household; they have undertaken major infrastructural upgrade; and they have successfully attracted investment.

Additionally, they have developed a workable and manageable Programme for Government and an investment strategy. We heard from the First Minister no later than yesterday that they are working and that aims are being achieved. I believe that that is progress, and that individuals and society in general have benefited from that progress and will continue to benefit from it in future. For too long under direct rule, this country was a forgotten land.

2.15 pm

The motion calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive, yet we hear Sinn Féin's threats to bring the Government into crisis over that issue. The DUP supports the devolution of policing and justice. Our Assembly manifesto states:

"While in principle we support the devolution of policing and justice functions we believe this can only happen when there is the necessary support within the community."

That is a sensitive issue that requires support from within the community, and such support is not evident

at present. Sinn Féin's behaviour has undermined confidence in the possibility of any move being made in the near future.

The DUP has been active in trying to resolve that issue and has engaged in intensive talks in which progress had been made. It has been agreed that there should be a single justice Department, with one Minister whose election will require cross-community support. That matter was then referred to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee for further progress. Let that Committee get down to business and move on the issue. Let it put the wheels in motion as regards the structures that need to be in place for a single Department.

After all, the policing and justice issue is not a matter for the Executive — it is a matter for each of the parties in the Chamber. The Executive have responsibility for each of the current Departments in the Administration and they should concentrate on that. I ask the parties to progress the matter of policing and justice through the appropriate channels. There is a clear division between the matters of governance and matters for individual parties. There are serious issues requiring immediate dialogue, and this country should not be hindered by those Members who are delaying progress. The DUP is committed to making progress and has been engaged in intensive high-level talks aimed at resolving those matters.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I am in favour of the motion, which, under the prevailing circumstances, accurately reflects the view of the parties in the Assembly — even if the rhetoric of the proposer does not. We all want to see the Executive meet and conduct their business free from partisan vetoes and for them to be in a position to address all the issues that are specified in the motion.

The following is an extract from a resolution that was passed by the DUP party executive in Belfast on 24 March 2007:

"The Party Officers having consulted widely, weighed up all the relevant matters and reviewed progress on outstanding matters recommend to the Party's Central Executive Committee that the DUP would support and participate fully in a Northern Ireland Executive if powers were devolved to it on an agreed date in May".

It further states:

"This firm commitment is offered within an environment where no one, including the government, goes back on any of the advances and commitments made."

It is obvious that the DUP has abided by neither the content nor the spirit of its own resolution. Advances and commitments were made by parties and Governments, and Sinn Féin intends to ensure that they are delivered on.

Some political parties and media commentators would have us believe that the ongoing crisis that the Assembly faces revolves solely around the issue of policing and justice. Although that is a vital issue, the

DUP's inability to cope with sharing responsibility for policing and justice is just the public manifestation of the real problem.

Yesterday, the House debated an Ulster Unionist Party motion on dissident violence from within the wider republican community. On the face of it, that was a valid concern, and one that Sinn Féin shares. However, unionists of all shades refused to accept a perfectly reasonable amendment that would have improved the motion by inserting a reference to ongoing violence, and threats of violence, from armed groups in the wider unionist community. No convincing rationale was offered for that particular example of a unionist consensus.

What then should we conclude? Does loyalist violence not matter to unionist politicians? Are unionists, by such crass indifference, telling the wider community that nationalist concerns do not count in the Assembly? The overriding cause of the difficulties experienced in the current political context is the refusal by some unionists, and the inability of other unionists, to accept the basic principles of partnership and equality in Government.

A cursory examination of the debates in the Assembly since restoration in May 2007 will demonstrate that rather than take issues on their merits, too often the unionists' approach has been that if an issue is important to nationalists, they will not support it. Yesterday's debate was an example of that, and the disgraceful attitude of the DUP to the Irish language Act is a further example. Such prejudice cannot be permitted to continue.

Today's motion is, in effect, a plea for the Executive to be reconvened. I have already indicated that my party supports the motion, notwithstanding the wording of some passages, or the selective amnesia of the proposers in relation to the origins of water charges. We are seeking to resolve the issues that are preventing the Executive from meeting, and we will continue our endeavours with the Irish and British Governments and the DUP to resolve those matters.

The DUP entered the institutions on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — that is undeniable. Both documents are predicated on the principles of equality and parity of esteem. That is also undeniable. Irrespective of the rhetoric of DUP spokespersons seeking to placate rejectionists within and without their party, the fact that the DUP is in Government demonstrates its acceptance of the tenets of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement.

Some members of the DUP leadership are attempting to use the economic pressure that many people are now experiencing as a smokescreen to hide their inability to deliver on their requirements, but while it is understandable —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I will not. I am almost out of time.

Although it is understandable that people will direct their demands for solutions at local politicians, it must be recognised that the Assembly, even if it were fully functional, has little power to address a global economic recession.

Finally, the refusal by the DUP to agree the transfer of policing and justice is not about a lack of confidence in our community; it is about a refusal to accept that nationalism has a right to have authority and policy oversight into how it is policed and how justice is administered.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I am sorry. Please allow me to finish, as I have only 10 seconds left.

It is fundamentally a human rights and equality issue, and unionists in the Chamber will have to accept that our community will no longer —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Mr McLaughlin: May I just finish? I was interrupted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. Time is up.

Mr Kennedy: The Ulster Unionist Party broadly supports the motion. It addresses the single most important issue for devolution and local democracy in Northern Ireland, because if we have no functioning Executive, the entire experiment of devolution has no real point. We are wasting the time, money and patience of the people of Northern Ireland.

The current impasse in the Executive has called all major democratic decision-making to stop. Ordinary people, families and businesses are facing a difficult economic outlook, and what are the DUP and Sinn Féin doing? Like Nero, they are fiddling while Rome burns. While families and the elderly are facing a winter of difficult choices, Sinn Féin is bringing the Executive and devolution to the brink.

In the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy, the Executive made the development of our economy their number one priority. However, local businesses and industry are facing serious difficulties owing to the turmoil in global markets and the economic downturn. However, rather than coming together and creatively addressing the problem, the majority of the Executive is being held to ransom by Sinn Féin. The logjam in the planning system and the inability to start major public works agreed in the investment strategy are — make no mistake about it — having a negative impact on Northern Ireland's economy.

The Executive also created ambitious targets to reduce poverty levels, yet the Minister for Social Development has stated that she cannot deliver an effective housing agenda because of the current deadlock in the Administration. The rising cost of fuel and energy will leave many hard-working families and the elderly facing a winter of fuel poverty and very difficult choices. The Executive must get to grips with the situation and follow the advice of Sir Reg Empey, which is to set up an Executive cost-of-living subcommittee to deal with the problem. However, the Executive must meet in order for that to happen.

Sinn Féin has resorted once again to shadow negotiations but has failed to realise that the time for negotiations is over. The current Executive and devolution within the United Kingdom are what Sinn Féin and the rest of us have signed up to, and it is within that framework that problems must be solved. In order for the devolution of policing and justice to occur, Sinn Féin must show the people of Northern Ireland that it, and this Executive, can be trusted. It must show that it unequivocally denounces violence, without a nod and a wink to dissidents. Sinn Féin must prove that it fully supports the Police Service, the courts and the rule of law, without a subversive acceptance of non-participation and agitation. The party must show that it and the Executive can be competent and effective policy-makers and administrators.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Member agree that the people elected the Assembly to do three things: first, to rebuild the economy; secondly, to upgrade drastically the quality of our public services; and, thirdly, to create a united community. Does the Member also agree that the widespread perception of the people, as expressed in the newspapers and on the radio, is that the Assembly, in its first year, has failed to deliver on those three objectives and that the fundamental responsibility for that failure lies with the parties in OFMDFM jointly — the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his contribution. I agree largely with many of the points that he made, but the situation is worse than that. The public generally believe us all to be a shambles.

The debacle over the summer has shown that the Executive have been unable to get to grips with the bread and butter issues. Ironically, Sinn Féin's recent intransigence has pushed the devolution of policing and justice further over the horizon. Having said that, I accept the call in the motion for the:

"First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive".

I assume that such a paper would clearly and reasonably state that, although we should work towards agreement on the principles of the issue, the time is obviously not yet right for the devolution of policing and justice.

That is the type of mature activity and progression that can build confidence, which may eventually, when the time is right, lead to the devolution of policing and justice. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee can carry out preparatory work, but it remains the Ulster Unionist Party's view that it is premature at this stage to consider the devolution —

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

Mr Kennedy: I have an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The intervention was for 45 seconds, Mr Kennedy. I call Mrs Naomi Long.

Mrs Long: It has been three months since the Executive last met. Although my colleagues and I have not been behind the door in our criticism of the Executive when they were meeting regularly, this latest development is deeply damaging to public confidence in the institutions generally. I agree with Danny Kennedy on that.

I hope that the noises that have been made in recent days indicating that the Executive will meet on Thursday 18 September will come to pass, because the public's patience is running out. The intervening period has been characterised by increasing brinkmanship, with threats of collapse being issued repeatedly. Such sabre-rattling cannot be seen as anything other than reckless and irresponsible, not least of all in the current economic climate.

More than that, the impasse has been incredibly counterproductive. Bearing in mind that it began as a dispute over the timing of the devolution of policing and justice, it is hard to see how creating instability and highlighting the weaknesses of the current arrangements does anything other than frustrate and delay devolution further. The situation may have started as a dispute over policing and justice, but the list of sticking points and blockages has expanded to include the Maze stadium project, the Irish language Act and PPS 14, to name only a few. It has served to expose to the public how deep and far-reaching the rift in the Executive currently is.

I regret to say that it has also been characterised by a certain childishness and petulance, which has done nothing for the reputation of these institutions. At Question Time yesterday, I was chided by John O'Dowd for referring to it as petty squabbling — frankly, it is difficult to think of a phrase that better sums it up. Take the spat over the regional development strategy; a crucial document that will shape this society and drive policy and investment for the foreseeable future. Had it been issues of gravity that led to public disagreement, the matter would have been serious. However, it was not; it was a childish spat about how to refer to this region in the document.

2.30 pm

No one thought that bringing together disparate political interests around a table and expecting agreement would be easy. Things can clearly only work if there is an overriding commitment to make them work. I do not believe that that commitment lies only with Sinn Féin; it lies with every party around the table, and indeed those of us who are not at the table.

It is the apparent absence of commitment, however, that causes people who are facing real and pressing problems to be concerned for the future. To be blunt, few of my constituents wake up at 4.00 am in a lather of sweat, concerned about how they are going to refer to Northern Ireland as they go about their business that day, or who the current Minister for justice might be. There are plenty, however, who are losing sleep because of concerns about how to put a loaf on the table, pay their heating and electricity bills, their mortgage, and about how their child in P6 will transfer from primary school to secondary school. For those people, the Minister's assurances that children are at the heart of it all, and that it is all very clear, are starting to ring rather hollow.

People are worried about planning delays, and about their houses being flooded every time it rains. Farmers are in despair over crops being destroyed, and people are worried about growing tension and violence in communities, and that the people whom they have sent here to resolve those issues are failing to do so. They want politicians who not only care but actually give those issues the same priority that they do in their daily lives.

The other issues that have been raised —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I will give way in a moment.

The other issues that have been raised are important, but they need to be addressed in the context of a functioning Executive, and in a mature way. People need to wean themselves off a diet of crisis and stand-off, and on to the solid food of good governance. If the Executive can not have any impact on those issues through these institutions — as some have been hand-wringing today — then it begs the question: what is the point?

If people are here because they believe that they can make a difference, they owe it to the people whom they represent to meet and find a way through their problems, rather than stamping their feet outside the door and complaining.

Mr Shannon: As a member ó tha OFMDFM Committee, aá agre wi tha principal ó tha moatshin.

Tha Executive er vital tae tha strength an stabilness ó tha Proavince an ther er imoporten decisions that must be tuk sooner rather than later — but, bi tha saem

token, aá must sae that thees metters er in progress ó bein maed an simply canny be rushed.

As a member of the OFMDFM Committee, I agree with the principle of the motion. The Executive are vital to the growth and stability of the Province, and there are important decisions that must be taken sooner, rather than later. However, by the same token, those decisions are in the process of being made, and they simply cannot be rushed.

There is no one in the Chamber who does not want to see the issue of post-primary education resolved. I have been inundated with questions from teachers and from concerned parents who simply do not know what their children will be doing in the near future. Of course, that is a decision that must be made, and, indeed, should have been made, and yet it is another example of why things cannot be rushed in the initial stages. The Minister of Education was so concerned with scrapping the 11-plus that she did so without having any replacement in mind. Had she not been so hasty, and allowed the test to stand until she had in place a new transfer system, we would not be in the situation that we are in today.

I agree that the Executive must meet to discuss and resolve the issues, such as water charges, and others. However, by the same token, we must take into account the external factors that are at work before those decisions are made. To take the issue of policing and justice as an example, as a member of Ards district policing partnership, I see the benefits of the devolution of policing and justice, and the impact that it would have in Northern Ireland. However, as an elected representative who is in touch with his local community, I also see that the confidence of the people of Strangford, the area that I represent, is not at the level that is needed in order to proceed with such a large step.

If there were a vote on the devolution of policing and justice powers, I am certain that the result would show that the unionist people are not yet ready. Timing is crucial, and it is clear that now is not the right time. Although the day when we are able to take control of policing and justice powers is coming, we are not yet there.

There must also be correct financial aid to enable the devolution of policing and justice powers. There are many issues; the devolution of those powers is not as simple as setting up a ministry. That financial aid is not in place — no one would sign up for a mortgage over umpteen years without knowing when or how it could be paid.

So that I am not misunderstood, I reiterate my desire for Northern Ireland to have legislative powers for policing and justice as set out in the Committee's report, where certain powers remain with the House of

Commons. However, some in this Chamber are not yet in a position to handle such responsibility.

If we listen to financial commentators, it seems that the UK is heading into a recession. As much as I would prefer that not to be the case, the Executive must — and will — play a major role in ensuring that Northern Ireland does not regress into an economic wasteland or disaster. I have been contacted by concerned constituents who have elderly parents or relatives and are very worried about how the price of coal, oil and electricity will make matters worse for those who already struggle. Those are the issues that the Assembly and Ministers must concentrate on — we must implement measures that offset, to as large a degree as possible, the rising cost of living in the Province.

Last week, I welcomed the Ards arthritic care group to Stormont, all of whom were in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The main question that those ladies and gentlemen asked was how they would get through the coming winter. As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to consider those matters on behalf of our constituents. As I suspect is the case for all Members, people regularly call into my advice centre and say that the Assembly must focus on the bread-and-butter issues and how people live each and every day. Those issues are very important. We are elected to make a difference, and now is the time to show that we are equipped and able to do that by tackling the day-to-day issues in Northern Ireland.

I agree with the part of the motion that encourages the Executive to meet, but we must strive to make the right decision rather than a quick decision. The most important issue is that the Assembly gets things right.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an ruin.

The motion points to various outstanding issues that the Executive must address, including the transfer of policing and justice powers, post-primary education, the development of the Long Kesh site, PPS 14, and the impact of the current financial downturn on the people whom we represent.

Sinn Féin is consistent in its pursuit of a resolution to those issues, and its Ministers are at the heart of the implementation of the necessary changes to education, regional and rural development and the other many important issues that affect the lives and living standards of people in the North and across the island of Ireland. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that those issues are addressed and that the neglect and underdevelopment of the past is confined to the past. That is why Sinn Féin put equality, which was not always present in previous programmes, at the heart of the recent Programme for Government.

Many issues in the motion are ones of equality, which is why they are priorities for Sinn Féin. All the

issues in the motion will be addressed and resolved by the Executive and the Assembly, with equality and partnership as the guiding principles.

It is right and proper to express concern, but we must explain how to move forward. The Assembly, the North/South Ministerial Council and all the other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are underpinned by equality and partnership. Sinn Féin stands by the commitment that it made at St Andrews, and it is time for all parties — including the British and Irish Governments — to not default on their commitments. We have no intention to countenance, never mind allow, a return to any form of majority rule. The DUP may have a desire or notion to return to that policy, which allows people to be excluded or mandates ignored.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Before I do, I have made a note to allow 30 extra seconds for Mark Durkan's intervention. He may go ahead.

Mr Durkan: The Member has just said that Sinn Féin will not allow anyone's mandate to be ignored. However, it is clear that Sinn Féin has agreed with the DUP that a Minister for justice will not — at this or any other time — be appointed through d'Hondt, which is the mandate-based system of inclusion at the heart of the agreement, but by cross-community support. At present, that is a veto on the SDLP; it will be a veto on Sinn Féin in the future.

Mr McCartney: If Mark had read the Good Friday Agreement, I am sure that he would realise that there must be some movement on the issue. D'Hondt was deployed for the setting up of 10 Departments.
[*Interruption.*]

I want to discuss why Mark jumped in during my comments. Let us bear in mind what you said last week in Oxford. You are the person —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCartney, all remarks must be referred through the Chair, not to Mr Durkan by his first name. Please refer all your remarks through the Chair, Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: If the haranguing from the margins would stop, perhaps I would not fall into that practice.

Now, I will refer directly —

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No; I will not give way because I have already given way once.

The SDLP and the DUP might have taken succour from the speech of the SDLP leader at Oxford. Of course, he has since tried to distance himself from that speech and claims that he was misinterpreted. Remember that the SDLP once said that we live in a post-nationalist Europe; the party spent the next two years saying that

that is not what it meant, even though it was written in the party's manifesto. This morning, Mark Durkan's analysis of the situation is that the DUP is wrong, but that Sinn Féin is to blame. If that is not muddled thinking, what is?

I reiterate my point: progress cannot be made unless there is equality at the heart of the Executive and the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: The Member speaks about the DUP's desire to return to majoritarianism. I want to point out to him that the DUP has never advocated that. As a matter of fact, he is quite right: it was Mr Durkan who came up with that suggestion last week.
[*Interruption.*]

Well, he was as near to it as made no difference. I understand that he has recoiled from his remarks somewhat.

Do the Member and the House accept that the burning issues for people are the bread-and-butter ones? People are not pulling the coat off my back demanding that policing and justice be devolved to a Northern Ireland Administration; they are concerned about the price of a loaf of bread and their next purchase of heating oil. The Assembly must get on with tackling those matters. Nothing should stand in the way of that.

Mr McCartney: I agree with many of your comments. However, bear in mind that in the past, when there was no equality or partnership, the problems that you mentioned were foisted upon one community by another.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. How short is your memory, Mr McCartney? I asked you to refer all your remarks through the Chair. However, just five or 10 seconds later, you have made your comments directly to Lord Morrow.

Mr McCartney: I believe that it was slightly more than five or 10 seconds ago. Forgive me.

Mr Durkan: It was a healthy exchange.

Mr McCartney: A healthy exchange is right. However, the point that I want to make through the Chair to Maurice Morrow is that although I agree with his points, the problems that he mentioned were foisted upon one community by another because there was no equality or partnership. My party is completely and absolutely committed to equality and partnership.

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

Mr I McCrea: The motion is timely and important, as it goes to the heart of the concerns of many people in their daily conversations. It is not specifically about the fact that the Executive have not met since June, but is more about the economic and financial crisis that Northern Ireland faces.

2.45 pm

The Executive have not met since June, and the sole responsibility for that lies with Sinn Féin Members. They alone have no regard for the everyday financial problems that our constituents face, and they will have to answer to their community for that lack of leadership. The DUP has consistently called for a meeting of the Executive. My party leader, the First Minister, made it abundantly clear that he was prepared to come home from his holiday if an Executive meeting was to be held, but Sinn Féin refused to co-operate.

Sinn Féin uses the impasse over policing and justice as its excuse for not agreeing to a meeting of the Executive. During the summer, however, a joint letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee stated that having considered the devolution of policing and justice matters, they required the Committee to undertake further work. The letter also stated that the Committee's consideration should be based on the model of a single Department with a single Minister at its head. As that way forward is agreed, Sinn Féin has no reasonable excuse for holding back the Executive from meeting on Thursday.

Sinn Féin seems to think that policing and justice is the main topic of discussion in Northern Ireland. However, as has been said previously, the discussions around dinner tables this evening — and for many evenings to come — will centre on more important issues. How will the next meal be put on the table; the next item of clothing put on a child's back; or the next electricity or heating bill or litre of fuel for the car be paid for? Those are the issues that matter to many of my constituents, and I have no doubt that every Member, whatever his or her party, can say the same.

It is important that the Executive meet this Thursday to allow Ministers to bring forward proposals to help people through the financial crisis. My party leader, the First Minister, has taken the lead with his recent suggestion that water charges be deferred, but only an Executive meeting can take such a decision.

I welcome the fact that all parties will support the motion and hope that an Executive meeting will take place. That is the wish of all the people of Northern Ireland whom we are elected to serve.

Mr B McCrea: What I have just heard is a lot of pathetic party-political bickering.

Mr Durkan: There will be none of that from you.
[Laughter.]

Mr B McCrea: There will be none of that from me.

There is so much Pontius Pilate talk. People are always apportioning fault. Two days ago, I spoke to a businessman about this issue, and he said that he

would not put petrol in his car to drive to a polling station to elect any of us. He did mean every political party and Member. I had hoped that he would exempt a few Members who are trying to do a good job, but the shame is on every one of us. People look at the Assembly, and consider us to be a pathetic shower for not getting around a table to tackle issues that affect everyone.

I was in New York last week when they announced the bailing out of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac for \$200,000 million. Lehman Brothers — the biggest and bluest of blue-chip companies — has gone into bankruptcy. Merrill Lynch has had to sell itself to the Bank of America. Will these events affect Northern Ireland? Of course they will.

The businesses struggling to keep people employed, the construction industry leaders who were here yesterday to talk to us, the farmers putting up with floods all ask what our august body is doing about the crisis. Compare how those people must deal with those issues with how Members are apparently unable to do so. I do not point the finger at any particular Member — that will lead only to more ping-pong politics. The Executive must meet soon. I prefer that they meet on Thursday. They must deal with those issues.

We must stop these battles by proxy. We can take any topic that we choose and put a particular angle on it. Members on the Benches opposite talk about equality and partnership, but I do not see any equality and partnership or anyone listening to our reasonable concerns about the education system. It is one way or no way.

I have argued that we should try a different approach. Issues such as water charges and PPS 14 are not easily solved; however, we must start to tackle them. People say that the days of majority rule are over, but that is nonsense. The idea is to build consensus so that we can progress; otherwise, the tail wags the dog and we get Government by minority while vested interests prevent progress. We get stalemate and inaction. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable in society struggle to make ends meet. Those people do not look at their MLA and think that we are doing a good job; they ask how they will be able to pay their electricity and gas bills. People are faced with the decision of whether to eat or heat. We must find a way of tackling those issues.

I want to conclude on a more positive note. I believe in a future for all the people of Northern Ireland. We must be able to work out difficult issues properly and not brush them under the carpet. We must be able to say that Northern Ireland can and will be a good place for everyone. It is time that we showed the collective vision and leadership that people expect.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate.

The summer was one of lost opportunities. We met with one challenge after another, but, by and large, we

did nothing or appeared to do nothing. That is the perception. Like other Members, I, too, have talked to people, and, frankly, the feedback has been a blanket condemnation of all — the good, the bad and the ugly.

We had three months to get ready for the difficult times ahead, but that time was wasted by those who put their selfish needs first. They cannot plead ignorance, because apart from the floods in August, the other problems that befell us were predictable when recess began in early July. Indeed, the problems were obvious when the Executive met in June. However, for three months, the ship of the state has drifted towards the rocks while the bridge was deserted. No one was in charge, and it would appear that on the doors of Stormont castle a sign read “Gone fishing”; some had gone to Donegal, others to Florida. It looks as though those Members have gone fishing once again today, because they have not bothered — or perhaps they do not care — to be here to listen to what we have to say. It is an insult to the Chamber that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister is here — at least one of them should be.

Some told us that there was no need for the Executive to meet at all, because departmental business was being carried out anyway. That is hardly a ringing endorsement of devolution. However, we know that business was not being carried out because some 30 important papers are lying in a drawer. The issues in those papers will not go away, such as the crisis in the construction industry, members of which were here yesterday.

Some 85,000 people are employed in the construction industry, 3,000 of whom have already been made redundant, and it could be that many more are made redundant before another 12 months is out. There are energy, food, housing and financial crises; there are also other issues, including the credit crunch.

We needed the Executive to take corporate responsibility for all those problems, and to lead the community; that was the corporate responsibility that we heard so much about at the time of the St Andrews discussions from the now First Minister.

Other Members said that there was little that the Executive could do about our problems; that there was not much point in holding meetings; and that we could not do anything about the global oil markets, Russian gas prices or the Treasury in London. That makes me wonder why those people bother getting elected at all if they cannot, or do not want to, do anything. We can all make a difference. It is absolute nonsense to say that the Executive could do nothing. The Executive could have done a great deal of work — they must start doing it as quickly as possible — if only Sinn Féin had not closed down the devolved Government.

I appeal to Sinn Féin, even at this late stage, to ensure that Thursday's meeting goes ahead in order to

make things happen. We owe it to the people. We must speak loudly on behalf of the building workers who are being laid off, the pensioners who are afraid to order home-heating oil, the families with children who cannot face an electricity bill, and the parents who do not know where their child will go to school next year.

Over the summer, one sector after another called for the Executive to meet and to face up to the problems. People who were concerned about jobs and about jobs in the construction industry, about poverty, and about children and the elderly were all screaming for the Executive to meet. People who could not sell their homes because there were no buyers, and buyers who could not get mortgages, wanted the Executive to meet. They all wanted a lead from the Executive — it did not happen. The Executive could and should have discussed all those issues. They should have discussed the work of the fuel poverty task force that was set up by Margaret Ritchie and ways in which its recommendations might have been funded.

We will have a crisis next winter about the elderly people who will not be able to eat or to heat their homes. We need the Executive to do something about it now — not in January or February, when the damage will have already been done.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, although, as my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin said, there might be some sentiments in it that I might not fully support.

We have heard many fine words from representatives in the Chamber today and over the past week and fortnight about how deeply concerned they are about those in fuel poverty and in poverty. I am sure that many of those people are genuinely concerned. However, some among them would not know poverty if it jumped up and bit them on the ass. That is the simple fact of the matter. They have never commented on poverty before; they have never introduced any motions in this Assembly about poverty; nor have they dealt with it in any meaningful way. They are using people's difficulties as a political battering ram against my party, which is fair enough, but it is not acceptable to use the deep concerns that are held by the general public.

As for those parties that lecture Sinn Féin that the Executive must meet — no matter what, because that is the only way forward let us look at their most recent history. The SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party voted against the Budget. They voted against the Programme for Government, and, if their mandate had been carried —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not.

If their mandate had been carried, the Executive and Assembly would have collapsed long ago because,

without a Budget or a Programme for Government, it could not have continued. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Durkan: We voted to amend the Budget.

Mr O'Dowd: This time last year, Basil McCrea was openly advocating that the Ulster Unionist Party should withdraw from the Executive, so why does he now show such concern about the future of the Executive? The SDLP —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. The SDLP — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, if I may continue, the SDLP was so determined to destroy the Budget and the Programme for Government that it voted against its own Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. We must examine where those parties are coming from — are they seriously concerned about the future of the Executive and the Assembly? Their past voting record suggests that they are not.

I believe firmly that the Executive should meet on Thursday, but they must meet in a stable partnership and with an equality-proofed agenda.

Those who dismiss that as trivia, as the Alliance Party, the SDLP and others have done, should be ashamed of themselves, because that is what this institution is supposed to be built on.

3.00 pm

Over the last few days I have heard moderate tones from the DUP; and some DUP members have even indicated that they may be in favour of power sharing. However, let us look at what happened in the Chamber yesterday. The Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party had an opportunity to display to the nationalist community their true views, through actions rather than words, but instead they voted against the amendment that stated that this Assembly notes the increasing levels of:

“violent dissident republican and continued loyalist activity and violence throughout Northern Ireland; condemns such activity; welcomes the increased level of political and community support for the PSNI in the face of this threat; and supports the rule of law, the courts, and the PSNI and looks forward to further asserting these principles through the devolution of policing and justice matters.”

Both parties, as a collective, voted against that amendment. That is what their fine words mean to the nationalist and republican community. Sammy Wilson throws people off advisory bodies because their address is in the South. Those things send signals to the nationalist and republican community. That may not matter to the SDLP, who now defend the poor and the downtrodden; however, earlier this year it tried to

bring down the Assembly during the Budget. Those things may not matter to the SDLP, but they matter very strongly to Sinn Féin.

Some Members: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order —

Mr O'Dowd: The St Andrews Agreement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Dowd: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has the floor. If the Member does not wish to take an intervention, it is entirely up to the Member.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Assembly is built on the St Andrews Agreement and the Good Friday Agreement, and none of the issues that Sinn Féin has raised since October 2006 has held any surprises for the DUP, the British Government or the Irish Government. The British Prime Minister will address the Assembly later today, and I wait with interest to hear what he says.

The Prime Minister cannot come in here and lecture Irish republicans or unionists on the way forward. He is a co-signatory of the St Andrews Agreement, and we expect him to ensure that that agreement is implemented in full. He, along with the Taoiseach of the Irish Government, has responsibilities, and should not come here to lecture anyone.

I seek some information from those on the opposite Benches. I am led to understand that the Utility Regulator brought a report on fuel price increases to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and that the Minister signed off on that. Why did the Minister not block those increases? I would like that to be made public —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, time is up.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the last speech, the Member made accusations about the voting record of the Ulster Unionist Party with regard to the Budget. He also made another —

Mr O'Dowd: That is not a point of order.

Mr B McCrea: When the record is checked, what is the appropriate way for the Member who made those accusations to go about correcting his erroneous statements?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no right of reply on any reference to a party and to how a party votes. Thank you, Mr O'Dowd, I will make the decisions here, I do not need your assistance.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Perhaps you can clarify why you referred that comment to me? At no stage during your address did I interrupt you or attempt to suggest what ruling you should give.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Yes you did, Mr O'Dowd. You said:

"That is not a point of order."

I will make the decision on whether it is a point of order.

Mr Ross: We find ourselves today in what the media has deemed a crisis. Whether the current impasse is a crisis, a deadlock, or any other buzzword, the situation is indisputable. I listened to Mr Basil McCrea's comments about how he hoped to rise above it all and not apportion blame. However, there is only one party who refuses to meet at the Executive table, and that party is Sinn Féin.

Many of us will recall playground disputes as children, involving a child who did not get his or her own way and who took the ball home to complain to mummy. What we have seen over the summer from Sinn Féin is little more than playground politics. When Sinn Féin does not get its way, it runs away from the Executive table and tells tales to our national Government in Westminster, or to the Irish Government in Dublin, in the hope that it suddenly will get its own way.

Yesterday, I listened to Martina Anderson saying that the days of single-party rule were over. The days of concessions to republicans every time they run away and throw a temper tantrum are also over. I listened to John O'Dowd on 'Stormont Live', saying that he wanted stable government.

Why, then, does Sinn Féin threaten to pull down the structures if it does not get its own way? Over the summer, leading Sinn Féin figures south of the border threatened to withdraw Ministers from the Executive, and, in recent days, the leader of the Sinn Féin Assembly group said that the party did not think that enough progress had been made to hold an Executive meeting on Thursday.

Republican threats of violence did not work on the unionist community over the past 40 years, so to think that threats to pull down the institutions will work now is just ludicrous. If Sinn Féin wishes to encourage progress on the devolution of policing and justice, as it claims, these latest attempts at bullying will hardly fill the unionist community with the confidence required for those powers to be devolved. All it does is to highlight the fact that the lines and the spin that Sinn Féin fed its electorate after the St Andrews Agreement over the devolution of policing and justice were false, and confirmation that the DUP has secured a triple lock on the transfer of those important powers.

Devolution was heralded as a bright new beginning for Northern Ireland, and all the parties in the Chamber spoke of the importance of locally elected politicians taking decisions that affect local people. The central pillar of that is a locally formed Executive charged with taking and implementing many of the important decisions that impact on our constituents' lives.

It is, therefore, extremely disappointing that the Executive have not met since June; and although the First Minister has indicated that he signed off on some 30 papers, the Executive are being prevented from meeting because of Sinn Féin's refusals.

All the other parties want to meet and get on with the job that they are paid to do, whether it be the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party or the Ministers on our own DUP Benches. The community will not take kindly to the fact that, at a time when we are all faced with rising energy costs, economic downturn and people faced with job losses, Sinn Féin blocks the Executive from meeting and prevents local Ministers from getting together to deal with such issues on a collective basis, as this system of government requires. In fact, it highlights some of the shortcomings of this type of mandatory coalition.

The motion mentions serious issues such as education and rural planning, which are being stalled because of the childish stance taken by the Members opposite. Quite understandably, those people in our community who are concerned about how they will afford to heat their homes this winter are fed up with the latest Sinn Féin-orchestrated deadlock. Is this really the sort of leadership that the community that it claims to represent wants? From conversations and communications that I have had in my own constituency, that is not what people in East Antrim want, nor, from listening to radio and television phone-ins, is it the type of behaviour that people across the country want.

It is time that Sinn Féin Ministers took the responsibility and the obligations of their office seriously and, instead of running away from the tough and important decisions, come to the Executive table on Thursday and take those tough decisions that can assist the most vulnerable people in society as they face harsh economic times.

The motion calls for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on policing and justice, but the proper place for those discussions is in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Nonetheless, the motion accurately sums up the mood of the Assembly and of the community, and I therefore support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: One of the principal reasons that I and, no doubt, the vast majority of Members supported a return of devolution was the ability to influence our own affairs. I strongly supported the restoration of

accountable, democratic structures at Stormont precisely because we could influence our own affairs in a way that we had not been able to do under direct rule.

Principal among that influencing our own affairs is our Executive, and if the Executive cannot meet, there are few ways in which we can influence our own affairs. The Assembly can meet every hour of every day and discuss these matters, but the Executive are central to it all.

That is particularly important as we face the current economic crisis. One hears much talk, here and outside, about how, if the Executive meet, ruminate and take decisions on those issues, things will somehow be better. With some of those issues, there is little that any Executive can do. If national Governments cannot make a difference, it is very difficult for a regional Assembly to do so. When one sees, as in the past 48 hours, the collapse of a bank the size of Lehman Brothers, and the Government of the biggest economy in the world cannot do anything, one knows that one is facing grave difficulties.

We can, however, exact some change, and we have seen — as was mentioned by colleagues — that when we have our hands on the levers of power, we can make a difference. We have already seen a freeze on the regional rate, which will assist people. We have also seen measures such as the lone pensioner allowance, whereby people over the age of 70 receive a 20% discount on their rates, and other measures that will greatly assist some of the most vulnerable individuals.

The Assembly can, and should, act on precisely those sorts of issues, and the Executive should be addressing them. I could, by adding to the reams of comments that have been made in the Assembly and in the press, engage in a blame game, but there is little point given that, as my colleagues have said, three parties in a four-party mandatory coalition Executive want to meet. The single party to refuse is sending out spokespersons daily to say that the Executive will not meet, Members know where the blame lies. It lies not with the DUP, the SDLP or the UUP; it lies full square at the door of Sinn Féin.

The Assembly should be dealing with the issues that affect people in Northern Ireland, such as rising energy costs and how to mitigate their effects on those who are most vulnerable and most adversely affected. The Assembly should be putting in place the fundamental elements of the economy, infrastructure and skills, not only to enable Northern Ireland to ride through the current economic problems as best it can but to ensure that it is well placed in the aftermath — when I hope that the economy will recover — to take advantage of any investment decisions.

Mrs Long: Business is struggling and people are concerned about the uncertain future and the economic

climate. Does the Member agree that to add to the mix political instability, which has held back development for so long, is, therefore, completely irresponsible? Rather than easing the path of people who are trying to make a positive contribution, which is what they expect from the Assembly, such instability places more barriers in front of them.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her intervention. This time last year, Members talked about how political stability is good for economic development. There is, therefore, no doubt that political instability is not helpful in any way, and I lay the blame for that full square at the door of Sinn Féin. That party's responsibility is not to bog down the Assembly, as is happening now, but to move forward to help not only business but the most vulnerable in society.

Yesterday, I was unable to attend the presentation that was given by the construction industry, but I heard reports about the threat of approximately 2,500 job losses by Christmas, and that is the kind of issue that people raise with me. Members have recently returned from recess, during which they spent more time in their constituency advice centres and surgeries than when the Assembly is in session. People are not talking about the devolution of policing and justice, but about issues such as the threat to jobs.

As desirable as the devolution of policing and justice powers is, it requires the confidence of the community, as has been repeated ad infinitum by my colleagues. There is, undoubtedly, huge public expectation about what the Assembly can do. Although there is, at present, no confidence in the community in the devolution of policing and justice, if the Assembly does not begin to tackle the problems, and if parties procrastinate and do not get off their backsides, confidence in the Assembly and its ability to effect change will plummet through the floor.

Mrs D Kelly: For the record, the SDLP, as a party of non-violence and social justice that was born out of the civil rights movement — and whose leaders John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Mark Durkan were the architects of power sharing, inclusivity, partnership and equality and ensured that those principles were enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement — will not take lectures today, or any other day, from Sinn Féin on any of those matters.

The reason for today's political instability is Sinn Féin's poor negotiation at St Andrews, where it gave the triple-lock veto to the DUP, something about which Mark Durkan had warned it. Did Sinn Féin listen? No. Sinn Féin did not listen, and it is not listening to the people about the real problems that they face. Yet Sinn Féin listens to the DUP, and tells members of that party that it will be all right on the day, but it is not.

Over the summer, one sector after another called for the Executive to meet to face up to the problems. The Executive could have re-examined all of the infrastructure investment projects that are planned for the next few years, some of which could have been brought forward to give work to the construction industry this winter. The dualling of the A5 Derry to Aghnacloy route is a massive project that could provide years of employment, and the Assembly should be discussing with the Dublin Government how that could be expedited. Sinn Féin will, potentially, not attend an Executive meeting on Thursday. What about the North/South bodies: will it give up on those too? Some people might say that it already has.

3.15 pm

Indeed, they could have re-examined the Maze/Long Kesh project. I am not talking about another sectarian bun fight over a supposed shrine to terrorism or even a wrangle about support for different football codes. The Maze/Long Kesh development project, as a whole, has the potential to generate considerable permanent employment and several thousand construction jobs lasting for two to three years.

We all need those jobs, and we will need the millions of pounds that the British Treasury has promised for the project. We do not need a party political decision or a sporting decision; we need a development decision, which should be taken by the whole Executive. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure should not be taking that decision. By any standards, it is the largest development project that we are likely to get our hands on. The decision must be, and should be, taken by the whole Executive.

All the signs are that we are heading into a lasting economic slowdown. In the middle of this great crisis, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment took time off to pursue a career in local government for a job from which she resigned only a few months ago, and the Minister for Regional Development will put a tin hat on poverty with a water tax unless the Brits bail him out again for another little while. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has OK'd flood relief —

Lord Morrow: I want to put the record straight about the reference that the Member made to the post that Arlene Foster resigned from. Arlene Foster resigned from Fermanagh District Council because a conflict of interests resulted from her previous job as Minister of the Environment.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sorry that the subtleties of double-jobbing and treble-jobbing were lost on me and on the great unwashed.

The Finance Minister OK'd flood relief grants in a midnight phone call, and the Environment Minister believes that global warming is caused by bovine flatulence. The Executive are not on top of all the

problems that we face. How could they be, when they have not functioned for three months? The First Minister's office does not provide real leadership. There are two Ministers and two junior Ministers, but where are they now? They have treated the House with contempt, and, each week, they treat the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with contempt.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Member saying that the fact that neither the First Minister, the deputy First Minister or either of the junior Ministers are here to tackle this issue shows complete contempt for the House? Will she confirm that she is as outraged about that as I am?

Mrs D Kelly: Lest there be any doubt in the Member's mind; yes that is the case. Not only is the House being treated with contempt but, at last week's meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, four papers were to be presented but were not. We have to change our forward work plan every week because nothing is being done.

Mr B McCrea: Shame.

Mrs D Kelly: Indeed, shame on them.

Yet, in the Chamber, we have listened to crocodile tears about the problems faced by many people on a day-to-day basis, but that is all because of party political interest. Where is the need to make decisions for the common good and give real leadership? It is missing from here, and it has been missing for the past three months. Let us see if they can rise to the challenge on Thursday.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will certainly give way, Mr Durkan.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member recall —

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The origins of the motion go back more than three months, even before the Executive held their last meeting on 18 June. It was perfectly clear then that we were heading for hard times and that our devolved institutions would be put to the test. Before the Assembly went into recess, the SDLP called on the Executive to examine energy policy and to urge the British Government to impose a windfall tax and use the proceeds of that to mitigate fuel poverty. Given the urgency and the fundamental nature of the challenges that we faced, Members had the right to assume that business would be done during the summer and that no petty procedural wrangles should stand in the way.

Sadly, that did not happen. For reasons that were highlighted in the Chamber yesterday, there were no

meetings. When it became clear that the Executive would not meet in July, the SDLP called for the Assembly to reconvene. Although some parties think that it should be the other way round — indeed, some think that it is the other way round — the Executive are answerable to the Assembly. Members should note the absence in the Chamber of Ministers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to the debate.

Sinn Féin's Martina Anderson described the call to reconvene the Assembly as "political posturing", because the Assembly and the Executive do not have the power to rectify the crisis. Speaking about the crisis, Martin McGuinness took the opposite view and said:

"we ... need to exercise what power we have to minimise the impact".

He, belatedly, produced a list of measures for action. However, he seems to be entirely unaware that many of those measures are in the pipeline already.

Alliance Party leader David Ford said that a recall would be too expensive, and he preferred to put his faith in the power of conscience. He said:

"If the Executive is not already ashamed enough at its failure to meet all summer, a recall of the Assembly will have no impact."

However, it will have an impact. In fact, it must.

Numerous people from various parties — the DUP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party — mentioned recurring issues including poverty, vulnerable pensioners' fears for the winter, health and education concerns, worries about lack of breadwinners in households to supply food and fears that those who have been in full-time employment for years will, for the first time this year, be unemployed. Those are the real issues.

The SDLP wrote to all MLAs to request that they support a recall, the terms of which are identical to the wording of today's motion. We understand that Ian Paisley Jnr replied; unfortunately, he got mixed up and sent his response to the Office of the Speaker. Moreover, at that time, he was confused about the number of names required to achieve a petition of concern. Indeed, he was confused again yesterday. Anyway, such things happen.

Mr Moutray and Mr McLaughlin supported our motion, and Mrs Long made valid points about the onus that Members share. At that stage, I scanned the Chamber — there were six DUP and five Sinn Féin Members present, but not one Minister. I compliment those Members who took an interest and who have the concerns of their constituents at heart. Mr Shannon spoke; he is a grass-roots politician who has his finger on the pulse of the community.

During his attack on the SDLP, Mr McCartney said that the Good Friday Agreement was 10 years ago and suggested that the country has moved on. The core

values at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement are pivotal to equality.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin, through its agreement with the DUP during the summer, is attempting to gerrymander the system of appointing Ministers in order to exclude the SDLP from a justice Department?

Mr McGlone: Mr McCartney let the cat out of the DUP bag today. *[Laughter.]* Courtesy of provisional Sinn Féin, no nationalist need apply — nice one.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: No, I have too much to get through. Basil McCrea made a valid point in support of the motion. Dr McDonnell referred to the summer of lost opportunities and mentioned the Executive's corporate responsibility to respond. Mr O'Dowd should, perhaps, arrange a therapy session with the good Baby Doc, because he got things completely wrong.

The UUP did not vote against the Budget. The SDLP voted to amend the Budget while colleagues voted for water charges, to cut childcare and to cut voluntary-sector jobs — and that is a fact.

Mr Hamilton made some valid points about the economy with which I concur, but —

Lord Morrow: The Member should have given way to Mr Poots earlier. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Very good. Members —

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Yes, if the Member makes a very brief point.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin is in a somewhat embarrassing position today, in that it has engaged in a role reversal with David Trimble by trying to pull down institutions that it signed up to a very short time ago?

Mr McGlone: From the Member's point of view, that is definitely a fair point. *[Laughter.]*

Members are genuinely committed to the care, well-being and concern of the people whom they represent. I do not deny that. We must take responsibility for holding the Executive to account — that is our duty and that is what people sent us here to do. When the Executive have not met for three months, we must hold them to account.

If one Minister or one party is responsible for that hold-up, we must lay the blame where it belongs. This is an extremely serious matter — it is nothing short of a political scandal, which threatens our democratic institutions, our society and the well-being of our people. It is incredibly and crassly stupid at this time, when people crying out for leadership and proper governance, that this should happen. It is way beyond a joke.

I cannot think of an example of another Cabinet or executive body in the democratic world that could simply shut up shop for one quarter of a year at the whim of a single party leader. Having said that, perhaps something similar happened this summer in Zimbabwe, where an ageing, autocratic, long-winded guerrilla leader — who has genuine difficulty in making the transition from paramilitary command to democratic politics — prefers to hang out with his war veterans, rather than debate with political opponents.

Some Members: Gerry Adams.

Mr McGlone: Gerry Mugabe — sorry; Robert Mugabe — is a very different case.

Members should not suppose that their duty and responsibility to hold the Executive to account will go unchallenged. Look around — where are the responsible Ministers who are prepared to answer the charge? Where are they today? Perhaps other than through the media, why can we not even find out who blocked the meetings of the Executive? Who, if anyone, made decisions this summer? Who, if anyone, is in charge? Why was the July meeting cancelled at short notice? Why was there no emergency meeting when people were stuck in floods, and when I and many others visited people whose homes were flooded or whose livestock drowned? It is incredible.

No one was here to provide answers at a time when there are major issues in respect of job creation and fuel poverty. Pensioners are afraid and families are left without a breadwinner. The cost of housing is a major issue. The response of the Executive is to do nothing. That is incredible. We must put down a marker today. If we elected representatives do not use the power to hold the Executive to account, we will lose it, one slice at a time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern that the Executive has not met since June and notes the backlog of papers requiring due consideration by the Executive on important issues such as post-primary education, the Maze and PPS14; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Executive meets to address important papers being brought forward by Ministers, to consider the regional impact of the economic downturn and measures which might mitigate its impact on households, businesses, employment and the regional economy including expediting the start dates for major public works agreed in the Investment Strategy, rejecting water charges and prioritising interventions against rising fuel poverty; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a paper on the devolution of policing and justice matters for consideration by the Executive; and reaffirms the recommendations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Report on the Inquiry into the devolution of policing and justice matters which highlighted issues which needed to be considered, examined or discussed by the Assembly and/or discussed by the political parties before the devolution of policing and justice.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; where necessary co-operating with other agencies and Departments; and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. — *[Mr G Robinson.]*

Motion not moved.

3.30 pm

Integrated Schools

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools. — *[Dr Farry.]*

Motion not moved.

Adjourned at 3.30 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 22 September 2008

The Assembly met at 12 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Town Centres and PPS 5

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, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the impact that out-of-town retail centres can have on the viability of town centres; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to publish and implement PPS 5.

My party colleagues and I have two reasons for welcoming the fact that the motion was selected for debate. First, retailing and town-centre planning policy greatly impacts on the shape of town centres, which, in turn, affects citizen's lives.

Secondly, the updating of planning regulations on retail outlets in town centres and commercial leisure developments has become a drawn-out, almost never-ending saga that has entered the realms of farce. Today's debate must spell out what has happened to the new retail planning policy and when draft revised Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS 5) will be implemented.

A brief history of draft revised PPS 5 will enlighten Members. Planning policy statements are policies on land use and other planning matters. They set out the main planning considerations that planners take into account when assessing individual planning applications.

The current planning policy for retail outlets in town centres is set out in PPS 5, which is titled 'Retailing and Town Centres'. That document was published in June 1996. Significant changes have taken place since then. Members need only think of towns in their constituencies to get an idea of how many new

supermarkets and out-of-town shopping centres have been built since 1996.

If one takes that into consideration, it will be easy to appreciate that PPS 5 is now badly out of date. Although PPS 5 originally made noises about the importance of sustaining and enhancing town centres in an:

"efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector",

it was, and is, widely criticised as being weak and ineffective.

To quote from another place:

"after several judicial reviews and other legal challenges, PPS5, which was meant to protect town centres, was so watered down that it was almost meaningless and certainly did not protect town centres."

Those are our Minister of the Environment's words, spoken at Westminster. I hope that he still believes what he said then and will be implementing the new policy as soon as possible.

In 2000, the then Minister for Regional Development, Gregory Campbell, announced a major policy review of PPS 5, which was expected to take between 18 months and two years to complete. During that period, however, we reverted to direct rule. Some three years later, on 5 February 2003, in answer to a parliamentary question, the then Minister with responsibility for the environment, Angela Smith MP, said:

"The final draft report of the retail consultancy is due to be issued within the next few days."

I remind Members that that was in 2003. She went on to say:

"The new draft planning policy statement is scheduled to be issued for full public consultation during the next few months."

Of course, that did not happen.

Later, the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA), in its report 'Nightmare on Every Street' — I recommend Members either acquire a copy or view it on the NIIRTA website — stated that the Department had advised it that the draft revised PPS 5 would be published in September 2004. Again, that did not happen. It was July 2006 before draft revised PPS 5 was produced and put out to consultation, which was to last until November of that year.

Then, on 15 January 2008, the Department of the Environment (DOE) assumed responsibility for draft revised PPS 5 from the Department for Regional Development (DRD). However, in April, there was a legal challenge to that, and the issue is currently before the High Court. I hope that our courts and the Department will ensure that the matter can be dealt with expediently so that no further undue delays to the long overdue policy change occur.

In an answer to an Assembly question for written answer that I submitted, published on 4 July this year,

the Minister confirmed that the consultation period ended on 3 November 2006, but that draft revised PPS 5 is:

“currently subject to Judicial Review and will be published as soon as possible.”

I welcome such comments from the Minister, and I ask that he and his Department ensure that no more delays emanate from that Department, that the final delay in this lengthy process is the court decision, and that all other issues are resolved, excluding any court decisions that may have to be taken into consideration.

The Programme for Government, which has been approved by the Assembly, states:

“It is clear that climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change.”

Given the Minister's rather eccentric view that man has not been contributing to climate change, he may need to clarify his view. In particular, he should clarify whether he remains committed to the Programme for Government on the issue, and whether he accepts that implementing draft revised PPS 5 would assist the Planning Service and the Northern Ireland Executive in delivering the commitments that they made in the Programme for Government.

It is now some eight years since Gregory Campbell announced the policy review. That is a ridiculous length of time to develop a new policy. I am not a conspiracy theorist, although others do not share my lack of cynicism — some people do believe in conspiracies, and not just climate-change conspiracies.

Speaking in a Westminster Hall debate on Northern Ireland planning on 1 November 2005, our present Minister of the Environment, when talking about research undertaken by Roger Tym and Partners, said:

“The report, which was published in February 2003, indicated that the Northern Ireland food market was reaching saturation point, with growth down from 1.28 per cent. to less than half that figure. Obviously, that did not suit some people in the Department, because at that stage there was an influx of major food retailers such as Tesco, Sainsbury's and ASDA into Northern Ireland.”

That report was published in 2003, yet there has been a huge number of out-of-town shopping centres developed since then. Therefore, the balance has shifted.

Indeed, in that same debate, our current Minister of the Environment went on to say:

“The document was delayed, but it now seems to have fallen off the radar completely.”

Again, I ask the Minister to examine carefully how the development of a huge number of out-of-town shopping centres has been allowed to happen since that date. Clearly, there is an urgent need for a review of that policy.

Perhaps when he is summing up, the Minister will reveal whether his planning department is still — metaphorically — in bed with the multinational retailers, which is something that he hinted at some three years ago.

To a lay person, draft PPS 5, which was published in 2006, seems to be a clear and concise document. Draft PPS 5 proposes a more stringent approach to retail development in town centres and out-of-town locations. It also ensures a restriction on commercial leisure development beyond town centres.

The proposed sequential approach would ensure that town centres are considered as the first possible location for new developments, thereby contributing to their sustainability and regeneration. The draft —

Mr T Clarke: Is the Member saying that he is against out-of-town development and competition coming into Northern Ireland? People are encouraged to see the major retailers coming to Northern Ireland, especially when those large retailers make the press on the issue of their fuel prices. Indeed, another large retailer that has been consistent with its fuel prices is attempting to come into the Province.

With the credit crunch and the current status of the market, is the Member against that competition?

Mr Beggs: The Member has not listened to what I said. In support of the draft policy, there should be an increased, stringent requirement to consider seriously locations in existing town centres. That does not rule out development elsewhere. However, it places a greater onus on those who wish to develop outside of town centres to provide a stringent case as to why that proposed development cannot be developed in town centres.

The policy has changed in Great Britain, and it is shown to have assisted in securing town centres. Perhaps the Member wants town centres with vacant shops.

My colleague Mr Cree will refer to the difficulties that have arisen in the Bangor area following the development of a significant number of out-of-town shopping centres. Balance is important in all of this, and the new policy will provide that.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No, my time is nearly up. I hope that the Minister will also ensure that no further delays emanate from his Department.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Craig: I beg to move the following amendment: Insert after the second “centres”

“, whilst recognising the benefit to the Northern Ireland retail sector of some development of regional significance”.

Although I have proposed the amendment, I have some sympathy with the motion. The issue of how we keep small businesses and, more importantly, businesses in town centres must be addressed.

There are some shocking statistics. For example, over 2,000 local shops close each year, and there are issues about how to make and keep those shops sustainable in town centres. Furthermore, over 50,000 businesses will go out of business by 2015. Therefore, we need to take a more balanced approach to the whole aspect of where shopping facilities are developed in town centres.

The other aspect of moving to out-of-town centres is that — and I know that the Minister could not possibly disagree with me — burning more fossil fuels and increasing one's carbon footprint contributes, in some way, to climate change. That would never do.
[Laughter.]

12.15 pm

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that there has been a significant climate change, in that the DUP won the seat in Fermanagh and trounced the Ulster Unionist Party very well?

Mr Craig: Yes, there is definitely some sort of carbon footprint all over Fermanagh at the minute.

On a more serious note, we must take issue with where and how we develop town centres. We must recognise the economic and social benefits of developing our town centres. However, do we do that at the expense of a lack of competition in the retail sector and, more importantly, without recognising areas of regional significance? That is why I have introduced this amendment. Three areas of regional significance are identified in the proposed PPS 5: Belfast city centre; Londonderry city centre; and one non-city regional centre, Sprucefield.

There is a need for such out-of-town regional centres. It is unreasonable to make the argument that anyone will shop every week in the likes of IKEA; that is impossible. People will travel long distances to places such as IKEA once or twice a year. I have no difficulty with the fact that we have an IKEA store in Belfast. People were travelling to Scotland by the busload and taking much-needed finance out of the Northern Ireland economy before the store came to Belfast. We need those businesses in our regional centres.

Mr Boylan: Three areas are recognised for their regional significance. Does the Member believe that other areas — possibly in the west — should be designated for their regional significance?

Mr Craig: Those are the three areas identified under draft PPS 5. It is up to the Minister to decide whether any new areas should be added, or for the Member to take up the matter with the Minister.

Some businesses are needed in the regional centres, and one controversial business is John Lewis, which has made up its mind to go to Sprucefield or nowhere else in Northern Ireland. The same argument applies to John Lewis as does to IKEA. People are continually taking cheap flights to England to spend their money, and that hard-earned money should be spent in the economy of Northern Ireland. John Lewis is needed at Sprucefield, and it is talking about bringing 1,500 much-needed jobs to Northern Ireland. Will that be to the detriment of some of the local businesses? I doubt that. People have already made their choice and have travelled and spent their money in John Lewis stores in the UK. It is better to keep that business in the Northern Ireland economy.

Another issue — and no Member will disagree with this — is that we need construction jobs to kick-start the construction industry in Northern Ireland. John Lewis would be a major investment of over £200 million, and Northern Ireland sorely needs that investment at this time in view of the crisis in the world economy. Can we afford not to have John Lewis in Northern Ireland? In light of the current situation, the answer is no, as that business would be drained out of the Northern Ireland economy.

We have an amazing planning system in Northern Ireland. There has been a five-year delay on the John Lewis development, and that delay — whether we like it or not — is costing Northern Ireland. It has cost us 200 jobs so far.

Of the 900 jobs that John Lewis originally proposed to create, only 700 remain. The five-year delay has cost 200 jobs, and it will cost many more. The proposed 1,500 jobs will not be available if we continue on the road down which we are going. A decision must be made about that particular planning matter. However, a decision must also be made about draft revised Planning Policy Statement 5. That is the end of my little rant about John Lewis. However, there are significant regional centres where regional businesses such as John Lewis and IKEA must be placed.

Dr W McCrea: I accept that regional centres should be developed in their own right. However, towns such as Antrim have, in many ways, been decimated by out-of-town shopping centres. We must be very careful. It is essential that we put life back into town centres, and planning policy can assist that.

Mr Craig: That is why I stated that a balanced approach is required and why I had no great problem with the motion. However, we must take cognisance of the fact that regional businesses need a regional centre. A more balanced approach on town centres is required.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for saying that he has no particular difficulty with the motion. Will he explain to the House how the amendment would

benefit the motion? What is missing from the motion that the amendment will add?

Mr Craig: It seems that the Member has difficulty in listening to what people say in the House. I have stated several times that regional businesses must be located in regional centres. Does the Member argue that Belfast, Londonderry and Sprucefield should not be designated as regional centres? That suggestion would not be received politely in those areas.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Craig: No, I have very little time left.

That is why I moved the amendment that the Assembly accept that regional centres be allocated in draft revised Planning Policy Statement 5 when it is implemented.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Speaker back after the recess.

Tyrone is also undergoing serious climatic change, and I congratulate the county on winning the all-Ireland senior football championship for a third time.

I thank the Members who have brought the motion to the Chamber. Sinn Féin understands the reasons for raising the issue and sympathises with the sentiments that have been expressed. Smaller retailers have genuine fears that they will be squeezed out by multinationals building superstores on the outskirts of towns.

Draft revised PPS 5 recognises Belfast, Derry and Sprucefield as regional shopping facilities and aims to direct new retail developments of regional significance to those areas. That will help to attract major new investment to the region in a way that will also sustain and enhance town centres in the North.

The draft policy promotes the primary retail core of the other cities and towns as first choice for the location of new retail developments, but it must also reflect the Programme for Government's commitment to tackling regional disparities. The valuable and enjoyable shopping experience of existing thriving town centres will be sustained, and existing town-centre businesses will reap the benefits of increased trade from a higher footfall in the town and city centres.

Sinn Féin acknowledges and supports the contribution of small-to-medium traditional businesses, many of which are family-run. Those businesses make up the vast majority of the retail sector here, and they enhance the economy greatly. Many people feel that the implementation of a policy to protect our town centres from becoming ghost towns is long overdue, especially in the current economic climate, when many job losses in the retail sector are feared.

Sinn Féin believes that any policy that is implemented must ensure that small businesses can play their part to bolster not only the economic vibrancy, but the social

fabric of our towns and cities. The draft policy makes provision for retail development in those towns and cities that cannot accommodate large retail development in their centres due to historical or heritage constraints or lack of suitable sites. That will allow towns and cities that wish to expand the retail sector and challenge similar-sized competitors for a share of the market base to do so, which will, in turn, attract shoppers to the nearby primary retail core.

Any policy that is published must be capable of being implemented. It must allow our urban areas the capacity for economic growth, while protecting the vitality and viability of our existing town centres. Ultimately, it must benefit the consumer by offering best value for money.

In conclusion, we recognise the need for the publication and implementation of PPS 5, as called for in the motion. However, we must also ensure that, under the current reform of the planning system — which was initiated by the previous Minister of the Environment — measures are put in place and proper guidance is provided for local government to protect town centres and existing businesses while achieving the necessary economic growth. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dallat: When a motion of this type first came before the Assembly on 2 October 2000 — a long time ago — it was enthusiastically voted down by the DUP and some Ulster Unionists. We were given a lecture by Ian Paisley Jnr on natural market forces. Nothing was said about balanced communities or the excesses of the multinationals. The present Minister of the Environment made a contribution at that time, too — he told us that one can buy Tayto crisps at Tesco in Knocknagoney.

Today, there appears to be a realisation in both parties that there is a need to regulate out-of-town shopping centres in a manner that provides for some sense of reality and acknowledges that those shopping centres wipe out our town centres, promote degeneration and leave the most vulnerable people with no shops, no banks and no post offices. Eight years on, post offices are now an endangered species. The whole process of killing off businesses in villages and small towns is already well under way. Members should know that, in Britain, more than 60% of villages and sizeable towns are left with no shopping facilities at all — not a single shop is left; no bank, no post office, no pharmacy.

A couple of years ago, I visited a town in Ohio called Ashtabula. I am sure that most people have never heard of it, and I cannot think of any good reason why they should have. The shops are mostly closed, as they have all fallen victim to out-of-town shopping malls. There are still a couple of pubs, and, as it was St Patrick's Day, I decided to have a tippale. I met a man who claimed that he was a direct descendant of an

Indian tribe. He was a nice individual who told me that his wife had gone to do the shopping. When I asked him whether he was expecting her back soon, he told me that shopping was a two-day event. His wife had to stop overnight at her sister's house because it was too far to make the journey in one day. That is the reality of out-of-town shopping centres, and if legislation is not introduced soon, we will head down the same dreary road.

However, we cannot put all the blame on the planners. If the opening of a new multinational store were to be announced today, I know Members who would be scrambling for airtime to welcome the hundreds of new jobs promised. Yet does anyone ever try to research the impact on the hundreds of people who will lose their jobs as a direct result of such developments? I do not think so. Does anyone attempt to evaluate the jobs on offer? How many of them offer the minimum wage? Has any research been carried out on the impact on family life as pressure is exerted on employees to work antisocial hours away from family and loved ones? I think not.

Those matters must be controlled in a way that creates a level playing field and curtails the power of the big retailers that do not care about local communities — their only interest is in sending the profits back home. Those profits do not circulate locally, and such development does little to promote other businesses.

12.30 pm

In recent times, multinationals have made an interesting switch from groceries to drapery, electrical goods, banking, insurance, and anything else that fills their shelves. Yet — and I hope that Sammy Wilson is listening — a small business in the countryside cannot get off the ground because of PPS 14, which bans development in the countryside. Not only is there no control over the size of the multinationals, but there is a bias against local people who wish to start up their own businesses. Even inoffensive advertising signs, which cause no harm to anyone, are being taken down, and the business people who erected them are being dragged through the courts.

It has been eight years since the issue was first debated in the Chamber. That is too long to wait for action if we are serious about retaining our town centres and villages. If we do not take action now, we will end up with a situation similar to that in Ashtabula.

Mr Ford: I, too, welcome the motion. As John Dallat said, there is a significant difference between the attitudes expressed in the Chamber this morning and those expressed when we last discussed the issue.

The present retail planning policy in Northern Ireland is around 20 years behind that in Great Britain, and Roy Beggs outlined some of the reasons that have

led to that delay. I am sure that all Members can provide examples of excessive commercial development, specifically in the retail sector, outside historic towns across Northern Ireland, rather than it being used to regenerate town centres and to promote a more sustainable future. One only needs to look elsewhere in the world to see that if we do not modify our planning policies soon, we will go down a very dangerous road and encounter serious problems.

Economic activity varies in historic market towns across the region. Such activity overwhelmingly relates to whether there has been modern shopping development in those town centres, or whether it has been displaced to out-of-town sites. If one looks at comparisons between Ballymena, Omagh, Newry and Downpatrick, one will see different activities taking place inside and outside the core centre. In almost every case, developments that are situated in town centres have thriving social lives and economies, but developments that are situated predominantly outside town centres experience the complete reverse.

I named Omagh and Newry among the list of market towns, and I was amazed that Cathal Boylan, as an Armagh man, referred to Tyrone winning a certain match at Croke Park yesterday afternoon. As Lord Morrow has disappeared, Mr Bresland has not mentioned it, and most of the Tyrone Members are not here, perhaps I should flag up my Tyrone roots and congratulate the team on its success. I apologise; Lord Morrow is in the Chamber.

There are real issues that must be addressed. We have totally failed to ensure that we maintain the vibrancy of those towns and the vibrancy of community life, which crosses over into other aspects.

I confess that I was slightly surprised by the wording of the amendment. I wondered why it did not include the word "Sprucefield", because PPS 5 readily acknowledges that there is a regional case for it. Planning Policy Statement 5 is designed to protect the integrity of district towns across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots: Does the Member recognise that, under the current wording of the motion, the IKEA development would have been turned down?

Mr Ford: I am not sure whether that is entirely the case, but there is a significant difference between IKEA-type developments — so-called roof-rack shopping — and the difficulties that have arisen from out-of-town convenience shopping.

I reiterate the point that my constituency colleague from South Antrim made: there are real differences between the shopping niches that were originally outlined for Junction One and The OUTLET outside Banbridge and those centres where retailers are given permission to add on normal convenience shopping,

which should be located in a town centre, rather than at a regional or special-day-out centre.

Planning policy has completely failed to learn that lesson by first allowing some of those developments to proceed and then changing the internal nature of those developments. Those points are relevant when it comes to Sprucefield, but they are also relevant to the way in which other centres are used in other places.

On that basis, I welcome the points that were made specifically about the strategic nature of town centre development. The draft revised PPS 5 contains key points, such as greater accessibility, the protection of existing retail provision, the addition of other suitable town centre uses and the promotion of urban renewal, whose implementation will be vital if town centres are to be kept as living, working places. If we do not address those points, and if we allow commercial activity to be driven out to out-of-town centres, all sorts of other activity that characterise a town centre will be lost.

Mr T Clarke: I presume that the Member has already made the same points that my colleague from South Antrim Dr William McCrea made in relation to Antrim town. Will he identify where Antrim town centre is and where the retail centre is, because the town has not had one? The retail outlet at Tesco moved before Junction One was opened.

Mr Ford: We will debate the minutiae of Antrim town's edge-of-town or out-of-town centres elsewhere. The Member has made a valid point, but what matters is the difference between those places that have developed centres at the edge of town, such as in Newry, and those that have done so completely out into the countryside. There are two key aspects to the enhancement of town centres; first, they promote the opportunity for shared space and a neighbourhood's social cohesion; secondly, they are far more sustainable. That is something that all of us, including the Minister of the Environment, should recognise.

Mr Ross: Politicians and the owners of small businesses across the Province have been calling for the publication of the draft revised PPS 5 for many years. More than ever, we are witnessing the increasing pressures that small and medium-sized businesses in Northern Ireland are facing. We must recognise that the vast majority of businesses in the Province are small. However, thousands of people are employed by small and medium-sized businesses, many of which are family-run and are the heart and soul of many local communities.

It has been predicted that many such businesses could be lost over the next few years as they come under increasing pressure from larger superstores and out-of-town shopping centres. The effect of that can be that local shops close down, and residents must travel

longer distances to buy basic necessities such as milk and bread. There is little doubt that some towns and villages across Northern Ireland are at risk of being gutted out, although the premise of the motion — that all out-of-town shopping facilities are somehow bad — is false.

I support the amendment tabled by my party colleagues from Lagan Valley, which is more balanced in its recognition of the impact of some out-of-town shopping developments.

Mr Beggs: The Member should look carefully at the motion, which did not rule out — nor did I in my comments — the potential development of some out-of-town shopping centres. Town centre developments, or edge-of-town developments, which some Members mentioned, could be more stringently assessed before greenfield sites are chosen at separate locations. I ask the Member to reflect on that and not to try to change the comments that I made.

Mr Ross: I welcome that clarification. It is important to point out that the amendment mentions the development of sites of regional significance.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: No, I will not give way again. I will allow the Member's colleagues to sum up whatever he wants to say at the end of the debate.

I welcome the amendment, which is more balanced in its recognition that some out-of-town shopping developments can be important for the region and the locality. They can also be important to local people. We must remember that many of our constituents want access to a range of products at a competitive price at a location at which they can park easily. That is particularly important now, as families face tighter economic pressures and economic considerations are the top priority.

If new facilities are handled correctly, many of them can provide jobs for local people and generate economic prosperity for a certain region. Members have mentioned many towns that could be under threat from out-of-town developments, including Larne in my constituency.

There are plans for a large supermarket in Larne, near the harbour. There will also be a bowling alley and a cinema as part of that overall development. Far from being bad for the town, the development will provide many desperately needed facilities. The majority of people in Larne travel to Carrickfergus or Ballymena for their weekly shopping and go to neighbouring towns for entertainment. It is better that they can buy their weekly shopping in their own locality and have somewhere to go at weekends and evenings, rather than leaving the town for both shopping and leisure.

Mr Weir: Is the Member seriously suggesting that people from Larne travel to Ballymena — two towns that have been grouped together in the new council boundaries — given his previous assertions about how utterly disconnected the two towns are?

Mr Ross: I appreciate that it is a two-day trip, as Mr Dallat mentioned, and I shudder at the thought of such a journey. However, it is important that people can shop in their local area and that, where those facilities are not available, we should be supporting efforts to make them available. It must also be recognised that although major developments should be located in town centres, ideally, as proposed in the draft revised PPS 5, it is often the case that the company in question will decide where it wants to locate. It is then for the town to decide whether to let the opportunity pass by.

I listened to the comments from the proposer of the amendment, who made reference to the proposed John Lewis development in Lisburn. In such a situation, when the choice is between Lisburn and Dublin, it is fairly clear which will benefit the local region more. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that town centres are under threat from large superstore developments, and we do not want our town centres becoming deserted. It is, therefore, important that the policy makes clear that out-of-town developments should be avoided unless they bring something of particular significance or importance to the local area or region or the development is not viable in a town-centre location. The key is achieving the right balance between safeguarding town centres and allowing major out-of-town developments that can be of regional importance.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member also accept that if too many restrictions are placed on developments that are not accepted as regional centres, the viability of those already in place could be affected?

Mr Ross: I concur with the Member's comments; they match some of the things that I have said. In fairness, the aim of the policy is to ensure that town centres are promoted as the first choice for such developments where possible: therefore, Members should have no difficulty in supporting the amendment.

The Department for Social Development (DSD) is also seeking to regenerate many town centres, and it is important that DOE works with DSD to prevent town centres being killed off before efforts to regenerate them can begin. A blanket ban on out-of-town developments cannot be introduced, as that may not always be in the best interests of local people or towns that may benefit from such developments. I support the amendment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the three Members for bringing the motion to the House. It is vital that PPS 5 is published and implemented, notwithstanding any legal difficulties, and that the Assembly demonstrates that it

is acting in the best interests of small and indigenous retail businesses.

Local retail businesses reinvest profits into the local economy rather than taking them out, and they are much more likely to give financial support to the local community, through sponsorship of local sports, to take just one example.

If Members have looked at the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association's document, 'A Nightmare in Every Street', to which Mr Beggs has already referred, they have seen that it shows that local food schemes return 50% of turnover to the local economy compared to as little as 5% from the much larger stores.

The inclusion in draft revised PPS 5 of the possible adverse effects on the vitality and viability of existing town centres is to be welcomed. The sustainability of the retail sector in towns and villages is an issue that the Assembly must prioritise because that also has an impact on those who supply the retail sector, local farmers being the prime example. The draft revised policy identifies town centres as the first choice for new retail developments and establishes a number of common-sense criteria for those seeking to develop away from the retail core of a town or village.

Many town centres, some of which have been referred to, are beginning to resemble ghost towns, and the smaller local hub towns are particularly vulnerable to out-of-town development. Therefore, there is already a need to examine economic regeneration in such areas to ensure that consumers have a good variety and choice of services in their own community, on their own doorsteps, rather than driving 10 or 20 miles to the bigger towns and cities.

In the South, retail planning guidelines similar to those proposed were introduced as far back as the year 2000, which, in itself, demonstrates how far behind we in the North really are, as other Members have already mentioned.

When we are talking about bringing more retail businesses into town centres, we should be considering the traffic implications also. The requirement for more park-and-ride schemes and better public transport to ease the pressure on town centres should be incorporated into any future planning policy.

12.45 pm

The pressure on small retail businesses in our economy must not be underestimated. In addition to pressure from multinational companies, the businesses face competition from the new market of Internet shopping and the increasing costs of overheads. A level playing field is needed, so the sooner that PPS 5 is published and implemented, the better.

The planning policy statement has been left on the shelf by direct rule Ministers for many years, and I hope that the Minister will provide assurances that it will be implemented when the legal issues have been dealt with, because many small businesses are already under severe pressure and are trying to keep their heads above water. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: There was much press comment when the Minister of the Environment, Mr Wilson, was appointed, and it overshadowed his first, and best, decision. Mr Wilson turned down the planning application for a Tesco hypermarket at The OUTLET in Banbridge. Like many public representatives, I welcomed that decision strongly. It was a courageous decision, given the nature of the company involved and the huge pressure that was on his Department to approve the planning application.

Why did I, and practically every other public representative, welcome the decision, given that the new store, based on Tesco's figures, would have had an income of £72 million in its first year? We welcomed the decision because that figure is more than the combined total annual income of all the shops in Banbridge — the impact on the town would have been enormous. That is an example of the problem that we face. In addition to £72 million income, which many regard as a conservative estimate, there was sufficient land on the site to double the size of the store at a later date. We have discovered that, if the principle of a large out-of-town shopping complex is accepted, it is almost impossible to resist applications for further expansion, as is happening in Newry. The impact of a store that had the capability of expanding would have been devastating to Banbridge, as similar stores have been to other parts of South Down.

Thirty years ago, Rathfriland was a bustling rural town that served the requirements of a wide hinterland. Today, many shops there are empty, and all that is left are takeaways, charity shops and solicitors. Any town that gets into that predicament is in difficulty. A drift of retail out of Kilkeel has already begun, and it does not take a genius to see what is happening: stand in any town in the South Down area on a Saturday morning and one will see the traffic heading to Sprucefield, Forestside and Newry. The powerful attraction of such shopping centres is leading to a loss of fabric in our small towns.

I also represent Ballynahinch, where a major application has been submitted for a large out-of-town shopping centre. Although the anchor tenant is unknown, we suspect that it will be one of the large multinationals, excluding Marks and Spencer and ASDA. The impact of such a shopping centre will be phenomenal, because the town is already showing severe signs of economic stress. It takes very little for a trend of closure, where stores such as Iceland and

SuperValu leave a town, to become inexorable. Once that happens, the town is on the skids.

It is important that there is a policy to provide guidance. There was an application for a Tesco store in Ballycastle, which had more square footage than all the retailers in Ballycastle and its surrounding towns and villages combined. The impact of such a store on places such as Bushmills, Armoy and Cushendun would have been enormous. Therefore, a consistent policy is required. I understand the difficulties that the Minister faces, but tackling that difficult issue must be one of his priorities.

I am glad that, in Banbridge, when councillors met traders and realised how much they would lose, they, at least, changed their minds. Initially, they supported the application.

I have become the patron saint of lost causes in Down District Council. It voted in favour of the new superstore by 21 votes to one — the one being my vote. Councillors see the pound signs on the large rates cheques that will come in every year from one multinational food purveyor. They do not see how that will result in gradual loss of income to the district as shop after shop in the town closes and, therefore, no longer pay rates.

I hope that councillors will have a bit of sense and realise that it is absolutely vital to maintain the vibrancy of town centres for future generations. The opening of big multinational stores is a quick fix that must be avoided, because it ruins the special character of many of Northern Ireland's towns.

Mr Cree: Much has been said during the debate about the market position that is enjoyed by large multiple-retail businesses and about how their out-of-town centres disadvantage small and medium-sized businesses, leading to the running down of town centres and depletion of shopping facilities in local villages. Those points are crucial and have been articulated well by my colleagues and other Members. However, PPS 5 should also be considered alongside wider political and economic concerns.

The Assembly must grapple with rapidly rising fuel and food costs and how to ameliorate their impact in the short term, during the coming winter, on the most vulnerable people in society. In the short term, fuel prices have steadied and, in some cases, abated. Fierce competition has reduced food prices. The hard fact that we must face, however, is that the era of cheap food and fuel is over. Government and society will be forced to make adjustments in order to accommodate the impact of that. How the Assembly shapes the future will affect how people fare with increasing food and fuel bills in the long term. The Assembly must help people to use less fuel and to eat healthily with less money.

Where does PPS 5 come into that? It is tied in with the trend towards high-density development in town centres, coupled with the drift away from low-density out-of-town sites. That is reflected in the move away from private to public transport, walking and cycling. In order to make that happen, town centres must be regenerated and their daytime and evening economies promoted. Bangor's town centre is an example of that, which has been caused by what the Americans call the "doughnut effect". In Bangor's case, it is half a doughnut, because it is surrounded by the sea on one side. Many other towns have been similarly affected, some of which have been mentioned in the debate — Ballynahinch, Comber, Ballyclare, Omagh, and Larne, to name but a few.

Town centres already have the necessary public-transport linkages to enable people to move away from increasingly costly private transport. Northern Ireland has a significantly higher than average carbon footprint. People here burn more fuel for each person than in other parts of the UK, whether they consume that fuel directly or as electricity.

Irrespective of arguments on global warming and mankind's contribution to it, fuel has become relatively expensive and is getting scarcer. It costs more to heat a home and to get around. The Assembly must facilitate the public in order to reduce their needs. PPS 5, which supports town-centre regeneration and development, is essential to ensure that people do not need to burn unnecessary fuel to heat their homes and to shop, and makes living in easy reach of a town centre more attractive when that is set against less dense and more remote housing.

Another factor that PPS 5 will buttress is freedom of choice and flexible retail development throughout Northern Ireland. It ensures that a wide range of shopping activities is open to the entire community. That flexibility and access to a wide range of shopping activities maximises comparison shopping — consumers can easily compare prices, quality and other considerations when making purchases. A more competitive and less captive retail environment leads to increases in the range and choice of goods. That is at the very heart of the healthy operation of free competition; the mechanism that ensures benefit to consumers. Out-of-town shopping centres benefit major multiples precisely because that environment curtails comparison shopping and enables the store to dictate the range and choice of goods. That acts to the consumer's disadvantage.

PPS 5 will improve the facility for comparison shopping and add to the quality of life in our towns and cities. Additionally, it has the potential to reinvigorate local communities through providing local services and shops that are responsive to local people and can take their needs into consideration. That has

the potential to benefit the elderly and vulnerable, so it should be welcomed.

Let me be clear: we are not trying to exclude major retail companies and developers, but, if we are to help the public to cope in the longer term with more expensive fuel and food, we must enact those measures that shape our built environment and infrastructure so that people can cope better. Many of them will be in the hands of the Department of the Environment. PPS 5 is a step along that road, and it should be implemented without further delay. I support the motion and urge the Minister to take immediate action.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and my colleagues' amendment. I support the motion in spite of some things that Members from other parties have said in support of it.

Mr B McCrea: Explain.

Mr Weir: I hear a cry of "explain" from Mr McCrea. I shall refer to a couple of remarks that were made.

Dr W McCrea: That was Basil.

Mr Weir: I should have said "Mr Basil McCrea", lest either of my colleagues of that name be insulted.

Mr Roy Beggs Jnr referred to conspiracy theories that would fit in neatly with either 'The X Files' or an Oliver Stone movie.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Mr Beggs has had his say. I have only a short time in which to speak.

We have also heard about the dreadful prospect of cohabitation, which Mr Beggs has supposedly identified. Mr Dallat painted a picture of working for a multinational company that was comparable to life in the Gulag. People who have the misfortune to work for such companies are evidently in some way detached from their families. It would appear to be akin to working a six-month stint on an oil rig, with the destruction of family life that that might entail.

When it comes to having retail choices, we want to see fair competition and a balanced approach to planning. It must be acknowledged that out-of-town shopping centres provide a useful service to people. The volumes of people who use those centres demonstrate that a demand for them exists. Bangor's problems, which have already been mentioned in the debate, are well documented. I am also aware that Bloomfield Shopping Centre and Retail Park and Springhill Shopping Centre are geographically close to communities and have made a major, positive contribution to life in North Down. A balance must be struck.

We cannot go down the line of draconian economic protectionism that tries to shut out the real world and that, like some latter-day King Canute, tries to pretend that we can turn back the waves. We can, however,

ensure that competition is fair, and fair competition lies at the heart of draft revised PPS 5. It is not about banning all out-of-town shopping centres but about creating an environment that benefits town centres. It gives a preference to new developments in town centres and focuses activity there. The reinvigoration of our town centres is vital.

Mention was made of the effects of out-of-town shopping centres on existing retailers. We should remember that, during the many years of the Troubles, when many multinational companies would not even look at Northern Ireland, mall traders kept the economy going.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Weir: We owe a debt of gratitude to those people.

Vital environmental and social components are needed in order to reinvigorate town centres. All those issues must be taken into account. In ensuring that town centres are reinvigorated, it is crucial that we do not look only at draft revised PPS 5 and at planning issues but that we ensure that there is joined-up government.

Consider Holywood in my constituency of North Down. Leaving aside the long-running issue of Queen's Parade, the redevelopment of the town centre and frontage is being held up at present by a legal dispute between DRD and DSD over a car park. Some of the solutions are planning related and concern retail, but others go beyond that and involve the provision of joined-up government. We must cast the net wider.

In the final minute remaining to me, I shall speak to the amendment.

1.00 pm

It is also the case that, whatever protection we afford town centres and, indeed, however PPS 5 is framed, there are going to be developments of major regional significance, which must be allowed for.

John Lewis would be a welcome addition to Northern Ireland; unfortunately it has been held up for too long. Look at the benefits of IKEA, which is situated on the edge of North Down and Belfast. Although that type of development causes some degree of displacement activity, it is geared at a regional centre, which means that money that would otherwise be spent across the water or down South is retained in Northern Ireland.

I am strongly in favour of PPS 5. I am sure that the Minister will outline the principal problem of the legal difficulties regarding the Rushmere case. There is a strong commitment, from Members on these Benches and across the Chamber, to support PPS 5, to see it implemented as soon as possible, and to have it balanced with fair competition in our town centres.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):

First, I thank the Members who tabled the motion on this important issue, about which the public will want to hear the views of their public representatives.

A flourishing town centre can enhance the quality of life for those who live, work and visit there. Town centres are a key asset in many of our communities; they provide a wide range of shops, employment, leisure and cultural uses. They can, at least sometimes, be reached by public transport, and they give access to the essentials of living for so many.

Shopping has always been a key use of town centres. However, it is the diversity of uses, to which some Members made reference during the debate, that makes town centres successful. When we lose that diversity — whatever aspect that may be — town centres come under threat. Other uses, apart from shopping, have an important role to play. Indeed, with urban regeneration we try to attract people back into town centres, to live as well as to shop.

Of course, as mentioned by a number of Members during the debate, it is one thing to increase the number of shops in a town centre; however, if people do not have easy access to those — because of inadequate road systems, parking or public transport — the town centre will not thrive. People will simply turn their backs on it even though the facilities are there. There are a lot of ingredients involved, and the debate has been useful in highlighting that this is not just a single issue. The problem will not be remedied simply by increasing the number of shops in town centres.

I want to deal with some of the points that Members raised. First, I wish to deal with the proposer of the motion, Roy Beggs. I was pleased by his speech, and I hope that it gets full coverage in the local papers in East Antrim, because for the past number of months, he has been implying that I cannot do two jobs: the one that I do at Westminster and the one that I do here. I am glad that he has extensively reported my involvement in Westminster, the speeches that I have made there and my involvement in debates.

Secondly, I am glad that he recognised that much of the delay in publishing and implementing PPS 5 has been due to the period of direct rule. Promises about its publication and the consultation period were made mostly during that time. That was one of the problems that we faced during direct rule. Mr Beggs asked that there be no further delay, as did a number of other Members.

Indeed, the Member for North Antrim Daithí McKay made the same point about the legal difficulties and asked how quickly PPS 5 could be introduced. I will look at the legal situation, even though the judicial review has been delayed again until

November. If it is possible, I will introduce PPS 5 — I do not want to see it being delayed.

Equally, however, I do not want to see PPS 5 issued and then further delayed because it has been brought forward prematurely. My intention is to publish PPS 5 as soon as possible.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Minister assure the House that the delay in the meeting of the Executive caused by Sinn Féin will not delay the issue of PPS 5?

The Minister of the Environment: If that were the case, I would have made the point a long time ago and well before I reached this point in the debate.

[Laughter.]

I assure the Member that I would not have missed that point: any delay has not been due to the fact that the Executive have not met. I hope that the Executive will meet so that if I get the go ahead to issue PPS 5, it will not be delayed because of the reason that the Member has suggested.

The Member for East Antrim Roy Beggs referred to the report prepared by Tym and Partners. Had he looked at the detail of that report he would have seen that there is still some potential for growth in retailing, albeit that Tym states that over the next five years the difference between demand and supply will probably be met as a result of the planning applications that are in the pipeline.

I expected the Member for South Antrim Mr Ford to mention climate change. I am disappointed that he did not — perhaps he thought that it was not necessary to do so because it had been raised by the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs. There was some predictability that it would be raised.

To the Member for East Antrim, all I can say is that 97% of CO₂ emissions are not produced by human activity. The UK produces 3% of the remaining 3%, and Northern Ireland is responsible for 3% of that 3%. The Member can do the maths if he wants. Even if we stop driving cars, heating our homes, producing electricity and other things that produce CO₂ emissions, we would save three ten-thousandths of 1% of the CO₂ emissions in the world. I do not think that PPS 5 is going to make a huge difference to climate change. I am glad that the Member clarified that he wanted a balanced approach, because that was not apparent in the speech itself.

I wish that the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Boylan's attitude and approach to PPS 14 had been as balanced as his approach to PPS 5. He made a number of very important points. First, we need regional shopping centres in Northern Ireland to attract people from outside Northern Ireland — from the Irish Republic or elsewhere. Those centres can play an important role in regenerating a larger area.

Secondly he pointed out, quite rightly, that not all town centres are suitable for large retail development, either because of historical significance or building constraints. Those towns should not be denied the opportunity to have large-scale retail facilities.

Another Member said that there are a number of largish towns in Northern Ireland that do not have those facilities; that, as a result, people travel long distances to other towns, and that that may rob town centres of the people who would come there for other purposes. He also made an important point about planning reform and the reform of local government in that there will be ample opportunity for public representatives not to blame the delay in PPS 5, not to blame the planners at headquarters and not to blame the planning officer at the divisional office, but to take those hard decisions themselves.

However, that is good, because all the issues that have been discussed here today can then be judged at a local level, where the local knowledge that people have demonstrated in this debate can be brought to bear.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister give some consideration to the west in relation to developments of regional significance?

The Minister of the Environment: I think that draft PPS 5 is flexible enough to ensure that that will be the case.

Mr Dallat, as usual, was very good at overstating his case. He paints the picture that in the future, we will find a situation in Northern Ireland where we may have to travel for two days to do our shopping. I am not married; however, if I were, and my wife told me that she had to go away for two days to do her shopping, I would not look for a draft PPS 5 but a private detective. *[Laughter.]*

No matter how devastating the policy that is brought forward will be, I cannot see the emergence of the picture that Mr Dallat has described. Mr Dallat mentioned, of course, the delay in PPS 14 and the impact of that on rural businesses. I wish that PPS 14 had been introduced much sooner, although I have to say that Mr Dallat's own party — and one of his colleagues in particular — was perhaps partly responsible for the fact that PPS 14 did not get through. However, when PPS 14 comes into effect, the policy on farm diversification will be in line with rural development policy. I accept Mr Dallat's point: it is important that rural communities have the opportunity to have local shops and commercial activities. The policy should reflect that.

The Member for South Antrim Mr Ford made an important point in his speech —

Mr I McCrea: Just the one important point.

The Minister of the Environment: Just the one important point. I know, I am handing out too many accolades today.

Mr Ford pointed out that in some cases, where edge-of-town, or out-of-town, shopping centres have been allowed, different activities have then developed in town centres. We cannot run away from the fact that we have a network of shopping centres, some of which could perhaps be described as inappropriately located; nevertheless, they are there. It is important that when we look to regenerate town centres — and it will be important for local councils in future — that sometimes we look for those town centres to offer different things rather than simply bringing the big shopping centres into the town. However, that is not always possible. If the shopping centre is at the edge of town, what can we do to ensure that the people who go there then come into the nearby town? What activities can we offer to encourage people to come into our town centres?

Mr Ross, a colleague from East Antrim, made the important point that we cannot have a policy that is totally restrictive. Some people have called for a moratorium on any new shopping centres in Northern Ireland; however, there is still some unmet demand for them. Mr Ross mentioned Larne, where a recent survey showed that 56% of people leave the town to shop in Carrickfergus or Ballymena. In doing so, the potential for those shoppers to drift into the town centre of Larne and do other shopping is totally lost. That illustrates the point that where there is an anchor store that attracts people to stay in their town, there is the potential for benefit to that town.

Mr McKay from North Antrim made the very useful point that if we are going to regenerate town centres and put commercial activity into them, we must make sure that people can get into them. Whether that is achieved through town-centre car parking, or through park-and-ride schemes — which may not always be possible in some of the smaller towns, because the economies of scale are not available — it is an important and necessary part of the whole regeneration action.

1.15 pm

The Member also asked me — and I believe that I have already answered this question — whether, as soon as the legal issues have been dealt with, I will proceed with PPS 5. I have made it clear that, if it is possible even before the legal issues have been dealt with, PPS 5 will be proceeded with.

I welcome the endorsement from the green wing of my own party for the Banbridge decision. I am sure that I will not receive much more praise from Mr Wells, but he made an important point: even under existing planning policies, whether an application was turned down in Ballycastle or in Banbridge, the policy

is not so loose that it cannot be used to turn down bad applications.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up.

The Minister of the Environment: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have only two other people to mention. The Member for North Down Mr Weir spoke about Bangor, where there is still a thriving town centre, and I hope that —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr Poots: We live in a time of change. Industry has changed — Bombardier, for example, is embarking on a £500 million spending spree, as it were, in order to update its equipment and to make itself more competitive.

In agriculture, 100 years ago, people were working with horses and ploughs. Now, there is sophisticated machinery in the fields. In health, there is now keyhole surgery, open-heart surgery and transplantation, none of which would have been dreamt of years ago.

Retailing, too, has changed. I well remember going with my mother to the wee shop in the countryside where three ladies packed stuff into boxes, and off we went with our groceries. That was a Friday ritual. Then, along came Stewarts, Crazy Prices and Wellworth's, and those wee stores gradually closed. Then, along came Tesco and Sainsbury, and Stewarts and Wellworth's and Crazy Prices gradually closed. That is the nature of life — change takes place, and things move on.

I remember going into Lisburn town centre, as it then was, to a hardware store on Bow Street, where my father had an altercation with a traffic warden who was booking him while he was carrying bags of cement out of Jefferson's to the boot of his car. The traffic warden thought that he should have parked 200 metres away, but I believe that my father got that situation sorted out.

That was the nature of shopping then, but things change and move on, and some people do not seem to realise that we are moving on. I am disappointed that Mr Dallat is the only SDLP Member present — oh, I see Mr Burns; I apologise. However, Mr Dallat was his party's only contributor to the debate, and that did not go very well for the SDLP — it was rather an inept effort.

Two days' travel time for shopping is something that would happen among the Amish, and perhaps Mr Dallat wants us to become an Amish-style community. That may be fine for some, but many people will move with the times. One cannot stop time. "Stop the world. I want to get off" is not a policy in which we will engage in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland must, therefore, move on in respect of retailing. Change is the reality. There are, in fact, many women from Ulster who go for two days' shopping,

but they are going to London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Manchester or Liverpool — and they are going to the big stores across the water in order to benefit from facilities that are not available in Northern Ireland.

The motion in the names of Mr Beggs and his colleagues, which Basil McCrea seemed to be supporting during his comments to Mr Craig, would have had the effect of stopping, and working against, the likes of IKEA coming to Northern Ireland. My wife, after a trip to IKEA in Glasgow, told me that 11 busloads of people had taken the boat over to IKEA that day. That is a fact of life.

Every year, thousands of people from Northern Ireland travel to mainland Britain to avail themselves of stores such as Harvey Nichols, John Lewis, IKEA, and House of Fraser, and they cannot be stopped from doing so. Consumers will go to shop in those stores whether or not branches exist here. Not to provide those stores in Northern Ireland serves only to lose business for Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member acknowledge that, in the published draft PPS 5, Belfast, Londonderry and Sprucefield are designated as “regional shopping centres” of “regional significance”? Therefore, large stores, such as those to which he referred, could qualify for planning permission under that new criterion in the future.

Mr Poots: Mr Beggs omitted to raise the issue that I highlighted and has missed the point, but that is not unusual. Under the terms of the motion and the original PPS 5, IKEA’s planning application would have been turned down. Is IKEA’s presence in Northern Ireland good or bad? Anyone who goes to the IKEA car park will discover that a considerable number of cars have Southern registration plates. IKEA brings money and jobs into the Northern Ireland economy, whether Members wish to acknowledge it.

In Banbridge, The OUTLET’s car park also contains many cars that are registered in the Republic of Ireland. That fact that is backed up by retailers in the town centre who confirm that, since the opening of The OUTLET, they handle many more euros than was the case previously. Therefore, out-of-town shopping centres are not necessarily evil or detrimental to existing town centres.

When Marks and Spencer originally opened at Sprucefield, business increased in Lisburn town centre, as it was then. The Marks and Spencer store generated an increased footfall, and the town rose to the challenge and developed in association with it. In fact, Lisburn’s main shopping streets — Bow Street and Market Square — suffered not because of Sprucefield, but as a consequence of the development of Bow Street Mall.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: People must recognise the facts that I outlined.

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure whether the Member who provided a summary of the amendment is for or against the main motion, because his argument seems to be that it was better to allow the development of out-of-town centres. In fact, the main tenor of the debate has been one of confused rambling from many Members.

I was pleased to hear from Mr Craig, who reached his normal heights by making an interesting, erudite, thought-provoking and generally well-presented case. I am sure that the BBC will pick up on the manner of his contribution. However, I am not sure that he addressed the main issue.

I hear an interesting interjection or two from the Back Benches. I acknowledge that Mr Paisley Jnr, who has just spoken from a sedentary position, has an intense interest in planning, as does the previous Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster.

However, as Mr Dallat said — and he took some abuse for trying to explain his point — people’s positions change. He also highlighted some inconsistencies in past approaches, and it was right and proper for him to do so.

The DUP has an undoubted interest in planning, and I share Mr Wells’s view that it is, perhaps, one of the most pressing issues that the Assembly can tackle. I am genuinely looking forward to seeing how the Minister, Mr Wilson, will deal with it. I am confident that he will bring his normal flair and élan to the process and take note of the point that Mr Wells raised about the flood of people who are leaving Kilkeel and where they go. In fact, he said as much about Larne and various other places.

On the topic of interjections and contributions from Members, I am interested in Mrs Robinson’s intervention, during which we could not get through the issues without hearing about a change of climate in Fermanagh and a change of climate in Tyrone. The Minister of the Environment said that climate change may be happening, but that it is not his fault. However, the real change of climate is the deep freeze that has set in about the Assembly. The Executive are not meeting, and not a single Front-Bench Member of Sinn Féin is here to talk about these issues. Where are they?

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr B McCrea: Some Members do not understand the metaphors that they tried to develop about climate change and freeze. This place is going into deep freeze

because two parties are incapable of governing. That is why those parties are over at the Labour Party conference. They are trying to work out a shoddy, back-room deal — as they normally do — instead of being here to deal with real issues. I welcome the Minister's assertion —

Mr Speaker: Order. It is important that the Member returns to the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: I welcome the Minister's assertion that he will push PPS 5 at every available opportunity. The UUP motion calls for that, and we want that to happen. The content of PPS 5 and the points that the Minister will take on board as part of the consultation process should rightfully be debated and brought to the attention of all Members.

Some Members were unsure about what my colleague Mr Beggs said. He argued for a proper, sequential assessment of whether it is right to put a —

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: Your time is up.

Mr Speaker: In fact, the Member's time is not up. Mr McCrea, you have 10 minutes.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. No doubt, I will be allowed some injury time as well.

As other Members have said, we want an opportunity for fair competition. I recognise Mr McKay's point that 50% of income that is generated in local stores is returned to the economy, whereas in multiples, the figure is sometimes only 5%. However, one must also recognise that people shop in multiples because they are cheap and convenient; they provide a service that people want. They also provide distribution channels throughout the United Kingdom for many local food producers.

As has been mentioned, parking is one tool that should be provided to planners and local councillors. One of the biggest issues in planning is accessibility. A way must be found to get over the tyranny of the parking warden, which Mr Poots raised with reference to Lisburn. It is certainly necessary to have people to try to manage the traffic, but a lack of convenient parking is a disincentive for shopping.

Let me just mention dual mandates. We were encouraged by the Minister's comments in the House of Commons, which were made when the Assembly was suspended and more time was available. The Minister suggested that there was some sort of confusion or conspiracy.

We want clarity, forward motion and an end product, because the lack of a clear and concise planning policy is hindering our economic development.

1.30 pm

I turn to the wording of the motion. Alastair Ross, quite properly, outlined that the John Lewis store must be built at Sprucefield; otherwise, it will be built in Dublin. It is obvious that it should be built in Lisburn. That project should begin now, and we should provide tools and appropriate legislation to ensure that quick and timely decisions can be made. Furthermore — and I know that some other Lagan Valley colleagues have spoken — there is a discussion about the expansion of Tesco in our fair city. Mr Ford said, and he received an accolade from the Minister for the contribution —

Mr Ford: Please do not mention that.

Mr B McCrea: I will mention it. The problem is that, once a development is agreed, will it be utilised for the purpose for which it was originally intended? Other Members said that development breeds further expansion that changes the character of the process.

As I said earlier — and Mr Speaker, rightly, directed me to return to the motion — it is important that the Assembly starts to work together on issues of mutual importance. It is important that Members identify issues that unite us and on which we agree. Therefore, we are happy to accept the amendment proposed by our friends and colleagues in the DUP, despite — as Peter Weir said — some of the arguments that could have persuaded us otherwise. We hope that the entire House will urge the Minister to introduce a timely, well-considered PPS 5 in order to enable our country's economy to progress. I support the motion and the amendment.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the impact that out-of-town retail centres can have on the viability of town centres, whilst recognising the benefit to the Northern Ireland retail sector of some development of regional significance; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to publish and implement PPS 5.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Review of Conviction Case

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer 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.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the concerns regarding the conviction of John Torney who maintained his innocence up to his death in July 2005; recognises that evidence has emerged that was not made available at the trial and that the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) has yet to investigate fully all aspects of this new evidence; expresses concern at the lack of progress by the CCRC in complying with the Order of the Divisional Court in the High Court made on 22 June 2005; and calls on the CCRC to review all aspects of the case with a view to its referral to the Court of Appeal.

The motion refers to the murder convictions of John Torney at Belfast Crown Court on 4 March 1996. At that court, presided over by the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Carswell, John Torney pleaded not guilty. However, by a majority of 10 to two, the jury convicted John Torney — a serving RUC officer — of the murder of his wife, Linda, his 11-year-old daughter, Emma, and his 13-year-old son, John Jnr.

The dreadful events of 19 and 20 September 1994 in Lomond Heights, Cookstown, which resulted in the death of Linda Torney and her two children, represent an appalling loss of human life and devastating tragedy for the Torneys and their extended family.

In April 1997, an appeal by John Torney Snr against his conviction was dismissed by the Court of Appeal. In July 2005, aged 50, John Torney suddenly died in prison of a heart attack. He protested his innocence to the very end.

If one accepts the prosecution case, the cold, calculated murders were clinically carried out by John Torney Snr using his service revolver. Worse still, he cynically and audaciously blamed his young son for carrying out those killings. As the trial judge said in his concluding remarks, the murders were planned and executed with fiendish ingenuity and ruthless precision. If that remark were true, he was caught in flagrante delicto. In that situation, how could one really say that those murders were ingenious? If he planned to do something such as that, why did he do it in such outrageous fashion? There is a question mark over that conclusion.

On the other hand, John Torney's defence was that his son killed his mother, Linda, and his sister, Emma, with John Snr's service revolver and then committed suicide. On the basis of the evidence presented to the court, the jury preferred the prosecution case. Both

before and after John Snr's death, the Torney family — in particular, Hilary Torney — has pursued a relentless campaign to have John Snr's murder convictions overturned. They have done so with great courage, dignity and impressive industry, and they have lobbied many people. They have come to the Assembly today, Mr Speaker, to seek your support and to advance his case with the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) in order to seek a referral to the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal.

None of us can determine the truth of what happened on that tragic night in 1994. However, as Members of the House, we can consider a number of factors that have come to light since the trial and the unsuccessful appeal to the Court of Appeal. Those are factors that the Torney campaign and I believe cast a significant doubt on the way in which the police originally investigated the killings and on John Torney's ultimate conviction for murder, based, as it was, on the evidence that was gathered as a result of that investigation.

On 31 October 2000, BBC 'Spotlight' broadcast a documentary about the Torney case. That documentary was seen by Dr Samuel McGuinness, the former headmaster of Cookstown High School, which both Emma and John Jnr attended at the time of their deaths. The programme reminded Dr McGuinness that he had had a conversation with a senior investigating officer in the week commencing 26 September 1994. That senior officer told Dr McGuinness that there was evidence of sexual activity between John Jnr and his sister, Emma, on the night of the murders and that semen was found on the girl's body. The same police officer indicated that no mention of that would be made at the trial, as they did not want to rub John's nose in it.

During the programme, Dr McGuinness realised that the defence at the original trial had not known about that at the time of the trial. He reported his conversation to the defence solicitor, Mr Keith Burrows. That was — and still is — a very significant development and was referred to CCRC and the Police Ombudsman's Office for further investigation. Neither of those investigations was exhaustively concluded, and the Police Ombudsman's investigation is still notionally extant. A formal decision by the CCRC not to refer the case to the Court of Appeal was made in 2002.

Ultimately, that led to a judicial review in 2005, in which Lord Justice Kerr ordered the CCRC to carry out further investigations to identify the police officers who spoke to Dr McGuinness.

Despite being investigated by the CCRC and the Police Ombudsman, the three police officers who were recorded as having been in contact with Dr

McGuinness at the time gave statements denying that a conversation of the sort described by Dr McGuinness ever took place. Indeed, one police officer, whom I will not name, claimed that he had not spoken to Dr McGuinness about any sexual history between John Torney Jnr and his sister, Emma. However, he went on to state:

"In fact I do not recall being aware of any information regarding possible sexual history between the two during my time on the investigation team."

That is an extraordinary statement, which demands careful explanation, because the same officer took a statement from Miss Laura Mattingley on 24 September 1994 in which she recalled how Emma Torney told her, *inter alia*, that her brother, John, had sexually abused her during the summer holidays.

Despite Dr McGuinness's assertion that he would be able to identify the investigating officer by sight or photograph, no opportunity has been afforded to him to do so, and, therefore, the matter is stuck at that point. The significance of Dr McGuinness's allegation, if true, is that at an early stage of the police's investigation, they ignored or suppressed evidence of actual sexual contact between brother and sister. Either allegation, if proven, would have had a major bearing on the case if it had been raised at the original trial or subsequently at the appeal. Therefore, it is essential that that matter be exhaustively investigated by CCRC or the Police Ombudsman. It is crucial that Dr McGuinness is afforded an opportunity to identify the police officer. Such an opportunity has been withheld for technical legal reasons, which, in such a grave case, must be removed in order to determine the truth.

It is clear that at an early stage of the police investigation, two schoolgirls recorded in written statements Emma's allegations of sexual abuse by her brother. That opened up an alternative line of inquiry, which the police, for whatever reason, did not pursue. Presumably, believing that it was an open-and-shut case, they deemed that no further lines of inquiry were necessary.

Dr McGuinness's serious allegation is, in effect, the key to having an in-depth review of the case. The CCRC takes the view that there is insufficient evidence to refer the case back to the Court of Appeal and, although the Police Ombudsman's investigation is not yet concluded, no formal communication has been received from that office since 2006.

Members should note that at no stage did Mr Torney make any allegations of sexual abuse by his son. That allegation arose from the statements made by the two pupils at his daughter's school.

My time is short; there are other matters that should be covered, which I cannot cover. There are aspects of the forensic evidence in the case that are unsatisfactory

— for example, Emma Torney's pyjama suit was lost, and, therefore, it was not possible for it to be forensically examined. That might have revealed evidence of abuse. Furthermore, the absence of gunpowder residue on John Jnr's hands raises serious questions. Those matters must be thoroughly reviewed in order to bring some sense of finality and justice to the case.

Any reasonable observer would agree that there is grave doubt about this case, and it should be further investigated by CCRC until firm conclusions are reached and the matter can be referred back to the Court of Appeal.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Weir: I support the motion. However, leaving aside matters of justice and the rights and wrongs of what was done in court, we should, above all, keep in mind the fact that we are faced with a human tragedy.

1.45 pm

It was a tragedy that led directly to the deaths of three people — John Torney Jnr, Emma Torney and Mrs Linda Torney. John Torney Snr is also deceased. Above all else, our thoughts should be with the families concerned — not just the Torney family, but the Duff family as well. The Duffs are Mrs Torney's relatives.

The Assembly must, and I believe that it does, adopt a solemn approach to such issues and treat them with gravitas, sensitivity and caution. I say caution because I appreciate that the Torney family has been told by its legal team that this motion may be the best way to apply pressure on the issue.

However, I am reluctant in principle for the Assembly to deal with individual court cases. It is wrong to have a trial by Assembly. As has been indicated, this House is not a court of law. Indeed, because neither Mr Torney Snr nor Mr Torney Jnr are here to answer the allegations against them, it is difficult for Members to make judgements or to stray into the area of allegations.

I appreciate that, in proposing the motion, Mr Maginness had to outline the circumstances of the case. However, it is difficult when people are not able to defend themselves or comment. As the Assembly is not a court of law, I do not intend to go into the details of the case. I cannot say whether Mr Torney Snr is guilty or innocent. I cannot say whether the conviction is safe or unsafe. Even if I were to have a clear view in my own mind, it would not be appropriate for the Assembly to pass such a judgement.

After reading the case files, I am convinced that, as Alban Maginness said, there are a range of issues that must be considered. They include the evidence of Dr McGuinness, the procedures that were applied, some

of the evidence that has come to light since the case was last considered by CCRC and concerns about the forensic evidence. I do not know whether those issues are enough to say that the conviction was unsafe. That is not my judgement to make. However, they raise serious questions, and there must be a proper examination of the Torney case.

Mr A Maginness: The Member is right to say that the Assembly is not a court of law, nor does it intend to act as a court of law. The facts that I adverted to provided a necessary foundation for the debate.

The Member should know, however, that whether or not one is convinced of Mr Torney's innocence, the fact remains that doubt is caused by the allegation raised by Dr McGuinness. That doubt and those allegations must be investigated thoroughly and brought to a conclusion. One cannot predict what those conclusions will be, but, nonetheless, the doctor's allegation raises such serious doubt that the CCRC must be urged to reinvestigate thoroughly, as suggested by the High Court.

That is the substance of the motion, and I welcome the Member's support in that respect.

Mr Speaker: Mr Weir will be allowed an extra minute for that intervention.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

As I said, I am reluctant to go down the road of opening up court cases in the Assembly, however justified that action might be. I am concerned about the precedent such that that would set. There are clear issues in the Torney case. I am not in a position to judge whether that will lead to a declaration that the conviction was unsafe. That would also be wrong for me to judge. However, it is clear to me that there are serious issues that must be examined. Consequently, in order to ensure that the maximum amount of scrutiny is brought to bear on the case, it is right and appropriate that the evidence in the case be re-examined by the CCRC.

Members on this side of the House support the motion.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In a way, I broadly endorse Mr Weir's comments. On behalf of my party, I support the broad thrust of the motion. Like Mr Weir, I do not want to delve into the poignant and difficult issues that have been raised in the Chamber this afternoon.

This morning, I had a first-hand briefing from members of Mr Torney's family, and I appreciate the time that they took to do that. In the early hours of 20 September 1994, three members of the Torney family lost their lives in tragic circumstances, and that was followed by Mr Torney Snr losing his life in 2005. We are discussing an immense and horrific family tragedy, and I extend our sympathy for and solidarity with all the family members concerned.

I am not in a position to second-guess the original judgement or what may be produced in a further trial or review, but some of the issues that have been raised seem to resonate with previous experiences, unfortunately. I do not intend to single out what may or may not be deficiencies in the original case. However, issues have been raised in relation to forensics, the identification of officers, and additional evidence that may have come to light recently.

Therefore, Sinn Féin supports the motion on the broad basis that a wide range of issues has been raised by the Torney family and others, such as the legal advisers and other experts. Indeed, the courts have asked for several of those matters to be examined. On that basis, we call on the CCRC to consider the case afresh and examine any new evidence. Ultimately, people have been bereaved and have suffered, so if there is evidence of an injustice or of a failure of the justice system, we want to see that redressed. On that basis, Sinn Féin supports the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to lend my support and that of my party to the broad thrust of the motion. The circumstances surrounding the death of the Torney family in 1994 were harrowing, and it must be very difficult for the wider family circle to come to terms with that. Equally, the death of John Torney in 2005 must still be difficult for those who are trying to clear his name.

I agree with the comments made by Mr Weir, a Member for North Down, that this is a legislative Assembly and not a court of law. Therefore, all Members must take due care and consideration with what we say and how we say it.

I, as well as other Members, have met representatives of the Torney family on several occasions. They have presented the evidence surrounding the case and conviction of John Torney Snr to me. Having considered the material presented, I am confident that significant evidence is now obtainable that was either not considered or not made available at the time of the trial. I am also convinced that avenues of investigation exist that must and should be followed by the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

The testimony of Dr Samuel McGuinness, former head of Cookstown High School, is crucial to the case. In October 2000, Dr McGuinness provided a sworn affidavit in which he stated that he had been informed by a policeman of significant evidence that could have altered the outcome of the murder trial. However, that evidence was not used. Dr McGuinness has not subsequently been given the opportunity to correctly identify that police officer. However, in June 2005, just weeks before Mr Torney's death, the Lord Chief Justice ordered the Criminal Cases Review Commission to take such steps as it may to utilise the evidence that

was presented by Dr McGuinness. To my knowledge, that has not happened.

I am also disappointed that the former Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, when asked to investigate the allegations made by Dr McGuinness, apparently concluded that she found no evidence to substantiate those allegations. From the evidence presented to me and others, that seems a peculiar decision.

In any potential miscarriage of justice, there will always be grey areas and intangible aspects that cannot be measured. However, Mr Torney and his family have always protested his innocence. The prosecution's case must be further scrutinised and any evidence that was missed or lines of investigation that have not been pursued must be examined.

The basis of every democratic society is the rule of law and a fair trial. The great thing about democracy is the influence and input of ordinary people, but that also can be a weakness. Human frailty can lead to mistakes — intentional or unintentional — and those can lead to miscarriages of justice. A measure of any democratic society is its ability to limit the occurrence of miscarriages of justice and the steps that it takes to investigate those, if and when they occur. It is not inconceivable that any one of us, or our families, could be accused of a crime. In that event, we would hope that the correct processes would be applied and the fullest investigations made to ensure the right and truthful outcome.

The circumstances and potential new evidence surrounding the case warrant further and fuller investigation by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It must comply fully with the order of the divisional court of the High Court in 2005 —

Mr Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Kennedy: To fail to do the aforementioned would be an affront to the Torney family, and a slight to the legal and democratic principles of Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party also supports the motion. First and foremost, the events under discussion must be viewed as a tragedy for the Torney family and the wider family circles of those involved. I include Mr Torney Snr, who died in prison while still protesting his innocence. As we have heard, a number of issues — seemingly unresolved — may have impacted on his incarceration.

However, the Assembly is not a court of law and, specifically, it is not a court of appeal. None of us in this Chamber can say with any degree of authority what did or did not happen on that night in 1994. Our concern must be whether justice has been done. To

know that, we must be sure that the various agencies involved have considered all the material facts and evidence, and that the checks and balances that exist in our criminal justice system have operated properly.

2.00 pm

Several issues of dispute and uncertainty are still outstanding and relate to the motive of those convicted and potential scenarios; forensics, relating specifically to the night in question and the issues raised by Mr Maginness regarding evidence that had not been properly examined or seen to be examined; and the nature of the family relationships, including the allegation of sexual relationships in the family, which has not been explored fully in court.

Where can we go from here? There are two issues to be considered. The first, and probably the more minor issue, relates to the performance of the Police Ombudsman's office. The family reported, disappointingly, a lack of response from that office to allegations that they made as to how the case was investigated. Indeed, they have not had an acknowledgement of those allegations.

The second, and broader issue, relates to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which is a UK-wide body and not directly accountable to the Assembly. Nonetheless, there are issues as to whether it sufficiently and rigorously implemented the decision of the Court of Appeal in 2005. That alleged failure may be an issue that the family might wish to challenge further through a further judicial review. The broader issue is whether the case should be referred back to the Court of Appeal on the basis of new evidence and facts that have come to light or have been reviewed and reanalysed?

I recognise that the Assembly should tread with a certain degree of trepidation when looking at individual cases. However, while bearing in mind that the CCRC is not accountable to the Assembly, we, as elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, have a duty to speak out when we believe that there have been systemic failures or the potential for systemic failures. Public interest warrants a fuller examination of the situation, and there is the potential for further consideration under our legal system.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the debate for the reasons outlined by Stephen Farry, who said that there is a duty to speak out when there has been potential systemic failure and injustice. That should be the touchstone against which the Assembly should be judged and should judge itself. We have a duty to speak out when there is potential systemic failure and injustice. If, during its life, the Assembly uses that touchstone to guide it in respect of such cases, then it will affirm itself as being responsive to the community in the North that it serves.

The motion is one of a school of motions to have come before the Assembly in the past few months and, no doubt, will come before the Assembly again. In April this year the Assembly endorsed unanimously a motion in respect of the case of Raymond McCord Jnr. Without trying to usurp the authority of the courts or second-guess any other criminal justice institution in the North, the Assembly, nonetheless, made a decision on what could be a case of injustice.

A few months before that, a DUP motion on the case of a miscarriage of justice in the Republic of Ireland was similarly endorsed unanimously on the Floor of the Assembly.

I hope that, in the coming weeks and months, the Assembly will have an opportunity to debate similar cases of alleged miscarriages of justice, or alleged cases of injustice, not least the case of the people killed by the British Army in Ballymurphy in 1971.

I acknowledge Peter Weir's comment that the Assembly must not usurp the authority of other justice institutions in the North. However, when families have little option, it is appropriate for the Assembly to make statements about alleged miscarriages of justice or cases of injustice. We have done that in the past, and I trust that we will do so in future. Although we must act judicially, we should not shirk that responsibility.

That is the best way in which to view this debate. The debate should reassure everyone in the Chamber and outside that we are acting appropriately and with discretion in such cases. Sadly and necessarily, as Alex Maskey indicated in his intervention, a new profile and new energy is often required in cases of miscarriages of justice or cases of injustice in order for the wrong to be remedied. John Torney's family are strongly convinced of his innocence, and they hope that the Assembly will help to give a new profile and new energy to the efforts that they have made over many years to rectify what they and many other people see as a great wrong.

Four essential issues arise in the case of John Torney, and other authorities must deal with those issues quickly. Alban Maginness referred to the first issue — the allegation that there was an abusive relationship between the son and daughter who so tragically died with their mother. If the police knew of that allegation in the hours immediately after the tragic murders, was that evidence ignored or suppressed, as the family and Alban have said? If proven, the suppression of that evidence would give rise, *prima facie*, to whether there should have ever been a prosecution, trial or conviction, never mind a life sentence. That matter goes to the heart of the case but is still not being fully faced up to by the authorities with the relevant responsibilities.

The second issue concerns the conduct of the police officers who had responsibility for investigating the case. According to a sworn testimony, one of the three police officers told a witness — a former headmaster of Emma and John Jnr — that, although there was evidence of a sexual and abusive relationship, it would not be pursued by the police. In statements to the Police Ombudsman, all three police officers denied that one of them gave the witness that information, despite his sworn evidence to the contrary. That is at the heart of the level of confidence that we can have in the police's investigation of criminal matters.

The third issue concerns the continuing role of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which is responsible for dealing with miscarriages of justice in Britain and Northern Ireland. As Stephen Farry indicated, the High Court directed the CCRC to take all necessary steps to identify the officer who gave the information to the headmaster. That was three years ago. If any of our constituents told us that a court of law in Northern Ireland had directed another responsible body to conduct all necessary steps to identify those officers more than three years ago and that that had not yet happened, what would we say about the inordinate delay and the alleged technicalities, which Alban Maginness mentioned, that caused the delay?

That matter goes to the heart of the process and affects confidence in how the CCRC conducts its affairs, and it must be addressed immediately.

The fourth point was highlighted by the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Kennedy; namely, that a Police Ombudsman investigation returned a negative outcome in respect of the family's complaint. A further complaint was raised with the Police Ombudsman over two years ago, but, at this stage, no conclusion has been reached, and no information was brought to the family's attention during that period.

It is more than legitimate for the Assembly to shine a spotlight on cases of that nature when responsible bodies such as the CCRC on the one hand, and the Police Ombudsman on the other, have not, after such inordinate delay, reached conclusions or completed the task set for them by the High Court in the North. It is legitimate for the Assembly to say that justice delayed is justice denied. A case that takes so many years to come to the point of review and satisfaction is surely one about which the Assembly should speak out loudly.

In conclusion, I welcome the support of Members, particularly the comments from members of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party. Although I am aware of the words of caution that have been expressed in other places, I will repeat what I said at the outset of the debate: if this House cannot speak up for those families who no longer have the opportunity to speak for themselves, we will have failed in our responsibility

and obligation to them. As our history of the past 40 years has shown, there are many families like the Torneys. Many people have suffered wrongs that need to be rectified and much hurt endures. We should judge ourselves on how we have helped those people when we consider what we have contributed to the betterment of our society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the concerns regarding the conviction of John Torney who maintained his innocence up to his death in July 2005; recognises that evidence has emerged that was not made available at the trial and that the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) has yet to investigate fully all aspects of this new evidence; expresses concern at the lack of progress by the CCRC in complying with the Order of the Divisional Court in the High Court made on 22 June 2005; and calls on the CCRC to review all aspects of the case with a view to its referral to the Court of Appeal.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr G Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; where necessary co-operating with other agencies and Departments; and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

I did not bring this subject to the House to be negative or judgemental or to scaremonger. I state categorically that I understand that no one deliberately intends to harm an unborn child. This debate is not an attack on the Minister or the professionals who deal with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) daily. I sincerely believe that they deserve our utmost respect and admiration. I tabled the motion to raise awareness of the effects of the disorder. I want to highlight the devastating effect that alcohol or drug misuse can have on an unborn child and the need of families, who live daily with FASD, for diagnosis and a support network.

2.15 pm

This debate is about the well-being of future generations. Some people may not fully appreciate the damage that alcohol can cause to the unborn child. Problems affecting a child with FASD include: varying degrees of facial disfigurement; brain damage, resulting in poor social skills; inability to learn simple tasks; behavioural problems; and an impact on co-ordination and motor skills. Those problems affect the entire family of a child with FASD.

As the term "spectrum disorder" implies, there is a wide variation in the severity of the condition and in the level of support required. FASD is not a well-publicised condition, but that does not mean that we, as a society, can afford to overlook the daily needs of the families and children who are affected by it. Their needs must be identified and addressed. Everyone in the Chamber must play a part in getting the ball rolling today.

The effects of alcohol on the unborn child are permanent — they do not go away. However, they are entirely avoidable. An interdepartmental co-operative approach must be adopted to achieve the objective of reducing the number of children affected by FASD. It must involve the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department

for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and national organisations who can supply the knowledge on which new policy and structures can be firmly based. Such a multi-agency approach will ensure that all resources are utilised efficiently and effectively — in short, joined-up working.

The problem of drinking before and during pregnancy must be raised early with young people. I say young people, rather than young women, because research has shown that alcohol consumption during adolescence can also have a detrimental effect on the fertility of young men. It may permanently alter the DNA that they pass on to their children, increasing the risk of birth defects such as FASD.

We must examine the dual issues of whom we should target and how, operationally, that can be achieved. It can be done through the education system, youth groups, family planning clinics or anywhere that young people get together. The means of delivery must be relevant and must utilise multiple threads of communication, such as leaflets, social networking websites and the traditional media. The policy in Northern Ireland should be to prevent, rather than deal with, birth defects caused by alcohol. There is an old adage, “prevention is better than cure”.

General public awareness must be raised. Even in today's society, parents have an important role to play. In the interests of public health, a publicity campaign should be undertaken to help to raise awareness of FASD among our citizens.

In the education sphere, some of the possible problems of FASD include: a reduced attention span; frustration; poor problem solving; the feeling of difference and exclusion from their peers; and delays or defects in speech and language development. However, every child with FASD is an individual and will have different needs.

Many children with FASD have exceptional abilities in one area, be it music, art or mathematics. Therefore, the people of Northern Ireland should be responsible for ensuring that such children achieve their maximum potential. We need better diagnosis and specialised services. At the moment, there is no accurate information on the number of children with FASD.

Some parents have told me that they have had difficulty getting an accurate diagnosis of the disorder. In fact, last week one parent told me that their child's diagnosis of FASD had been overturned. The implications of that are huge, as the support services that have been in place, and even benefit entitlement, may also be removed from that family.

From my perspective, that is a shocking state of affairs. How can that family be expected to cope physically, emotionally or financially? I secured this

debate in order to urge the Minister to put in place a comprehensive service designed for those children and families who, sadly, have to live with FASD. As with any medical condition, there must be, primarily, an accurate diagnosis so that families are not left in turmoil because of medical inconsistencies.

I can almost hear the Minister screaming in my ear, “George, what about the cost?” I ask the Minister: what is the cost of doing nothing? There is a continuing need for lifelong medical assistance, special arrangements for education and medication to treat the secondary symptoms of FASD, all of which cost, at best, millions over each generation. Many of the specialised services and personnel required to supply those services are already available in the different systems. It is not a long journey to make in order to utilise them. However, every journey begins with one step, and I ask the Minister to take that step by liaising with other Departments and support organisations in order to ensure that those communications are embedded and developed. After an accurate diagnosis, families must have barrier-free, easy access to the services that are beneficial to them.

I am fully aware that there is no quick fix for this problem, but we have to start somewhere at some time. That time and place is now. Children with FASD carry the effects for their lifetime. That is why parents need accurate diagnostic and support programmes that are obviously and desperately required in order to achieve the objectives that I have brought to the attention of the House today.

The FASAwareUK website states that FASD:

“is the biggest cause of non-genetic mental handicap in the western world and the only one that is 100% preventable.”

Let the Assembly encourage the Minister to take the first step on the journey.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on it. The motion calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

“to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder ... and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.”

Drinking during pregnancy may give rise to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and babies who have been subjected to alcohol while in the womb are also more at risk of sudden infant death. That is a cause of great concern, especially as we appear to have a culture of binge drinking. According to a representative of the Royal College of Midwives, many women carry a binge-drinking habit into their pregnancies.

In general, more people are aware of the dangers that are associated with smoking during pregnancy, but there is much less awareness of the effects of alcohol while pregnant. In the past few years there has been

increased awareness-raising of the effects of alcohol consumption by pregnant women and those trying to conceive. However, more must be done, especially as some health professionals suggest that foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is increasing and that, due to the complexity of the disorder, many cases are not being diagnosed.

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is the umbrella term used to describe a range of effects that can be caused by maternal alcohol exposure. Children that are identified as having FASD show signs of behavioural, intellectual and physical difficulties, including learning difficulties, poor language and memory skills, and attention problems. Who would willingly subject their child to such problems? Who would willingly drink alcohol, knowing that those difficulties could be the outcome? We must provide targeted support and advice, so that women are made aware of the effects of the condition and can make an informed choice.

We have sought changes to the advice that is offered to women about drinking alcohol during pregnancy. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines were revised in recent years to reflect the change in thinking. NICE now recommends that alcohol should be avoided altogether during pregnancy, but it says that those who wish to consume alcohol should minimise the risk to the baby by refraining from drinking alcohol in the first three months of pregnancy and thereafter consuming only a few units a week. Even that advice is confusing and is causing a great deal of concern. Women are asking whether they should or should not have a drink during pregnancy.

FASD is completely preventable through the elimination of drinking during pregnancy. Therefore, we have a duty to ensure that every possible effort is made to raise awareness and to bring down the level of FASD, or, if possible, to eliminate it. The dangers of drinking too much alcohol have been well documented for years. However, in recent times, healthcare professionals have made more concerted efforts to increase public awareness. I want to commend those professionals involved in the campaign, and pledge my support to help them along the way.

In order to lead an informed campaign, there is a need for more information, a good understanding of the continuum of permanent birth defects associated with FASD, and an increased awareness of the risks of pre-natal alcohol exposure among the general public, in particular among women who are pregnant, or considering pregnancy. That has been made more difficult by the fact, for which there is evidence, that FASD consists of a set of conditions that are poorly understood, not only by the general public, but by health professionals. Therefore, there is a need for more studies of the effects of those conditions, so that the best support can be provided.

It appears that the best advice for pregnant women seeking clarity on whether they can drink alcohol or not is to refrain altogether, because there is no definitive research to suggest that there is a safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. If a pregnant woman consumes alcohol, it will go into her bloodstream, and, from there, straight into the baby's bloodstream. In some cases, that alcohol can have a toxic effect on the foetus. Surely, that is enough to deter any mum-to-be. If you are drinking, your baby is drinking. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Question Time is about to begin, and yet again, four of the first six questions to be asked are from the party of the Minister who will receive those questions. We have been assured that the selection of questions is a random process. Clearly, it cannot be, and I would like an explanation of that.

Mr Speaker: All I can say to the Member is that the questions are selected by random ballot. Neither I, nor my office, take any part in that procedure.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank you for the clarification, and I realise that that is the case. I am not a statistician, but, although the process appears to be the chance selection of a ballot, four, five or six of the first six questions are regularly asked by the party to which the responding Minister belongs. There is something not right. I am not saying that something is wrong, but something is not right.

Mr Speaker: I understand that the Member has made a very valid point. *[Interruption]*.

Mr B McCrea: What about Dromore?

Mr Speaker: Order.

As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Mr Gardiner.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Post-Primary Transfer: DUP Proposals

1. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Education to confirm if she is aware of any proposals on post-primary transfer from the Democratic Unionist Party.

(AQO 230/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Is mór an díomá dom é nach raibh an Coiste Oideachais ná páirtithe polaitíochta eile ábalta aghaidh a thabhairt ar na buncheisteanna a bhaineann le haistriú iarbhuideochais go fóill. Go dtí seo, níor tháinig aon chomhdhearcaidh chun solais agus níor cuireadh aon mholtaí eile ar an chlár ach amháin mo mholtaí-se.

I am disappointed that the Education Committee and other political parties have not addressed the real issues on post-primary transfer. No consensus has emerged, and mine remain the only significant proposals on the table. When I brought my proposals to the Executive on 15 May 2008, and during discussions with the Education Committee the following day, I made it clear that I was happy to listen to constructive comments about the proposals and that I would engage constructively with anyone who has ideas that improve them.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her reply. Have there been any proposals from the Education Committee that could, even now, offer the prospect of a consensus?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin agus as an phointe sin. Two comments struck me from the comments that I received from the Committee. First, some Committee members feel that some breathing space is required. To an extent, I agree, which is why my proposals include the partial continuation of academic selection during its phased abolition between 2010 and 2013, which was a difficult feature for me. However, there will be no distortion of the primary-schools curriculum as a result.

Secondly, the Committee showed interest in an important feature of the proposals that has received relatively little attention — the development of academic streams, which could be academic schools

within clusters of schools. Academic provision will continue to exist, and I have always made it clear that it should continue to be a key part of our system at all ages, but particularly from 14. I propose that curricular provision be all-embracing in all areas and offer the full entitlement framework to all children. However, I envisage that school diversity and specialism will continue and flourish.

My position has always been that academic selection is unnecessary. By that I partly mean that there are ways to have schools with a strong academic emphasis in their provision that are fairer, better and more flexible than academically selective admissions procedures conducted at ages 10, 11 or 14. Academic selection is unnecessary at 11 and at 14.

Throughout the process, I have listened carefully to all the main interests — educational and other — and worked to achieve a consensual way forward. My proposals offer a compromise solution for those who, like me, do not regard the current system as the way forward and do not hang on to the past. There are areas of commonality, but the Committee has failed to make any consensus proposals.

Mr Storey: Mr Deputy Speaker, will you rule on whether the Minister's previous answer has any relevance to the question that she was asked? Despite being asked a question about proposals from the DUP, all the Minister did was attack the Education Committee. Obviously, that was the statement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member ask his question?

Mr Storey: In her answer, the Minister tried to do what the rest of her party has been doing over the past few days — abdicate the responsibility that comes from being part of the Executive. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister accept that her proposals have not received consensus, and will she agree to meet me after today's sitting to consider further proposals from the DUP? The DUP put proposals on the table — we went to the public with them. Mr O'Dowd is going round the country doing the same because the Minister has little support.

Will the Minister agree to meet me and discuss my alternative proposals in order to see whether consensus can be reached? Then, perhaps, that will remove the confusion that exists among parents of children who are in P6. The blockage remains with the Minister.

The Minister of Education: There is no confusion among parents of P6 children. Some people have tried to create the myth that there is confusion. A Chathaoirligh, primary-school teachers and principals are well aware of what they will be teaching, which is the revised curriculum. Teachers like the revised

curriculum. The teaching unions are opposed to distortion of the curriculum.

I have always said that I am available to meet the Chairperson of the Education Committee. I have yet to receive the Committee's consensus proposals. I look forward to receiving them. In fact, I will attend the Education Committee, where a good discussion on the matter can take place.

Let us not play politics with children's education, which is what Mervyn Storey is doing. I am glad that people have reached consensus that change is needed and that they understand that the current system fails many children from different communities. Progress must be made. I have made proposals after engaging extensively with all of the different stakeholders during several months of consultation. The Member's party did not even discuss those proposals in the Executive. I look forward to the Executive's discussion, because I will bring — *[Interruption.]*

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

The Minister of Education: If I may finish my answer —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please take your seat for a moment, Minister. Mr Storey, you are aware that no points of order are taken during Question Time. All remarks must be made through the Chair. Last week, I told Members that all remarks must be made through the Chair — not over it, nor under it.

The Minister of Education: I look forward to the Executive meeting at which my proposals are discussed. Progress must be made on the basis of equality, partnership and respect. That is the greatest message that the Assembly can send to children in every class from P1 to P7. Children need to see politicians engage with each other on the basis of equality and partnership. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr K Robinson: Despite what the Minister has just said, will she accept that both the public and schools are mystified as to what her proposals entail? Will she undertake to bring a motion to the House that will enable each party to set forth its ideas in public?

The Minister of Education: Ní ghlacaim leis sin. I do not accept that. The reason is that I go into schools and meet educationalists every day of the week. They understand the need for the system to be changed. They are crying out for change and are thankful that the Department is bringing it about. They are also well aware of who resists and blocks change. The message that comes from schools in every community is that blocking change disadvantages working-class children on the Falls, on the Shankill and in Ballymena, Coleraine, Derry and all parts of the North of Ireland. Let us continue to make change, rather than try to

interrupt and block ministerial proposals. Let us move forward and bring about change for the children who need it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Revised Curriculum

2. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education to confirm that she will take action against any school attempting to divert feeder primary schools from teaching the revised curriculum. (AQO 226/09)

Breakaway Entrance Exam: Sanctions

5. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Education what sanctions she will take against a school that plans to administer a breakaway entrance exam. (AQO 222/09)

Transfer Procedures: Advice

8. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Education what advice her Department has given to primary schools in relation to the transfer procedure for pupils currently in P6. (AQO 194/09)

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le do thoil freagróidh mé ceisteanna, 2, 5, agus 8 le chéile.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall answer questions 2, 5 and 8 together.

Tá ceangal dlí ar scoileanna an curaclam reachtúil a sholáthar do dhaltai den aois éigeantach scoile.

Schools are required by law to deliver the statutory curriculum for pupils of compulsory school age. The revised curriculum was not designed with testing for the purposes of selection in mind.

Over the years, the transfer tests have had a damaging effect on the delivery of the primary school curriculum. I am mindful of that in the proposals for which I seek a legislative framework. In the interests of consensus, they include a transitional test for a three-year period, which is available to schools that feel that they need time to adjust to the reform.

Chuir mé in iúl go soiléir gur mhian liom go mbeidh bunscoileanna ag díriú a n-iarrachtaí go heisiach ar mhúineadh an churaclaim athbhreithnithe nuair a thagann deireadh leis na teisteanna aistrithe atá ann faoi láthair.

When the current transfer tests end, I want to see primary schools focus entirely on teaching the revised curriculum. I expect every teacher and principal in our primary schools to fulfil the statutory duty of delivering the revised curriculum to our children and

not to be diverted from that important task by the particular admissions requirements of any post-primary school. I can rely on the teaching profession in the primary sector to do the best for children in their schools.

However, let me be clear, if any school is found to flout the law, I will take action.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her forthright reply. Will she tell us what the Education and Training Inspectorate will do if it encounters evidence that schools set aside the requirements of the curriculum to focus on test preparation?

The Minister of Education: The Education and Training Inspectorate is an independent means of reporting occasions in which the statutory curriculum is distorted by testing for the purposes of selection. If it encounters evidence that the revised curriculum has been set aside for any reason, it will report that as part of the inspection procedures. Any such report will be published on the departmental website. Therefore, parents and the Department will be made aware of such evidence, and appropriate action will be taken to protect the education of the young people in that school.

Boards of governors have a statutory duty to secure the delivery of the statutory curriculum in their schools. If parents feel that their child's school is not delivering the broad and balanced requirements of the curriculum, they have a right of appeal to an independent curriculum complaints tribunal. Following such proceedings, the Department has the power to direct a school to fulfil its duties. Furthermore, teachers' unions can report to the Department if they feel that teachers or schools are not fulfilling the statutory duties that are outlined in the curriculum.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Minister assure the House that the transitional test will not distort the revised curriculum?

The Minister of Education: Is féidir liom sin a dhéanamh. Before I do so, I congratulate the Member on her county winning the all-Ireland final yesterday. I was privileged to be at the match. My own county, Mayo, unfortunately drew with her county, but that result might be rectified next week. *[Interruption.]*

I am answering the question on the revised curriculum. I am sure that children in many schools in Tyrone are preparing artwork for the return of the Tyrone team. I am sure that the Member will attend the return of the team. Sport is also education.

The transitional test will not distort the revised curriculum. It will be focused on the expected levels of literacy and numeracy at transfer age in a manner that does not require either a skewing of the curriculum or prior practice. It should be taken on a single day, and last no more than one hour. It should rank children on

the basis of ability within the cohort sitting it. It is my intention that such a test will be taken in the post-primary setting, not in the primary school. For too long, the primary curriculum has been distorted by the unnecessary testing of our children. That is the difference between the transitional test and the transfer test. The transitional test is also different to the sort of test that a number of grammar schools claim that they will carry out, not only in the flexibility that it indicates on my part, but in its regard for the education of children in primary schools.

Let me be clear, the test that I propose is a concession in the interest of consensus, and it is a means to an end — the end of academic selection.

Some Members: Never.

The Minister of Education: I propose that this test operates for a three-year period, during which its application within admissions will reduce.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister has the Floor. She is entitled to be heard.

2.45 pm

The Minister of Education: Yes, I have heard "never" on many previous occasions.

I want to return to the issue of the test. Grammar schools will have time to adjust; however, many are going with the new proposals. I will welcome the decision of any grammar school which chooses not to use the test. No child will be compelled to take the test. I have reluctantly conceded the test, because I consider it to be an unfortunate necessity on the route to the abolition of academic selection. If political debates suggest to me that the test is not a necessary means towards that end, I will be delighted.

Mr Neeson: As the Minister knows, my party and I acknowledge the need for change. As a former teacher, I know that there is extreme confusion among pupils, teachers and parents about what changes are being brought about. Will the Minister explain exactly what information her Department is providing to primary schools?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. We have been out and about visiting schools and holding public meetings right across the North of Ireland. I plan to continue doing so. I met all the post-primary principals in Fermanagh. Last week, I was in Ballinascreen, where we held a public meeting. We have held many different meetings so that we can have a genuine discussion about the proposals.

The Department and I have clearly said to primary principals and to teachers of P6 pupils that they must teach the revised curriculum. I do not know how much clearer I can be. There is a revised curriculum in place,

which is a good curriculum. Yesterday, as I was going to the match in Dublin, a teacher told me that the revised curriculum is working.

I have also met all the different trade unions —

Mrs I Robinson: More resources?

The Minister of Education: Of course, people want more resources, and we are doing everything that we can to ensure that education gets the resources that it needs. My colleagues are ensuring that we have those resources.

We have also written to school principals to explain that they have a statutory duty to teach the revised curriculum.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister intend to name and shame those schools which attempt to help their pupils in the new test? Will she publicly publish a target list of schools that she thinks are likely to default on the issue? Will she give an assurance to the House that she intends to set up surveillance cameras in every school so that she can pick out the teachers who do not do what she wants? In practice, will she use the so-called anti-terrorism laws under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 to ensure that every teacher does exactly what she says?

The Minister of Education: Although the Member asked about 20 different questions, I have already answered his question about what I will do, and I have explained what the inspectorate and the teachers' unions will do. If the Member had listened, he might have got his answer. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I must ask Members again to allow the Minister to answer the question.

Have you finished giving your response, Minister?

The Minister of Education: Yes, I have finished.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that instead of taking action and sanctions against schools, she should be apologising to schools —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Minister agree that she should be apologising for the consternation in schools where parents are asking principals for advice on the Ruane 11-plus, and where principals are unable to answer those questions?

Does the Minister agree that she has left parents and teachers in an invidious position, which has been made worse by her failure to attend Executive meetings?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education: I do not agree with any of the points that the Member has made.

[Interruption.] Until I came into this job, I thought that the SDLP were anti-academic selection and pro-change. I was obviously mistaken. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Extended Schools: September Monitoring Round Bids

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Education what bid she made for extended schools in the September Monitoring Round. (AQO 235/09)

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. I congratulate the Member on his football team, because I do not discriminate on grounds of gender.

Mr Kennedy: Who won the Ryder Cup? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Education: Who won Wimbledon?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is Question Time and there are serious issues to deal with.

The Minister of Education: I am glad to see that there is such interest in the House in such a wide variety of sport.

Mar is eol do Chomhaltaí, thug mé an-tacaíocht don chlár um scoileanna sínithe. I gcás na tairisceana ar £5 mhilliún a lorgaíodh i dtosach i mbabhta mhí an Mheithimh, lorgaíodh arís í i mbabhta monatóireachta Mheán Fómhair.

I have been highly supportive of the extended schools programme. The bid for £5 million, which was originally logged in the June monitoring round, has been re-submitted in the September monitoring round. The earlier bid was not met by the Finance Minister. However, in his statement to the Assembly on 24 June 2008 on the outcome of the June monitoring round he assured Members that every effort would be made to provide additional funding for the extended schools programme at the next monitoring round. I look forward to that.

In light of those positive indications about the potential to meet the bid for £5 million, I wrote to the current Finance Minister to outline the fact that I had asked my officials to put arrangements in place to ensure that additional allocations were made in July to allow for school planning and continuity of the programme. The Finance Minister welcomed that course of action in his reply but highlighted that the scope for the Executive to meet that bid in the September round would depend on the amount of funding available for reallocation.

I have been delighted to receive letters of support and thanks from school principals and pupils for the restoration of previous funding levels and widening eligibility criteria.

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister confirm how schools are being identified as in need of funding and what level of funding is expected?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. Priority for funding has been given to schools serving areas of greatest social disadvantage, and it has been targeted at children and young people who are disadvantaged, marginalised, or who have the most limited access to current services. The additional £5 million funding means that we can restore previous years' funding levels for 2008-09 and reintroduce those wards, identified as being the most deprived under the education domain, to the selection criteria. The education domain measure had been used in 2006-07 and 2007-08. However, due to the reduced level of funding, the multiple-deprivation measure has been adopted for 2008-09.

Schools eligible for the programme are as follows. Primary, post-primary and special schools are eligible for the programme if: 51% or more of their enrolment is from a neighbourhood renewal area; 51% or more of their enrolment is from the 30% lowest ranking wards in the multiple-deprivation measure; 51% or more of their enrolment is from the 30% lowest-ranking wards in the education domain, or if they have a free school meals entitlement of 37% or higher.

Nursery schools are also eligible for the programme if they have 37% or more children who are entitled to free school meals and/or 37% or more pupils' families claiming jobseeker's allowance.

Schools are being allocated funding amounts of between £5,500 and £48,000, depending on their size and the uptake of the clustering incentive. Funding was decided on the basis of a formula as follows: first, there would be a block allocation to every school of £3,000; secondly, there would be a sliding-scale whereby the first 100 pupils are funded at £100 each; the next 100 at £75 each; the next 100 at £50 each; the next 150 at £25; the next 100 at £20 each; and the remainder at £10 each. Where schools join with other schools in a cluster arrangement, they will be entitled to a 15% additional allowance as an incentive for partnership working.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister, while she is on her feet, tell us how many times she has been in her Department? This is my only opportunity as an elected representative to ask a question of the Minister as she refuses to meet me in my constituency. I make no apology for repetitiveness in asking the question, although I may be accused by a certain member of Sinn Féin of being obsessed; apparently when you speak about one subject you are obsessed.

Will the Minister indicate when we are going to see a newbuild for Tor Bank School for special needs? The Minister talked eloquently about equality and

therefore, I would like to know when that newbuild will commence? The state of the shanty town that currently acts as a school is an absolute disgrace to the Department of Education and to the Minister in particular.

The Minister of Education: I have met with the Member on a number of occasions; however, her supplementary question is not relevant to the initial question. I ask that in future the Member's questions be relevant — there are rules governing that.

I have visited Tor Bank School — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. I know that it is not popular to suspend people from schools any more but somebody is going to get suspended here if you do not respect the Chair.

The Minister of Education: In relation to Tor Bank School, I will write to the Member with the information, as I have done before. I have visited Tor Bank School. Tremendous work is being done there, and I pay tribute to the principal and the staff.

Mrs M Bradley: Is the Minister aware that her failure to properly fund the extended schools programme through the education budget — and I am talking about schools that are in areas of high deprivation — has done irreparable damage to many projects?

The Minister of Education: I think that the Member has left out some information. There were four Departments funding the children and young persons' package: the Department for Social Development (DSD); the Department of Education; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. In the Department of Education, we mainstreamed a sizeable proportion of the extended schools budget. I asked the then Minister of Finance and Personnel for more money for extended schools; I wrote to him on many occasions outlining my concerns about the cutting of that programme, and that is on record. Thankfully, we have managed to mainstream a large section of the extended schools programme in the Department of Education, and we have, hopefully, managed to get extra money. I look forward to DSD funding the projects that it is also responsible for.

Area-Based Planning Groups

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work of the area based planning groups. (AQO 182/09)

The Minister of Education: I have been in regular contact with the chairperson of the central group for area-based planning and, in my view, an excellent start has been made on that important exercise. The chairperson and vice-chairperson of the central group,

and the five chairpersons of the local area groups, have had a series of meetings to reach a shared understanding of the exercise and to prepare discussion papers for consideration by the central group.

The central group met on 27 June and on 4 September; a further meeting will take place in early October. Initial guidance on the process of seeking submissions has been agreed and will be issued in the near future. Nominations have been received for the five area groups and a two-day residential meeting, which will allow them to analyse the available data and identify the key issues in their respective areas, will begin on 30 September. I have requested an interim progress report from the central group by the end of October.

In the meantime, I have been meeting principals in all parts of the North; I have had meetings with many of the principals in Fermanagh, and this week I am meeting some of the principals in County Down. For the first time ever in the North of Ireland, we have all the different education sectors sitting down together and planning on an area basis, rather than, as in the past, all the sectors — the Catholic sector, the Irish-medium sector, the integrated sector — meeting separately. As part of the review of public administration (RPA) I have regularly chaired a high-level group made up of all the different sectors so that we can move towards area-based planning.

3.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: Is the Minister aware that she is already six months behind schedule with her programme? Has she given any steer or advice to the area-based planning groups to help them to maximise the potential for outside organisations to use schools after school hours for community activities?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be very brief as we have moved beyond the 30-minute limit for questions to the Minister of Education.

The Minister of Education: As I have stated, I am very pleased with the progress that has been made. I pay tribute to the chairperson and the vice-chairperson of the central group, who are doing tremendous work. While others may have been on holiday, they were working away, and I place my appreciation to them on record.

Schools have an enormous role to play in local communities, and that is part of post-primary area-based planning and the area-based planning process that the Department will introduce. The more that buildings and resources are maximised and the more that Departments work together, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I appear to be getting some help on how best to chair the meeting. The 30-minute period ended while the Minister was answering, and I

permitted a further two minutes to allow her to conclude. This is in line with the Speaker's ruling.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

St Mary's University College: Enrolment

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students entered St. Mary's University College in each of the past five years. (AQO 163/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The number of first enrolments at St Mary's University College in each of the past five academic years for which data are available are: 350 in 2002-03; 360 in 2003-04; 295 in 2004-05; 310 in 2005-06; and 365 in 2006-07.

Mr Armstrong: Is it true that had previous trends been allowed to continue, teacher training would have ceased to be the main activity at St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The way that things were going, there was a risk that in two to three years, non-teacher training would have been the main activity at not only St Mary's University College but at Stranmillis University College. Given that both colleges have built significant reputations in initial teacher education, I felt strongly that it was important to ensure that that was the key ethos at not only St Mary's but at Stranmillis. I hope that we can steer things firmly in that direction in the Department's discussions with the college and with the Minister of Education.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware of a case that arose in my constituency earlier this year regarding the sudden death of Shauna McCann, a student who attended Liverpool Hope University. At the start of this new academic year, have any provisions been made to advise students and to protect them from being tied into payments for accommodation if they have to leave third-level education through illness — mental or physical — or, in the case of Shauna, because of a tragic death? As the Minister knows, the letting agents have pursued her parents relentlessly for outstanding rent.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Although that matter is not specific to the question, the Member asked me about it before the summer recess. He raised it in a debate or through a question, and I believe that we have corresponded on the matter. I am sympathetic to the particular case that he drew to my attention. All Members find it a sad case, and I am

sorry to hear that the family is continuing to be traumatised. However, it was a matter for civil law. I will ask the Department to examine the Member's point, and I will write to him after the record has been reviewed.

Mr O'Loan: St Mary's University College has an exceptional profile: it attracts students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it has high entry requirements, and, despite the recent uncertainty, it succeeded in filling all its student places this year. Given that profile, the history of the college, and the affection in which it is held, how can the Minister credibly argue that the potential expansion of the University of Ulster's York Street campus — as yet unannounced, unfunded and uncertain — would put St Mary's University College, which offers a highly appealing degree in liberal arts, at great risk? He made that argument during an Assembly debate on teacher training on 23 June 2008.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The activities of other institutions are relevant, particularly those that are located nearby. However, no one doubts the excellent record of achievement of St Mary's University College. It has succeeded, and marginally surpassed other institutions, in attracting students from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, all Northern Ireland's institutions have a better overall record in that area than most in GB.

No institution is an island, and, therefore, every event is relative. The students' feedback on their experience at St Mary's University College has been extremely positive, and we should concentrate on the positive. In consultation with the Minister of Education, the Department is examining the entire ambit of issues that affect the college, and discussions over the past months have been good. An excellent debate was held in the Assembly, and the issues are rapidly becoming clear. If the issues surrounding particular areas of continuous professional development can be resolved, the college undoubtedly has a very positive future.

Hearing-Impaired People: Training Opportunities

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to improve access to training for people with hearing impairments.
(AQO 204/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I apologise in advance for my rather long answer to the question, but it is important to address the issues fully.

A range of measures and initiatives is in place to provide and improve support for people with disabilities, including those with hearing impairments,

to access training. Among those measures is a register of support providers that is available to all disabled students in higher education and colleges of further education, and through which a range of support services, including sign-language interpreters, can be provided.

The Department secured £1.3 million through the comprehensive spending review to enhance the provision of both British and Irish sign-language tutors and interpreters in Northern Ireland. Moreover, as recommended by the Committee for Employment and Learning when it was scrutinising the Training for Success programme, my Department established a working group, which includes representatives from disability organisations and which carried out a review that focused on the needs of people with disabilities in the context of the provision of Training for Success. The group recently submitted its report to the Department, and to increase access to that training provision for people with disabilities, including those with hearing impairments, I will ensure that all its recommendations are considered.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. What measures can be taken to ensure that interpreters who support deaf learners in further and higher education are of an adequate standard, and are monitored?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A range of measures in the further education sector is in place to provide support for students with hearing impairments, depending on the degree of impairment and the nature of the course. Those measures include signers, the provision of hearing induction loops, assistance from note takers and the availability of lecture notes.

To ensure that my Department does everything possible to help learners with disabilities, the Education and Training Inspectorate was asked to review the provision of services and to identify any gaps. I hope that that comprehensive review will be able to identify any weaknesses. The Education and Training Inspectorate is thorough and, in consultation with groups connected with those who have hearing impairments, it is happier now that at least some additional provision is being made. I sound one note of caution: only a finite number of tutors can train the trainers. That bottleneck in training must be addressed, but the Department is fully aware that it exists.

Mr Shannon: I, too, thank the Minister for his comprehensive and extremely helpful answer. Earlier today, in the Long Gallery, there was a presentation from the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS). Those young people, some of whom used sign language, spoke extremely well.

I raise that point because that organisation's knowledge would be helpful for the Minister's proposed review. What discussions has the Department had with the NDCS to ascertain what it feels should be part of the review process? Such discussions would be helpful.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his contribution. I agree that the people whom we met that day were impressive; they were also keen to point out issues that do not often register with us. For instance, people with hearing impairments who go to see a doctor at a hospital are perhaps unable to point out some obvious mistakes. As we all know, mistakes can happen, so that is a serious issue.

The review will include everyone who is deeply involved in such matters. The Department already provides funding to Belfast Metropolitan College in order to increase the number of fully qualified sign-language interpreters. As I said earlier, one area on which we will concentrate is the question of who trains the trainers. We will consult NDCS. It is essential that the review comes to an early conclusion, given that there has been a backlog; we want to get the outcome of the review to the colleges as quickly as possible.

The previous Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was helpful in that our Departments worked together on the issue. The Department's Disablement Advisory Service provides a range of programme support to help people with disabilities, and Access to Work helps them to obtain suitable employment. Therefore, I am confident that a process is in place that will lead to the correct measures being implemented. The fact that we received extra funding through the comprehensive spending review was also helpful.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the number of sign-language interpreters will be significantly increased, given the bottleneck to which he referred? What assistance can be provided for people who require extra aid in a job interview?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In my earlier response, I said that my Department had secured an extra £1.3 million in the CSR, specifically to increase the number of people who are trained. Under the communication-support-at-interview process, the Department, through the Disablement Advisory Service, will meet the cost of providing communication support at employment interviews for people who are deaf or who have hearing disabilities. In other words, the Department will send and pay for someone to go to an interview with an applicant so that the applicant has the necessary support and help to conduct a proper interview, which will level the playing field for that individual. I confirm that the

Disablement Advisory Service will do that and will pay for it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Members who were due to ask questions 3 and 4 are not in their places.

Global Economic Downturn

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has reviewed his strategy for sectors to target in light of the global economic downturn.
(AQO 203/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has commissioned a forecast of future skill needs in Northern Ireland based on short-, medium- and long-term economic predictions. In conjunction with other forms of labour market information, that will inform the Department's decision on whether it will be necessary to review the sectors that it targets for future skill work.

Mr Neeson: We all recognise the complexities of the global economy, but will the Minister consider developing skills academies or apprenticeship academies, as has happened in other parts of the UK? Will he consider the development of industrial hubs?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have no doubt that the Member is aware that the Department has a skills expert group and workforce development forums, which have been established to bring together the providers of education through the colleges and local employers to ascertain the needs in any particular area.

The Department has an agreement with 23 of the 25 sector skills councils in Northern Ireland. They have a key responsibility to ensure that qualifications are of a high standard and meet the needs of local employers.

3.15 pm

We must consider future plans for academies. We have, potentially, an important structure in place, whereby the applicants and the sector skills councils work in conjunction with the colleges and local employers. In the northern region and the Ballymena area, Michelin — one of the large employers — has a training centre in the local college. That could be described as a centre of excellence. However, it is a matter of opinion whether that can be defined as an academy.

Given how international labour markets have changed in the past couple of months, we must examine closely the whole gamut of prioritising skills for the future, because the situation today differs from that of six months ago. I thought, perhaps, that the Member was driving at that point.

Mr Newton: The Minister stated previously in the House that he will introduce a demand-led strategy; given that, Mr Neeson's point is well made. Sectors of the Northern Ireland economy are buoyant, yet employers cannot recruit qualified graduates. Those shortages are, generally, in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas. Will the Minister outline what steps he will take to meet graduate demand from engineering and technology companies?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Two weeks ago, I attended Queen's University's open day, and I visited the Bernard Crossland Building, which houses engineering and technology activity. In the current year, that university filled its places in the broad STEM areas, although I am unsure of the situation at the University of Ulster. However, I accept entirely the concept of a demand-led process.

At the end of 2007, the Department launched the 'C'Mon Over' initiative, through which we will visit various university campuses — many, in fact, this month — in the United Kingdom, and we will visit Dublin in late 2008 or early 2009. Employers will accompany us to try to convince students who have trained in universities in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Liverpool, Dublin and Dundee to return to employment in Northern Ireland. Those employers will offer real jobs to students. The Department wants to recover skilled students who have left Northern Ireland.

A combination of that process, work in schools and efforts to encourage more children to study STEM subjects, such as Queen's University's decision to offer bursaries — and the University of Ulster is considering that, too — will improve the situation. People take key decisions at the age of 13 that determine which subjects they can learn in future. It is a comprehensive proposal, and I assure the Member that I am focused on ensuring its delivery. As the Member realises, that is the only way to retain a competitive position.

Mr Savage: What role do the skills expert group and the workforce development forums play?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Workforce development forums are based around the six regions in which the principal colleges of further education are located. They provide meeting places for the colleges of further education and local business communities. It is as easy and cost effective for colleges to teach qualifications with positive outcomes to students as it is to teach qualifications for which there are no jobs. Therefore, it makes sense — for the colleges and the students — that people are supplied with the skills that are needed by the local communities and employers.

A further initiative is the all-island skills conference that will focus on border areas, and it will take place in

early October 2008 in the north-west. The conference will be hosted jointly by the Northern Ireland skills expert group and the expert group on future skill needs. It is a joint operation with my counterparts in the Republic — I believe that Tánaiste Mary Coughlan will be one of the Ministers involved. In that context, we are seeking to have the right mix of labour-market intelligence present so that colleges in the border regions can ensure that the skills and qualifications being taught there match the needs of local communities. I encourage all employers to become involved, because they will find it useful.

Stranmillis University College: Merger

6. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is satisfied that Stranmillis University College fully considered all options, for its future, prior to the decision of its board of governors to endorse a proposal to merge with Queen's University Belfast. (AQO 149/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The governing body of Stranmillis University College made the decision, in principle, to merge with Queen's University, Belfast. That decision was based on the consideration of options arising from the Taylor Report on the long-term strategic options for Stranmillis University College, which was published in July 2007. The governing body voted unanimously for the option.

Any decision to merge will require the consent of my Department. We will conduct a rigorous evaluation process that will include the setting out of all options, and the decision will be subject to the consideration and approval of the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Assembly.

Mrs Hanna: The Minister approved two-year conversion funding in respect of student numbers for Stranmillis and St Mary's. As he said, that will create space so that all issues can be explored.

Does the Minister understand why Stranmillis and Queen's told the Committee for Employment and Learning that they plan to make their decision for merger in 2009? Will he confirm that he will not consider accelerated passage for any legislation concerning the matter?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The answer to the Member's second question is yes. In response to the first question, I was promised that the business case would be available in July 2008. I have not received it yet, and I understand that it will be some weeks before it comes into my possession. The Department has not had the opportunity to see the business case yet.

When the business case is received, it will go through a rigorous evaluation process that will include, by definition, consideration of all the options. After that is done, we will consult with other Departments that have a keen interest. We will then come to a view and discuss it with the Committee. It will be a matter for the House to deal with any legislation that flows from that, because the merger cannot take place without legislation.

I already gave an undertaking to the Committee for Employment and Learning that I will not be seeking accelerated passage for the process. I cannot be specific about the timetable, but my view of the process — which I highlighted at a meeting with representatives from the college and the university before the summer break and which I clarified twice in writing — is that it is nearly October and I have not received the report, and that time is rapidly running out. The practicalities dictate that it will not be possible to complete the process within the time available. It is up to the college and the university to submit their case. I will deal with the case when they submit it.

Mr Spratt: The Minister will be aware that the day before the Stranmillis University College board of governors made its announcement, its representatives gave a presentation to the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, to say the least, everyone on the Committee was convinced that a deal had been done prior to that meeting.

It is strange that there was only one option on the table. Can the Minister confirm whether the Stranmillis board of governors considered all other options, and is it not the case that the University of Ulster, which was also thought to be a player in the process, pulled out because it knew that a deal had been done with Queen's University's board of governors prior to the meeting at which the decision was supposed to have been made?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot confirm all that the Member said, but he raised questions that I know have exercised his mind and the minds of Committee members.

The Committee took evidence from the University of Ulster's vice chancellor and others, and met Stranmillis University College representatives, about which the Member will form his own opinion. All that I can say is that the college's board must take the initiative. If the college has a proposal, as I have indicated, we will consider all the options, which must be set out in detail.

I make it clear to the Committee — and I repeat for the second or third time — that there will be no attempt by my Department to steamroller anything through the House. It is not my fault if the proposal comes to me late. I have made it clear that there is a

process, and the process will be adhered to. Given that I must review the options that were considered, some matters that the Member raised may emerge when I receive the business case.

The Stranmillis University College board of governors commissioned the Taylor Report, which was published in 2007, and although it was not terribly specific, nevertheless, at that stage, the board was already considering options. However, that is a matter for the college's board. When the Department is asked, it will deal with the matter, and it will seek legislative consent from the Assembly for a full and proper Bill, which must pass through all Stages in the House before any changes to that institution's status can take place. The Assembly will have the final say on the matter, and I hope that that reassures the Member.

Ms Lo: Since 2003, a review into teacher education in Northern Ireland has been under way, and I believe that a draft review document was provided for the stakeholders' group in January 2008. For the benefit of all concerned, will the Minister inform Members about the review's progress and clarify the Department for Employment and Learning's position on teacher training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct about the timescale, and that concerns me. As the Member is aware, the review is a joint effort with the Department of Education, and I recently wrote to the Minister of Education to seek clarity on when her Department will conclude its deliberations. My Department has signed off on the latest draft, and I await a response from the Department of Education.

I accept that the review has taken far too long. Nevertheless, during the Christmas holidays last year, I saw an earlier draft, and the final report will be an important piece of work, containing some excellent proposals, which I am sure that Members will be pleased to see on publication. I am conscious of the need to get the report into the public domain as soon as possible, and I await a response from the Minister of Education.

Stranmillis University College: Enrolment

7. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students entered Stranmillis University College in each of the past five years. (AQO 164/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The first-year enrolments to Stranmillis University College for each of the past five academic years for which data are available are: 460 in 2002-03; 435 in 2003-04; 480 in 2004-05; 395 in 2005-06; and 385 in 2006-07.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for his answer. If the merger goes ahead, what are the implications for Queen's University of having all those extra students? Are there savings implications? When did the Minister first become aware that Queen's University and Stranmillis University College were seeking a merger?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I formally became aware of a merger on 17 April 2008, when a decision was taken. I knew that a merger was an option that was being considered.

The implications are fairly far-reaching. In Northern Ireland, there are five providers of initial teacher education: Queen's University, the two university colleges, the Open University and the University of Ulster. Queen's University and Stranmillis University College tell me that they envisage a centre of international excellence. The absorption of that number of students into Queen's University will be a significant development. Further details will appear in the proposals that will be put to me by Queen's University and Stranmillis University College. That issue will be taken into consideration by the Department in reaching a recommendation on the way ahead. The Committee for Employment and Learning and the Assembly will have the final say on any proposals.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Marching Season: Contribution to Tourism

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what her assessment is of the contribution of this year's marching season to tourism. (AQO 191/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): There has been no formal assessment of the impact of the marching season on tourism, but the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland are in regular touch with representatives of the Loyal Orders to see how events such as the Twelfth of July parades can be developed as tourist attractions.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board worked with the Orange Order to help to broaden the appeal of this year's Twelfth of July demonstrations and identified four flagship parades — Belfast, Tandragee, Dromara and Coleraine — as those with the most potential appeal to visitors. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board provided "welcome host" training for stewards at those parades.

Tourism Ireland also helped to raise the profile of this year's parades; for example, its website had a link to the BBC's live coverage of the Twelfth. I understand that considerable interest was generated, and I am optimistic that such events have the potential to make a real contribution to the Northern Ireland tourism product.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she is a family-oriented person, and I hope that she, like me, enjoyed a family day out at one of the Twelfth spectacles this year.

Will she indicate whether any representative from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland took the opportunity to attend a Twelfth of July celebration in an official capacity?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. I availed of the tremendous family day at Kesh's Twelfth of July celebrations. I met many visitors who had travelled up Lough Erne to be in Kesh for the festivities.

Representatives from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland attended the Twelfth of July parade in Coleraine and will be meeting Orange Order representatives to provide feedback. The Orange Order has expressed its thanks to the tourist authorities for the advice that it has received to date.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the contribution that local historical and cultural events can make to tourism by exploiting the uniqueness of the North, will the Minister detail what plans her Department has to ensure that the Tourist Board will supply funding and resources to local community-based tourism projects that promote such events? I have in mind places such as west Belfast, where such projects have been organised for years. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, earlier this year, I attended a very good fair day at Irvinestown in Fermanagh. I assume that that is the type of small-scale cultural event to which the Member refers.

A cultural tourism strategy was commissioned by the Tourist Board in March 2005, and it is currently being developed. The draft Northern Ireland Tourist Board corporate plan for 2008-11 also identifies cultural and heritage tourism as a key product development priority.

The Tourist Board is developing a cultural and heritage tourism product framework that covers four broad areas — heritage, living culture, creative and the arts — all of which are further divided into subcategories.

A great wealth of cultural activity exists that can act as a stimulus for the tourism market. I look forward to seeing the plans develop.

Mr O'Loan: Although I acknowledge and commend the Orange Order's initial efforts to engage with the Catholic community, does the Minister agree that if the Orange Order is serious about turning the Twelfth and other parades into tourist events, it will have to revise fundamentally what it represents to the Catholic community, including its written principles? Does she also agree that it will have to revise the culture associated with those parades, which includes alcohol and bonfires? I note that DRD has estimated that it costs £60,000 to clean up such bonfires.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not here to be a spokesperson for the Orange Order, however it should be noted that that organisation is based on the reformed Protestant faith, and, as such, it is fundamental to that organisation to promote that faith, so I do not see its principles changing any time soon.

With regard to the Member's other comments, particularly the one about alcohol, I know that the Order has been working very closely with the police and I encourage them to keep doing that and to eradicate the abuse of alcohol at the parades. I know that, as well as anything else, such behaviour is a blight on those parades.

Bed and Breakfasts: Joint Grading System

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what communication he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland concerning a joint grading system for bed and breakfasts. (AQO 184/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have not discussed that issue with my counterpart in the Irish Republic. My officials are currently engaged in a review of the certification and classification of tourist accommodation in Northern Ireland. As part of that exercise, they will consider best practice in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: I presume that the Minister has done some research into the Scottish tourist board's experience of accommodation grading?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The question was in relation to the Republic of Ireland, and I want to cover the differences between here and that jurisdiction. We in Northern Ireland have the only statutory certification for bed and breakfasts — nowhere else in the British Isles has that. Therefore, we have set minimum standards that are very important and that are recognised by people when they visit bed and breakfasts here.

Work has been going on in the rest of the United Kingdom in relation to classification, and a new

voluntary code has been set up. We have been examining such work closely and will continue to do that, because a review of the issue of classification is pending. We hope to be able to publish the consultation about the new classification in January 2009.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister probably approved the recent sale of Northern Ireland's electricity system operator to the system operator in the South. That means that power stations will, ultimately, be controlled from a single control room in Dublin, and there will be one system operator for the island. Does the Minister agree that it is a sign of our growing political maturity that we in the North are now comfortable with having our power switched on and off from a location in Dublin? Will she confirm also that she supports a logical, all-island — *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The original question was about bed-and-breakfast classification; I am not sure what the single electricity market has to do with that.

Mr Hamilton: There seems to be some confusion in the Chamber — I thought that it was only the Minister's gender that had been confused in the original question. Last week a by-election was held in Enniskillen during which the Ulster Unionist Party tried to gift a seat to Sinn Féin; now it seems that they are wishing to gift our bed-and-breakfast classification system to the Irish Republic as well — I hope that the Minister defends that as stoutly as she defended the seat in Enniskillen.

The majority of tourists who travel to Northern Ireland come from Great Britain. Therefore, does the Minister agree that, if a joint-classification or joint-grading system for bed-and-breakfast accommodation is needed, it would be better to have a system in conjunction with our colleagues in GB, rather than with those in the Irish Republic?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was quite amused by the fact that Mr Armstrong referred to me as "he" in his question. However, given the Ulster Unionists' role in last week's by-election, I suppose that I should not be surprised.

Both jurisdictions on this island operate from very different starting points. As I have already indicated, we have a statutory system of certification that is very important for our standards, and that system is jealously looked upon by colleagues in the Republic of Ireland.

The Member is correct. Most of our visitor potential for bed and breakfasts comes from GB. Therefore, it makes sense that we should have a similar classification system to the rest of the United Kingdom. I will certainly bear that in mind.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should be relevant. I also remind Members that, when the Minister has the Floor, she must be allowed to be heard.

Marine Renewable Energy

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to support marine renewable energy in coastal areas. (AQO 213/09)

15. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the Strangford Lough wave energy project. (AQO 206/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 15 together. Northern Ireland has a significant tidal stream resource, and harnessing that resource is an important element of my Department's ongoing work to increase the use of renewables.

That was recently demonstrated with the 1·2 megawatt marine-current turbine project — SeaGen — which began generating renewable electricity in July 2008. It is the world's first commercial-scale tidal system to be connected to a local grid. The deployment of the system at Strangford has put Northern Ireland on the map for tidal-marine renewables, and that augurs well for the exploitation of tidal resources off our north coast.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is in the final stages of commissioning a strategic environmental assessment of offshore wind and marine renewable energy in Northern Ireland waters. That will enable DETI to work with the Crown Estate — owner of the seabed — to issue a competitive call for private-sector investors in order to develop commercial projects at certain offshore sites. The strategic environmental assessment, including the consultation phases, will be completed by spring 2010.

In the interim period, DETI, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Crown Estate will continue to work with developers who wish either to deploy pre-commercial or demonstration-stage devices — such as the marine-current turbines at Strangford Lough — or to prepare their proposals before the competitive call for commercial projects in 2010.

Mr Shannon: I congratulate the Minister on her recent by-election success. Not only was she able to win the election that day, but she was able to make supper for her wife — sorry; for her husband — and her children. Furthermore, she was able to put them to bed. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Shannon, you clearly did not hear a single word that I said a few moments ago.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has outlined part of the case for the turbine initiative at Strangford Lough. Does her Department have any intention to encourage other forms of marine renewable-energy production in other coastal areas? Areas such as the Ards Peninsula or the east Antrim coast could perhaps be considered.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I indicated in my answer to the initial question, the Department is working with the Crown Estate to identify potential sites. The strategic environmental assessment that is under way will allow us to see what potential exists. I believe that such potential does exist, but we obviously need to have that assessment carried out before that can be developed.

Mr McCarthy: I also congratulate the Minister on her election success in Enniskillen. Well done.

I thank the Minister for her detailed answer to the initial question. Can the Minister assure the House that, when SeaGen is in full production at Strangford Lough, the residents of Portaferry, Strangford and the Ards Peninsula will benefit from low-energy electricity charges?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member knows, the technology is most innovative, and that is something of which he and the people of that area are very proud. Whether only the residents of Portaferry will be able to benefit from lower energy costs is another matter. I hope that it will add to our renewable energy and will help us to meet our targets for the coming years. The Department will work closely with SeaGen and will look for other potential renewables. As I have said, we have the potential to develop offshore wind and marine renewable energy.

3.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin.

Given the recent gas and electricity price rises — of which the Minister is aware — and the sustainable energy market on the island of Ireland, has she any plans to develop an all-Ireland energy market for renewables?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is always looking for opportunities to develop the renewable sector in Northern Ireland, and it will continue to do so. However, there are difficulties with the cross-border energy market, as the renewable support systems that are available in the United Kingdom — and hence in Northern Ireland — are different from those in the Republic of Ireland. The

United Kingdom has levy-exemption certificates, while the Republic of Ireland has a feed-in tariff. There are different circumstances, and, therefore, cross-border working becomes increasingly difficult.

However, we are working with the Scottish Executive on offshore wind and marine renewable energy, and I see great potential for harnessing that renewable energy and making Northern Ireland a leader in that field.

Consumerline

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what efforts have been made to promote Consumerline. (AQO 177/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has undertaken a wide range of marketing and promotional activities to raise awareness of Consumerline, which encompasses the consumer telephone helpline and the website. Those activities have included advertising on television, on radio and in newspapers as well as more locally based awareness initiatives. Calls to Consumerline have increased by 30% over the past three years, and hits on the website have increased by 65% in the same period. In addition, customer satisfaction levels with the helpline are, on average, 92%, and the estimated saving made by Northern Ireland consumers as a result of contacting Consumerline is £2 million per annum.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree that in the current dire economic climate the elderly in our society are particularly vulnerable? It is particularly important to find ways of making consumer information readily available to them, given the fact that they may not be au fait with the Internet and such technologies.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I could not agree with the Member more. He will know that a wide range of advice networks are available. I have a long list here, although I am sure that the Member does not want me to read it out. However, it is right to target the advice, and I will ask my officials to reply to him on that subject.

Mr Newton: I also congratulate the Minister on her by-election victory. In this dire economic climate, that by-election — the result of which was inevitable — should not have been called, and the expenses should not have been borne by the ratepayers.

In the House last week, the Sinn Féin Member Mr John O'Dowd said:

"I am led to understand that the Utility Regulator brought a report on fuel price increases to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Minister signed-off on that. Why did the Minister not block those increases?" — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p81, col 2*].

Mr O'Dowd was speaking from a position of political ignorance. Will the Minister comment on his misleading and inaccurate statements?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

It was ignorance, and not the sort of ignorance that I expect from Members. Everybody knows that the regulator is independent. Therefore, I cannot direct or tell him what to do, nor can I demand that he do x, y or z. However, I asked him whether he would consider having a review of those price rises. I recognise that people outside, and inside, the Chamber are worried about the price rises — particularly those for electricity.

My Department has no role in determining energy prices. The Department strives, in co-operation with the Utility Regulator, to create market conditions that will drive down energy prices over the long term. In light of concerns about the scale of the increase in electricity prices, I have read the regulator's proposals about how best to ensure full public confidence in the tariff-setting process. I am very pleased that the regulator responded positively and that he has commissioned an independent review by the former regulator Douglas McIlldoon. Independence means no political interference and, therefore, Mr McIlldoon is independent.

Mr Gallagher: I am sure that Consumerline has been very busy since the announcement of the 33% hike in electricity prices. The Minister acknowledged public anxiety and alarm since that announcement. Does she agree that public confidence in the regulator has evaporated since the announcement? Does she also agree that her Department has been deafeningly silent on the matter? Is it not the case that the decision to appoint the previous regulator, Mr McIlldoon, to review the present incumbent, Mr Osborne, is a sign that, like the public, her Department has no confidence in the current regulator?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Member cannot have it both ways — either I have been proactive in asking for a review or I have been silent. Which is it to be? I have accepted that there is an issue of public confidence, and that is why I asked the regulator to consider a review, which he has done. I am satisfied with the terms of reference of the review and with the person who the regulator has asked to carry it out. I, along with most — if not all — commentators acknowledge the independence of the gentleman who has been appointed to carry out the review. That is vitally important, and I look forward to the outcome of the review in due course.

Renewable Energy Sources

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the proportion of electricity that will be produced by renewable energy sources by (i) 2010; and (ii) 2020. (AQO 209/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland has around 6% renewable electricity generated from indigenous sources. Our renewable electricity target is for 12% renewable electricity by 2012. I fully expect that target to be met. I am assessing the potential for renewable energy to make a greater contribution to the generation mix, and I will consider an appropriate target for Northern Ireland's renewable electricity for 2020. I plan to consult on such a target next year, when the proposed EU directive on renewable energy — including renewable energy consumption targets — is in its final form.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, although it did not entirely cover the points that I was seeking to raise. I understand that experts assess the potential limit for electricity generation from renewable energy sources in Northern Ireland to be 42%. In the face of that, achieving 12% by 2012 is a low target. Will the Minister indicate what she will do to promote micro-generation and enhance infrastructure to ensure that the maximum possible benefits can be gained from renewable energy, wherever it is generated in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There has been some confusion; I am not sure whether it is my confusion or the Member's. The 42% figure is the amount of renewable energy that the grid can cope with in its current state. A report on the grid was completed at the end of last year, and we must examine how the infrastructure can be improved.

Northern Ireland has around 6% renewable electricity generated from indigenous sources. Our renewable electricity generation target is 12% for 2012, and I believe that we will meet that target. I think that the Member understood that 42% is the potential limit for electricity generation from renewable energy but, rather, that figure refers to the amount of renewable energy that the grid can take. However, whether we need to upgrade the grid is a different story.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister issued only a brief statement after meeting the regulator, and she was not available to come to the Chamber when a Member tried to put a priority written question to her. Does she not think that that sent a signal to people in the North that she agreed with the regulator's increase in electricity costs and that that led to a lot of questions? Although the Minister cannot instruct or direct the regulator, could she not have sent

out a signal that she absolutely disagrees with a 33% rise in electricity costs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: If the Member is referring to the questions for priority written answer that the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment submitted, let me point out that the answers were returned within the time frame. I was very disappointed to hear the comments that were made about that matter. The questions were tabled on 15 September, and the responses were to be back with the Business Office by 2.00 pm on 18 September. The answers were sent to the Business Office at 11.27 am on 18 September. Therefore, I am not sure what —

Ms Anderson: It was a private Member's question.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was not made aware of any private Member's question. It never came to me; therefore, I do not see how I can come to the House to answer a question that was never given to me.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the umpteenth time, I ask Members to be quiet, please, particularly when the Minister is speaking, and to direct their remarks through the Chair. There has been a constant din this afternoon.

Mr K Robinson: Lest I forget, I also congratulate the Minister on her elevation to the role and status of district councillor. *[Laughter.]*

Is the Minister aware of the problems being experienced by the operators of wind turbines, many of whom operate as individuals, in getting competitive rates for their electricity when they supply it to the national grid?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am aware of some difficulties around competition in the single electricity market. I have already raised that issue with the regulator, and I intend to pursue it with him. As the Member knows, the single electricity market has been in existence only since November 2007, and it has always been the case that the benefits would accrue in the long term. However, I am a little concerned about some of the competitive aspects of the market, and, as I said, I intend to pursue that issue with the regulator.

Single Natural Gas Market

6. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to develop a single natural gas market following the development of the single electricity market. (AQO 211/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is working with the Republic of Ireland's Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and with the two regulatory authorities to assess the economic benefits of having common operating arrangements for the two gas transmission networks. However, before any decision to proceed is taken, there will need to be clear evidence that having common operating arrangements will bring tangible benefits to consumers in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

The project under consideration is not the creation of a wholesale trading market similar to the single electricity market. The aim is to examine whether gas, the vast majority of which is piped from Great Britain, can be bought and sold using common market conditions and signals such as a single transmission tariff. That has the potential to bring more efficient operation and open and transparent competition, and it could help to drive down costs. It would be in line with EU objectives for the development of regional gas markets.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for that positive answer. However, I seek clarification on one point, which follows on from Mr O'Dowd's comment. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has already held two long meetings to discuss the current crisis that consumers are facing owing to rising energy prices. The Committee will continue to deal with that issue, and Sinn Féin members of that Committee are working closely with the other Committee members.

As the Minister is aware, the single electricity market has recently been established. In fact, earlier today, David Ford and I met representatives of Northern Ireland Electricity to discuss the proposed North/South interconnector. Does she agree that there is a need to develop greater competition, particularly in the gas and electricity markets, in order to benefit consumers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I agree that greater competition is needed. I will continue to keep a close eye on the matter, and that is why I will continue to meet the regulator to express concerns. As the Member will understand, that is all that I can do, because the regulator is independent. However, the regulator is aware of that issue, and I know that he will raise it with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Weir: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her convincing victory in Fermanagh. However, I am yet to be convinced about the benefits of the single electricity market. Can the Minister tell me whether there will be any common arrangement for gas?

4.00 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said, the plan is to have common arrangements for

gas that will potentially improve the flow of gas around the two systems. The idea is to have — and to benefit from — operational efficiencies. Therefore, we will not have a single market for wholesale gas. We intend to have common arrangements that will benefit consumers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Renewable Energy

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what incentives are available to encourage or enable the generation, purchase and supply of renewable energy on a cross-border basis. (AQO 220/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Current incentives for renewable energy development focus on electricity generation. In Northern Ireland, the renewables obligation, which is known as NIRO, is the main support mechanism, while the Irish Republic operates a feed-in tariff. Both incentives require the electricity that is generated to be supplied in the jurisdiction that provides the support — there is no cross-border dimension. However, there is no indication that the issue of different support systems is a constraint on the development of renewables across the island.

Northern Ireland is on target to meet its 2012 renewables target. The key constraints beyond 2012 will be the limitations of our existing grid infrastructure, which is a shared concern for Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her answer. If there is no viable single market for electricity that is generated from renewable sources on the island, there will be a requirement for cross-border subvention arrangements to be put in place in order to create such a market. That is particularly important to us here. The greatest source of renewable energy is based on the west coast of Ireland, which is in the Republic. What will the Minister do to take full advantage of that?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said in my initial answer, the different support systems do not seem to be having a detrimental impact on renewable electricity. Therefore, I do not see the need to interfere if there is no detriment to the electricity market.

The different approaches to incentivising renewables in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland reflect the Republic of Ireland's status as a separate member state with different renewable targets. The Republic of Ireland has different targets to the UK. Therefore, it has decided to move to a feed-in tariff, whereas we have decided against that, and, so far, that has caused no difficulties. The development of

renewable energy has grown in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, and we are on target to meet our renewables targets for 2012.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

Ms J McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. For clarification, I submitted a private notice question to the Business Office on Monday, and at 5.00 pm that evening, I was told that the Minister would not be available the following day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That has been noted.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was not informed of the private notice question, and, quite frankly, I should have been. I will take up the matter with the Business Office.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; where necessary co-operating with other agencies and Departments; and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. — [*Mr G Robinson.*]

Mr Gardiner: I have gone on record many times warning of the hidden costs of alcohol for the National Health Service. Normally, those costs are associated with underage drinking and the effects that that will have on the National Health Service in the future. However, on this occasion, I am drawing attention to a disorder that is also caused by alcohol, but that is often caused unwittingly and without intent. I refer, of course, to the dangers that are posed by drinking during pregnancy and to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), which is a lifelong condition affecting one in 100 people in this country.

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

That spectrum of disorder includes: foetal alcohol syndrome, the symptoms of which include a small head or body, distinctive facial characteristics and brain damage; foetal alcohol effects, including symptoms such as behavioural disorders and attention deficits; alcohol-related birth defects, which can include heart defects, sight and hearing problems and joint anomalies; and alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders, including attention deficits, behavioural disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

It is clear that that range of disorders creates lifelong difficulties for sufferers and lifelong costs for the National Health Service. I add my voice to those who have commended the work of the National Organisation on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome-UK (NOFAS-UK), which has done so much good work in support of FASD sufferers. Our role as an Assembly must be to highlight the disorder and to tease out the issues that surround it.

For instance, some geneticists who specialise in diagnosing FASD believe that the rise in young children being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is because they are, in fact, suffering from FASD. That misdiagnosis has a serious impact on the treatment and assistance that are available to sufferers and their families. Most of those children end up in foster care or are adopted. Often, they have behavioural problems and can sometimes end up with criminal records.

There is also a risk of recurrence of the condition in the same family. One geneticist had reported seeing a family in which three of the siblings showed symptoms

of the condition. Identification of those symptoms is already included in the training of doctors and midwives.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already signalled his positive intentions with regard to improving the management of FASD. He has entered into discussions with the drinks industry about the sale of alcohol at discount prices, which has helped to create the problem of expectant mothers drinking at home. We should welcome his proactive and sympathetic response.

Mrs Hanna: As other Members said, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is the term that is used to describe a range of totally avoidable mental and physical birth defects that are the result of maternal alcohol exposure during pregnancy. They are conditions for life that can have an adverse impact on the lives of the individuals concerned and their carers. The disorders can have serious consequences for infants and children, such as learning difficulties, attention disorders, physical abnormalities and physical difficulties.

The advice for women who are trying to conceive and for those who are pregnant has recently become clearer and more consistent across Ireland and the United Kingdom. The message for women is now to avoid alcohol completely. Indeed, for years, the message was mixed. We know that the message about drinking a little — a small glass of wine, perhaps — was very subjective. Unfortunately, many women did not know how much was too much, and that resulted in many babies being born with FASD. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines are unambiguous: women should not drink at all during pregnancy, and particularly not during the first three months, which is the time when most of the baby's organs are being formed. It is at that stage that the unborn child is most sensitive to the drugs and alcohol that can cause birth defects.

Given our binge-drinking culture, it is important that the message not to drink is presented clearly to all women. There is a real risk that women could deliver babies with FASD if they keep up their usual drinking habits during pregnancy. Even low levels of alcohol can affect a child's development and can damage a child's nervous system. Education and communication are vital if we are to reduce the number of women drinking while trying to have a baby or when pregnant.

It is also important to stress to women that if they have been drinking alcohol before their pregnancy has been confirmed, they must stop. Indeed, the area of health professionalism that diagnoses, manages, and reduces the incidence of those disorders needs to be built upon. Although the numbers affected are relatively low, there is a possibility that cases are going undiagnosed, due to the wide range of symptoms, and

there is also a chance that some of the symptoms could be indicative of another disorder.

There must be a raising of the awareness and training of paediatricians, midwives and other health professionals, such as social workers, who may come across this type of disorder in children. Support must be given to women who have a problem with alcohol and who find it difficult to stop drinking when pregnant. As with all excessive alcohol use, it is important to address it before becoming pregnant. We should consider providing education in schools on alcohol abuse during pregnancy, because so many young women are becoming pregnant.

The health and well-being of babies is a very serious issue. Women want the best for their unborn children, and abstaining from alcohol is essential in preventing the unnecessary adverse effects of the disorder. We do not want to have to pick up the pieces when the damage is done. The important thing is prevention.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the motion and thank George Robinson for bringing it to the House. The effects of this very serious disorder can and should be avoided. It is essential that every effort continues to impress upon young women the consequences to their new-born babies if they continue to abuse alcohol while pregnant.

As has been said, the effects of excessive drinking during pregnancy can be horrendous. I know of a case, which is probably typical, of a mother who, unfortunately, had succumbed to the evils of alcohol and was recognised as an alcoholic in her community. Both she and her partner were long-term unemployed. The baby was born with severe learning difficulties. That family had little knowledge of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and had little understanding of how to access services for the new-born baby and the rest of the family. It goes without saying that that new-born baby got off to a very poor start in life.

A recent study showed that some 55% of women consumed alcohol during pregnancy, against the advice of professionals, who continually advise that no alcohol should be taken during that time. It is widely recognised that heavy alcohol consumption during pregnancy leads to growth retardation, abnormality of the features, intellectual impairment, memory deficits and other defects. Surely, no mother would wish to ignore all the medical advice on the subject when she knows exactly what the outcome of her actions will be.

I know of the excellent work of the Health Promotion Agency, the Health Department and other organisations, and I hope that they will continue to appeal to women who are pregnant or who plan to have a family to avoid excessive alcohol consumption at all costs, explaining time and time again what the results may be.

The motion requests that the Minister introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by FASD, and that must be of high priority. However, the main emphasis must be on prevention, and I concur with Carmel Hanna's closing remarks on that issue. That is the main message that must be put across. I support the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: I congratulate my colleague for securing this important debate. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder has been described by the Salvation Army as:

"the most common and preventable cause of birth defects and brain damage in children."

4.15 pm

It has been reported that almost one million children in the United Kingdom live with a parent who has an alcohol dependency. A survey published this morning by Tommy's the baby charity states that one third of pregnant mothers drink alcohol during their pregnancy. Given that 70% of women in Northern Ireland drink alcohol, and that there has been a recent increase in binge drinking among younger females, there is a danger that, without education and information, pregnant young women will be unaware of the dangers of drinking alcohol and will place their unborn child — or children — at risk of FASD.

Some 6,000 children a year are born in the United Kingdom with FASD. FASD is not a diagnosis, but it describes a full spectrum of disabilities — from birth anomalies, such as low birth weight, to neurological problems that have the potential to leave lasting physiological and psychological damage. FASD has the potential to create lasting physical, cognitive and behavioural problems. I welcome the Minister's speaking to the manufacturers of alcoholic drinks about the issue, because they, along with publicans and the Government — who do very well from the tax on alcohol — have an important role. I hope that a holistic approach is adopted to deal with the problem.

In small children, FASD leads to irregular sleep patterns; a failure to thrive through a height and weight deficiency; an inability to make and keep friends; a lack of the normal ability to distinguish friends from enemies; difficult-to-manage public behaviour; danger to the affected children, and to others, because they do not grasp the universal laws of cause and effect; deficiency in the normal sequential learning abilities of reasoning, judgement and memory; highly manipulative behaviour; and, sometimes, medical fragility. Such problems in development are likely to be amplified as a child grows older.

Research shows that if FASD is not diagnosed correctly, children and adolescents are likely to experience mental-health problems; drop out of school early; experience homelessness; engage in

inappropriate sexual behaviour; develop alcohol and drug problems; have regular employment problems; and be unable to handle independent living. Some children may not experience such obvious forms of abuse and disadvantage, but they are likely to suffer from neglect or a chronic lack of the little things that are crucial to their overall well-being. Where affected children live with parents who continue to experience difficulties with alcohol, they can be exposed daily to rage, violence and abuse, which become part of the unpredictable and inconsistent environment in which they live.

The lack of a diagnosis of FASD often means the adoption of inappropriate and ineffective traditional interventions that can lead to the development of secondary disabilities. A child who receives a correct diagnosis is in a much better position to benefit from intervention than one who is not diagnosed, or one who is misdiagnosed and receives only partial treatment.

I call on the Minister to use the resources available to him to provide better education for young mothers. Young women must be better informed of the evident risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Guidelines published by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence recommend that women not drink alcohol during the first three months of pregnancy — my personal view is that they should not drink at all. We must do everything possible to further protect unborn children from such unnecessary abuse. FASD is preventable. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: Members are aware that we live in a society that abuses alcohol at a level that impacts seriously and detrimentally on every aspect of the lives of individual citizens and on wider society.

Tens of thousands of households in Northern Ireland spend more money each week on alcohol than on food. Even during the current credit crisis, some alcoholic beverages are cheaper to buy than bottled water and soft drinks. Daily, newspapers are filled with reports of alcohol-related violence, mayhem and murder. Children as young as 10 years of age are admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning. The binge-drinking mentality has become pervasive in society. Fifty per cent of weekend admissions to accident and emergency departments involve alcohol abuse. Youth is being corrupted by the availability of cheap, potent, alcoholic drinks. In many parts of the Province, the situation at weekends and holiday periods seems to be out of control and well beyond the police's ability to deal with effectively. A sad feature of the problem is that an increasing number of valuable and scarce resources are expended on dealing with incidents and illnesses that result from alcohol abuse.

With the debate, the Assembly has turned its collective attention towards the need for the introduction and

development of policies to tackle the increasing incidence of children being born with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. It is the single biggest cause of non-genetic mental handicap in the Western World, yet the condition is 100% preventable. In young children, it causes serious growth deficiencies, major neurological damage to the brain and the central nervous system. The condition is caused when expectant mothers consume large amounts of alcohol during their pregnancy. One episode of binge drinking during pregnancy is one too many.

The National Organisation on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome-UK estimates that more than 6,000 children are born with FASD each year in the whole of the UK. Excessive alcohol can damage unborn babies at all stages of pregnancy. As mothers can often be unaware that they are pregnant for some weeks or months, those who wish to conceive and bear children should adopt a zero-tolerance attitude to alcohol. There are no safe limits.

The Assembly cannot ignore a tragedy of that dimension; it must take decisive and determined action. Children who are damaged by alcohol in the womb suffer throughout their lives from behavioural and learning difficulties, poor memory skills and attention problems. Often, they have noticeable physical deformities and are at greater risk of sudden infant death. The Assembly must acknowledge the part that is already played by primary- and community-care workers to develop selective prevention strategies that include screening and referral procedures to identify and target women who are most at risk and to minimise the risk to their unborn children. However, no child should be born to suffer in that way. Prevention has always been better than cure.

I support the call on the Health Minister to introduce well-researched and well-resourced multi-agency policies that involve various Departments in order to tackle the increase in FASD. Special emphasis must be put on assisting families who are affected by FASD. However, on a wider front, there is a pressing need for the Assembly to tackle, as a priority, the scourge of alcohol abuse in society. People must change their attitude to the dangers of alcohol. Alcohol abuse must be given the urgent and critical attention that it deserves.

Mr Elliott: I add my thanks and congratulations to Mr Robinson for securing this important debate. I also want to pass on the apologies of my party colleague Mr John McCallister, who, unfortunately, cannot be present. Mr McCallister and his staff have worked for considerable time on the issue, which he has raised in the Health Committee. He has worked with NOFAS-UK to raise awareness of the condition in Northern Ireland. He is the sponsor of a training day that will be held in Stormont on 14 October 2008. It has been organised by NOFAS-UK and is an opportunity to highlight this

avoidable condition among relevant bodies. I hope that Members will support that event.

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is an umbrella term that describes the range of disabilities that are caused entirely by a woman's drinking alcohol at any time during her pregnancy.

Disabilities can often occur even before she knows that she is pregnant. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder symptoms include the baby's having a small head and body, facial abnormalities and brain damage. Symptoms that are not visible may include behavioural and attention-deficit disorders. Organ dysfunction, epilepsy and learning difficulties — in addition to other conditions — can all derive from the mother's consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. All those conditions are permanent and irreversible but, as has been said in the debate, totally avoidable.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is a serious problem that affects the most innocent and vulnerable even before they are born. The decision that expectant mothers take can destroy the rest of their children's lives. We need a two-pronged approach to tackle the issue.

First, we must take steps to reduce the number of women drinking alcohol while pregnant. Unfortunately, there is an increase in the numbers of teenage girls who engage in sexual activity but continue to drink. However, that group does not account for all the cases of this avoidable disorder. Last year, the British Medical Association (BMA) published a paper on the syndrome as a guide to healthcare professionals. The document includes a number of recommendations that we should consider. The BMA recommends that, as part of routine clinical care, all healthcare professionals should provide ongoing advice and support to expectant mothers at every stage of pregnancy. That should include information on the risks of maternal alcohol consumption. All health promotion and advice should be supplemented with take-home printed information on the risks of consuming alcohol during pregnancy. During antenatal care, alcohol use should be monitored and recorded appropriately. Any pregnant woman who has a known history of alcohol consumption should be offered brief intervention counselling. Any expectant mother who is identified as being a high-risk case should be referred to specialist alcohol services for appropriate treatment.

I recognise that training is in place in the Health Service in Northern Ireland. The steps outlined may not be entirely appropriate, but most reasonable people will agree that more steps should be taken to educate and support pregnant women and to help them not to drink alcohol. I am aware of the UK Chief Medical Officer's position on the issue, and he has issued advice. An agreement between the Government and

the drinks industry has ensured that alcohol units and health information will be included on labels. However, more can be done to prevent drinking during pregnancy.

Secondly, we must consider how to deal with the conditions that result from mothers drinking during pregnancy. That has already been partly touched on in the discussion on misdiagnosis. I agree with Mrs Hanna that the key to dealing with the disorder is prevention. However, that must not detract from the need to care for those children and families whom the disorder already affects. Its effects on them are devastating. One has to live through it to see how it affects them. We cannot ignore those people. Serious measures must be put in place to deal with the condition, and to support the families and children affected.

Mr Shannon: A'hm fer the motion. A houl at a wean bes a gift fae God. An ivry wean bes a wee miracle. A houl forebye at thair bes an onus oan iz tae leuk about the weans an' the mither tae the bes' o' oor ability tae dae sae an' thon's fer wie A congratulate mae colleague fer bringin the matther tae public attention.

I support the motion. A baby is a gift from God, and each and every child is a little miracle. Furthermore, there is an onus on us to protect babies and mothers to the best of our ability. It is for that reason that I congratulate my colleague on bringing the matter to public attention. I was shocked when I read the reports of the damage done to babies when their mothers drink alcohol during pregnancy. It is not necessary to repeat what my colleagues have said already on that subject. However, it is important that, although the number of births affected in the Province is some 10 a year, the number of people affected by the symptoms is much greater.

Symptoms can range from learning difficulties and ADHD to facial abnormalities. Given the number of children in the Province who suffer from behavioural issues, flags are definitely being raised.

4.30 pm

I will not go over everything that we have already heard. However, midwives say that the mothers who admit to drinking while pregnant often fib about the amount that they actually consume. That is where the problem lies. Mothers and fathers are unaware of the severe nature of the problem and feel that a fib is enough to cover themselves, or perhaps they do not see the danger in it. They do not understand the issue, and it is little wonder.

When my colleague asked the Minister how widespread information was on the issue, the answer was that it was not very widespread. Some midwives are trained in dealing with those issues, some are not. No leaflets are given out, and no posters are posted. Although legislation concerning labelling on products is changing, the Minister said that the Department will

voluntarily put information on the labels at some stage. However, it will take more than that. I ask the Minister to label alcohol in the same way as cigarette packets, which carry the easy-to-understand warning, "Smoking kills" in big, black letters.

In the United States, wording on alcohol labels advises pregnant women, or those trying to get pregnant, against drinking any alcohol. Like my colleague Iris Robinson, I want to see that approach employed here. It is all well and good to tell pregnant women to limit their drinking, but to do so allows certain people to think that they can drink just a little bit more without doing any harm. The fact is this: it can and does make a difference to the life of child. I urge the Minister to make the right, and clear, statement about that.

The last survey on this issue that was carried out by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety found that 6,000 children a year are born with FASD and that some 9% of pregnant women are still drinking more than is recommended. Those statistics are based on the women who are not telling fibs, so who knows what the real figures are. More than 50% of women admit to drinking during pregnancy. I am sure that the Department wants to lessen that number. The answer should be to tell women that no alcohol should be consumed during pregnancy — full stop.

All pregnancy-related appointments with GPs, midwives and in hospital must be supplemented with take-home information highlighting the risks of drinking while pregnant and advising a no-alcohol policy. That is also the recommendation of those involved in highlighting the disorder. If a child is born with problems, his or her mother always wonders what she could have done differently. Some of those problems may be preventable, because the disorder is completely preventable, so let us help to prevent it today.

There must be wide understanding of the difficulties associated with alcohol. Mothers must understand that their children's bodies do not have the ability to process alcohol in the way that their bodies do. Alcohol immediately affects a child in the womb. Some ideas have been proposed, and a complete ban on alcohol during pregnancy has been advocated. Can we, in good conscience, do any less? The health and social life of a mother is not adversely affected by not drinking, whereas the life of a child can be affected through his or her mother's drinking, so let us make clear — through widespread labelling of alcohol — that mothers-to-be must not drink. Let us have posters on the walls of health centres, leaflets distributed at anti-natal classes, and a publicised campaign to let prospective parents realise the dangers —

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that education in schools is one of

the most important ways in which to highlight the dangers of drinking while pregnant? Does he also agree the Department of Education should adopt the role of providing such information?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her intervention and for her comments.

That is certainly one of the issues that we must address. There is a role not only for the Minister of Health, but for the Minister of Education also.

I fully support the motion, and I ask that Members do the same. We must protect the family unit and the health of unborn children in the Province.

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Alcohol misuse is a major public-health issue in Northern Ireland. The Department estimates that the total cost of alcohol misuse is more than £700 million a year and that the cost to the Health Service of treating addiction alone is some £12 million a year. A wide range of physical and mental harm is associated with the misuse of alcohol, including sclerosis of the liver, several cancers, increased blood pressure, stroke and heart disease. It is also associated with harm to the community in the form of antisocial behaviour. It is linked with accidents in and outside the home; and we are becoming increasingly aware of alcohol's association with suicide.

Alcohol is clearly an issue that we need to address. Today's motion concerns one impact of alcohol misuse — the effect that it has on the unborn child.

The term "foetal alcohol spectrum disorder" is used to describe the many problems that are associated with exposure to alcohol before birth. The most severe of these disorders is foetal alcohol syndrome, a combination of physical and mental birth defects. These defects occur when babies are exposed to maternal drinking during pregnancy. Only a minority of pregnant women with alcohol problems have babies with the more severe foetal alcohol syndrome. The severity appears to relate to the frequency of high doses of alcohol during pregnancy.

One of the difficulties of FASD is that it is sometimes a hidden issue. Diagnosis is complex and open to interpretation. It is, therefore, difficult to state confidently the prevalence of the condition in Northern Ireland. Based on international estimates, it is likely that between seven and 10 births a year here could be described as exhibiting foetal alcohol syndrome.

The latest figures available show that, over the past six years, there have been 20 hospital admissions involving 11 patients requiring treatment because of foetal alcohol syndrome. It is likely that more people did not have the condition diagnosed or did not require hospital care. It is also important to note that the

condition does not affect the individual only as a baby or as a child; it is a lifelong condition. Although the number of recorded cases in Northern Ireland is small, each case concerns a unique individual who has real needs that must be met.

The first part of the motion states that we should reduce the level of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. That means that we should address the entire issue of alcohol and the full range of problems that its misuse causes in our society. Although the focus for this debate is FASD, I am sure that Members will agree that alcohol misuse causes other significant health and social problems. As I have stated previously, excessive use of alcohol can increase the risk of liver damage, heart disease and cancer, including breast cancer. The emotional and mental health consequences of alcohol misuse are also considerable.

Alcohol is involved in one third of all suicides and too often is a factor in antisocial behaviour and violence. Domestic violence is often fuelled by alcohol, and, shockingly, one third of all domestic violence incidents occur when a woman is pregnant. Tragically, alcohol is too often the common link for physical, emotional and mental-health problems.

In Northern Ireland, the main problem with alcohol is our unhealthy attitude towards its use. That attitude is deeply embedded in our culture and is difficult to change. I am determined to continue the work in addressing the issue.

In May 2006, the Department launched its 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-11'. The aim of the strategy is to reduce the amount of alcohol- and drug-related harm in Northern Ireland. There is a clear focus on the need to reduce the level of excessive binge drinking and increase public awareness of the real harms associated with alcohol misuse.

The strategy is supported by a range of Departments, including those of Education, Social Development, Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Employment and Learning. It contains regional and local outcomes that depend on cross-sectoral co-operation in order to achieve them.

I am encouraged by the wide support for our efforts to combat alcohol misuse. I have had discussions with each of the major supermarkets, representatives from the alcohol and drinks industry, and the PSNI on the availability of alcohol, especially to our children and young people.

The debate also presents an opportunity to highlight our growing concern about the level and pattern of female drinking in Northern Ireland, where 67% of women choose to drink. Of those, one third are binge drinkers; in the 18 to 20 age range, 50% of drinkers binge drink.

The occurrence of foetal alcohol syndrome is associated with the frequency of binge drinking. Over the past 20 years, Northern Ireland, in common with the rest of the UK and other countries, has seen a rise in the proportion of women — especially young women — who drink, and hidden within that increase is a growing trend towards excessive drinking.

All our campaigns, literature and websites ensure that the risks to women from alcohol misuse are made clear. That will be further strengthened by a specific leaflet — which I have instructed the Health Promotion Agency to publish — in support of the next phase of the binge-drinking campaign. Education work is ongoing in schools and youth clubs across Northern Ireland, and we will continue to support such work.

We have a clear message for women about the effects of alcohol consumption during pregnancy and its relation to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The current advice, which is common across the UK, is that alcohol can damage an unborn baby, so women who are pregnant should avoid alcohol or at least cut down to a couple of drinks a week. Couples who are trying to get pregnant should also cut down as alcohol can affect both the egg and the cells that produce the sperm. Many of us feel that that message could be toughened up.

Excessive alcohol consumption can not only harm an unborn child but it may result in couples having difficulty conceiving. That advice will be found in all our literature on alcohol. It will also be found in the recently revised copy of 'The Pregnancy Book', which is available to first-time expectant mothers through antenatal clinics, GPs or health visitors. I assure Members that the real risks of alcohol to the unborn child are made clear to expectant mothers by health and social care professionals.

Just as we have seen improvements in the screening of pregnant women when cases of domestic violence are suspected, so too there are clear procedures in place when it is thought that a particular risk has been identified in relation to alcohol misuse. That involves liaison between health and social care colleagues to advise and monitor the health and well-being of the expectant woman and the unborn child. Members should be reassured that this issue is one that all health and social care professionals receive training on. The 'Hidden Harm' action plan, which my Department will issue later in the autumn, places particular emphasis on inter-agency collaboration and training in addressing the needs of those young people who are problem alcohol and drug users and who are being cared for by parents or carers.

That leads me on to the other point of the motion — the introduction of dedicated teams to assist families affected by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I fully

understand and appreciate the issues and challenges for those families, however, the consistent view of health and social care professionals who work in that area is that dedicated services are not always appropriate and, in fact, may not be beneficial. That is because children with the disorder require access to a wide and often different range of services. The complex nature and broad range of diagnosed conditions associated with FASD means that the management of individuals diagnosed as having that disorder should be tailored to their individual needs, circumstances, the severity of their condition and their responsiveness to interventions.

For example, the specific needs of children who have suffered a learning disability as a result of the disorder are met through a range of services funded by my Department. Those services are provided for all children with a learning disability and will vary to meet the specific needs of the individual child. Services for children include allied health professional provision such as occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, respite provision and day-care provision.

Respite care is an important part of the wide range of health and social care services provided. Such care takes many different forms and is delivered in care settings that range from people's homes to day facilities or residential care homes. I have secured extra funding for respite care amounting to a total of 400 additional packages, which will be available to those people diagnosed as having FASD. I have secured £4 million to provide a total of nine early-intervention support teams across the five health trusts. Those teams, which operate in early-years settings, comprise speech and language therapists, community and paediatric nurses, paediatricians, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. These multidisciplinary teams focus on diagnosis, assessment and early intervention.

4.45 pm

Improving and safeguarding the well-being of all children and young people in Northern Ireland are primary aims of Government policy. Improving the assessment process is essential, which is why my Department has developed a new assessment framework for understanding the needs of children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI). The framework is in the process of being introduced in all health and social care trusts.

I mentioned my meetings with the alcohol and drinks industry. An agreement was reached with the industry to introduce health information on drinks labels, including information about alcohol and pregnancy. That was a voluntary arrangement. However, consultation is taking place in order to see whether health messages on such labels should be

made mandatory. I am determined to pursue as a matter of urgency, at all levels, the clear labelling of alcoholic drinks with health messages, including responsible drinking in pregnancy.

The drinks industry has a clear, corporate, social responsibility in respect of the products that it manufactures, sells and markets. That is just one element of the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs which is aimed at tackling alcohol misuse across Northern Ireland. As part of the strategy, there will be further phases of the binge drinking public information campaign next year, and the young people and alcohol action plan will be published later this year.

I am, and will be, taking measures in order to prevent or reduce the level of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder by targeting the level of alcohol consumption in Northern Ireland, obviously including among women. There are a range of services for children with special needs, including FASD.

It is important that individuals can be treated based on their unique individual needs and circumstances. However, we do not necessarily have a total picture of the scale of FASD in Northern Ireland, and that is an issue that I am discussing with my departmental officials in order to get a more complete picture, which would enable better planning of services.

In the meantime, we will all take responsibility for helping to reduce the levels of alcohol misuse in society. Tackling drinking habits that are almost culturally ingrained is a major challenge. My Department will continue to target the level and pattern of drinking by young women, and continue to address the issue of alcohol and pregnancy, and to provide information and appropriate advice. To those women who drink excessively during pregnancy, the message is simple: alcohol and pregnancy do not mix. The stark fact is that every case of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is preventable, and I will ensure that all efforts are made in order to achieve that.

Mr Buchanan: I support this motion in the name of my colleague Mr George Robinson. It is not a motion to judge, but to produce a positive debate on the way forward for those suffering from and affected by FASD.

Alcohol misuse and problem drinking can severely affect the well-being of families through its association with child abuse and neglect, domestic violence and sudden infant deaths. I was shocked to learn that there are no accurate figures available for the number of people in families with FASD. That, surely, must be the basic starting point for the Minister in order to begin to resolve the problem.

How can this Assembly improve the situation of those affected by FASD, whether individuals or families, when there is no accurate database from which to work? In order to establish such a database,

we must, first, have accurate diagnosis of cases of FASD. That is the foundation stone for everything that this motion seeks to achieve.

My colleague George Robinson listed some of the characteristics associated with FASD, and I will not repeat them. However, Members must recognise that FASD is entirely preventable and we must remain focused on establishing the services that we seek to provide. A concentrated and targeted approach is required, not only to assist those families who are living with FASD, but to reduce the number of future cases.

It makes no sense, morally or economically, not to tackle the problem head-on. The prevention of the adverse impact of alcohol consumption during pregnancy remains a significant challenge, not least because of the poor levels of awareness and understanding of FASD among healthcare professionals and the public.

Health promotion and educational programmes have been shown to be ineffective in altering drinking behaviour, and therefore FASD must be considered as part of a wider strategy to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. Primary and community care settings provide the ideal opportunity to deliver active prevention strategies, including screening for maternal alcohol consumption. It is essential that young people are given the starkest possible message about the effects that alcohol or drugs can have on them years ahead when they wish to start a family.

Not every child who is born with FASD will need a great amount of care and support, but it must be available to those who do. Every child in Northern Ireland should have the opportunity to develop his or her skills and abilities to their full potential. For some, that means that a care package must be easily accessible, and the Assembly must ensure that that is exactly what is provided.

Today's debate highlights the need for packages of specialist services to be available to those affected by FASD, whether for individuals, families, or a combination of the two. The need for young people to be aware of the dangers to the next generation from alcohol consumption is abundantly clear. The only effective way to achieve such awareness is through co-operation between Departments and specialist outside bodies. Some people might think that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is unfortunate in having to take the lead departmental role. However, the crucial issue is the achievement of accurate diagnostics of FASD, and the services and benefits that other Departments will subsequently provide depend on that. Only an inter-agency approach can provide the support that the families concerned need. I repeat that the achievement of accurate

diagnostics is the foundation stone of what the motion aims to achieve.

I recently read an article that appeared in 'The Irish News' on 25 May 2006:

"Excessive alcohol consumption in pregnant women has led to 50 babies being born with serious mental and physical birth defects in the last five years ... A consultant with Belfast City Hospital has warned that the amount of babies with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is likely to be much higher, as many are not diagnosed until pre-school age. FAS causes disfiguring facial abnormalities, small body weight, mental development delays and other behavioural problems. Many children born with this syndrome require lifelong care."

Today, I urge the Minister to ensure that the services required by FASD-affected families and individuals will be available as soon as possible. If the Assembly lays the proper foundation stone, all that is built on top of it will provide the safety and security that is so desperately required. I apologise for not being present when George Robinson started today's debate; I was chairing an all-party Assembly group meeting on cancer. However, as I listened to the rest of the debate, three or four key issues emerged: awareness, prevention, education, and support. That really sums up the content of the motion.

Mr Gardiner spoke of the hidden cost to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on account of those who consume too much alcohol. The Minister's comments about the amount of money that is spent on treating alcoholics and those who misuse alcohol illustrate the fact that a staggering amount of money comes out of the Department's budget to tackle the misuse of alcohol. That issue must be urgently tackled head on.

Carmel Hanna said that people must be made aware of the problem, and she mentioned the awareness campaign. The clear message must go out that, as the Minister said, alcohol and pregnancy do not mix. It would be wrong to send out a message that it is OK to have a few drinks a week. There must be no ambiguity on the matter; we must be clear and concise in saying that alcohol and pregnancy do not mix. No alcohol should be consumed during pregnancy.

Kieran McCarthy spoke about the horrendous effects that the syndrome can have on children after they are born, such as lack of growth, and other disabilities. My colleague Iris Robinson spoke about the educational needs of young mothers and the need for early intervention, which is essential for children who, through no fault of their own, may be affected by the condition. It is vital that the correct procedures be put in place to ensure early intervention.

Alex Easton spoke about the need for prevention, and the misuse of alcohol among young women. That issue must be tackled. Tom Elliott spoke about the measures that must be taken on prevention, and he said

that those who are already suffering as a result of the disease must not be forgotten. Along with a focus on prevention, that point must be taken on board so that measures are also in place to help people who are already afflicted.

Jim Shannon said that life is precious, and we must remember that life is a gift from God. Therefore, it is important that the proper facilities are in place to treat anyone who is affected by such a terrible disease.

I commend the Minister on the strategies that are already in place, and on the action plans that he proposes to put in place. I hope that the necessary measures will be introduced, and I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce policies to reduce the level of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; where necessary co-operating with other agencies and Departments; and to introduce dedicated teams to assist families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Adjourned at 4.59 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 23 September 2008

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): With your permission, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in inland waterways sectoral format.

The meeting was held at the Radisson Roe Park Hotel, Limavady, on 4 July 2008. The Executive were represented by Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, MP, MLA, and me, and the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív, TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister Murphy, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Mr John Martin, chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, provided a report on developments since the previous meeting in October 2007. We were pleased to note the content of his report, in which he outlined the continued progress on the restoration of the Royal Canal and explained that an additional 86 metres of public moorings were provided on the Royal Canal and the Shannon.

Since the end of August 2007, 283 metres of moorings have been provided on the Erne system and a 36-metre floating mooring and gangway was installed on the Lower Bann. Waterways Ireland's accessible sailing initiative was launched at the London Boat Show in January 2008 in the company of the then

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Edwin Poots, and Minister Ó Cuív.

Furthermore, Waterways Ireland exhibited at the Earls Court Boat Show in December 2007, and the Lakelands initiative is being actively promoted. Ministers were pleased to hear that work on the new Waterways Ireland headquarters is on time, on budget and due for completion this month.

The Council reviewed progress to date on the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal and noted that Waterways Ireland carried out consultations with the Clones Erne East Partnership and landowners, and also had discussions with various relevant statutory agencies.

Ministers noted that Waterways Ireland commenced procedures to have the preliminary design undertaken and also that it proposed to take forward the land acquisition in advance of letting the contract. Waterways Ireland presented its revised future plans for consideration. We discussed its revised business plan for 2008 and noted that the targets and budget will continue to be reviewed throughout the year. We also noted the impact of currency fluctuations on the value of the allocations.

We heard and noted Waterways Ireland's capital investment proposals for a programme of activity under the capital expenditure plans contained in the national development plan 2007-2013. Those proposals include the completion of the reopening of the Royal Canal to boating traffic in 2009, and completion of investigations and construction of extensions on the Shannon navigation. The proposals also include the consolidation of other existing navigations by improving access to facilities and infrastructure, carrying out feasibility studies and preliminary design work on additional projects that might be taken forward if sufficient resources become available. Waterways Ireland also intends to undertake preliminary investigations on a number of other waterways. The Council noted the Waterways Ireland annual reports and accounts for 2006, which were presented on 4 July 2008, prior to being laid before this Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Council noted that Waterways Ireland has commenced a pilot study to assess the resources and the processes required to register all of its property. We also noted that a tender has been awarded in respect of a pilot property registration of two areas of the canals in Dublin. The Council agreed to proposals for one compulsory purchase order and a number of disposals, all of which were in Minister Ó Cuív's jurisdiction.

Ministers welcomed Waterways Ireland's tourism and marketing initiatives, which include the key objectives of developing Waterways Ireland's corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; awareness creation; and the building of platforms for sustained market development. The Council agreed

that its next meeting in the inland waterways sectoral format would take place in October 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure met representatives of Waterways Ireland. In April 2008, the Committee met the Blackwater Regional Partnership, which is an alliance of local authorities from Armagh, Monaghan and Tyrone. Both bodies made a strong case for the reopening of the Ulster Canal and emphasised the tourism and economic benefits of that. I welcome the fact that that was discussed at the meeting.

When the issue of the reopening of the canal was discussed, were any timetables or timescales detailed to take the project forward? When will the contract be let?

In an individual capacity, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I apprise the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, that the Sam Maguire cup is safe and well; back home in the O'Neill county after an epic encounter. Yesterday, the Minister will have received a number of representations for civic receptions in Parliament Buildings; one from the deputy First Minister and another from me, via a telephone conversation with the Minister's office. Having spoken to many sportspeople and followers of Gaelic games yesterday, I know that there is concern about the Minister's political comments. The Tyrone team will be going through the front door of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that he should ask questions that are related to the Minister's statement.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The question in the Member's contribution was in relation to the Ulster Canal.

Waterways Ireland is involved in a procurement exercise to engage a consultant to undertake preliminary design work. A call for expressions of interest was published on 15 May 2008, with the deadline for replies being 16 June 2008. From that process, a list of six consultants was compiled, and they will be asked to submit proposals based on the brief for the works. Waterways Ireland expects to appoint a consultant later in the autumn.

In addition, Waterways Ireland consulted the major statutory authorities on both sides of the border, including the roads agencies, the planning authorities, local councils and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Forty-six of the 49 known landowners along the route of the canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne have been contacted and advised about the canal proposal. Furthermore, Waterways Ireland has appointed an internal project manager, who will act as liaison

consultant on the project. I hope that I have answered the Member's queries about Waterways Ireland.

The other points he raised have no connection with Waterways Ireland but are connected with the sporting element of my responsibilities. As I indicated yesterday, every request, whether for a meeting or reception, will be considered. I said that when I was appointed, and I repeated it yesterday — all requests will be considered.

I hope that the urgency with which requests concerning the sporting element of my portfolio were made will be repeated when dealing with Executive business. I expect to hear such urgent matters being dealt with equally speedily.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister provide Members with an update of the community balance of employees in Waterways Ireland? Protestants have always been under-represented, and I would be grateful if the Minister would give details of the current situation.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member's question is relevant and timely. Waterways Ireland, in common with other employers in Northern Ireland, is required to monitor its staff's community background. The position as of 1 September 2008 — so, obviously, these figures are up to date — is that Waterways Ireland had 76 permanent employees based in Northern Ireland. Of those, 26 had a Protestant community background; 46 had a Roman Catholic community background, and four were described as others. Therefore, the percentage composition of the workforce was: 60·5% Roman Catholic; 34·2% Protestant; and 5·3% other or not stated.

In the most recent census, the community background split in the Fermanagh District Council area, which is the catchment area for most of Waterways Ireland's staff, was 58% Roman Catholic and 39·8% Protestant. When Members talk about equality, they should be aware that I am very interested in that subject and have campaigned for it for many years. It is obvious that appointments must be made on the basis of merit, because that is the only basis on which people must be recruited, but, in situations in which there is a small under-representation — which there is in Waterways Ireland — I will keep that matter under the closest possible scrutiny. I wish to ensure, as much as possible, that people are offered employment using the merit principle and that staff in that organisation, like those in all others, reflect the community background spread as closely as possible.

Mr K Robinson: It is ironic that the Minister's statement about such work can be brought to the House when the Executive, which is part of this Government, cannot meet to deal with the bread-and-butter issues that concern our constituents.

I am disappointed that the only concrete progress that appears to have been made, although welcome, is on the Royal Canal around the Dublin area and in the west of Ireland.

The Minister said that 46 out of 49 landowners around Lough Erne have been contacted about the potential of the Clones Erne East Partnership making progress on that part of the extension to the system.

Did any discussion take place about extending the navigable system from Maghery along the River Blackwater, to the upper reaches of the latter, that would enable an approach from both sides? It appears that all the movement is taking place south of the border. I know that, in the long term, those developments will link up with changes that will be made in the Northern Ireland section. However, little progress seems to be being made there at present.

10.45 am

I will raise my concern in a question to the Minister: in the light of pressures on public-expenditure budgets in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, was the need to revisit Waterways Ireland's potential budget discussed?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the honourable Member for his question. He refers to irony at the same time as he talks about "concrete progress" on waterways. I am sure that the mixed metaphor will not be lost on other Members.

The Member is right to say that significant progress has been made in the Irish Republic. It is right and proper for that country to make that progress. The North/South Ministerial Council must see progress in both countries. I, as a Minister in this country, share Mr Robinson's desire to see further development, and not only on the waterways about which he spoke. I hope that a process with that objective will begin at the next NSMC meeting in the inland waterways sectoral format.

I also want to see progress being made on the development of the Lower Bann in order to permit a link-up across Ulster that will incorporate the Ulster Canal and other waterways under which I have jurisdiction. I also want to see sensible, active commercial promotion of those waterways. Therefore, the honourable Member has raised a serious issue that requires significant resources, which we must review in the light of ongoing budgetary constraints. However, I am well aware of the issues and want to promote the development of waterways. I trust that I will get support from across this House in doing so.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister outline the proportional capital and revenue costs of Waterways Ireland's new headquarters to each Government? Does he believe that those costs represent value for money? Furthermore, will the Minister give a commitment to

the House that he will continue to attend, and participate in, North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I did not know that there was any uncertainty about my future attendance, other than from parties other than the Member's party and mine, which are currently preventing Executive business from proceeding and, consequently, preventing the North/South Ministerial Council from meeting. I am not preventing that, and I know that the honourable Member's party is not. However, that is a matter that must, and I hope will, be resolved.

In an earlier answer, I mentioned that urgent correspondence can be received within hours of a sporting event's taking place. I trust that we can resolve more serious business within days. I await a speedy response on that.

DCAL funds 100% of capital costs of navigational work. The Department pays nothing towards capital costs in the Irish Republic. By agreement, the Irish Government fund 85% of non-capital costs, while the Northern Ireland Executive pay 15% of those costs.

Dr Farry: First, to give Mr McElduff a look-in, I hope that one day the Sam Maguire will be able to come North through the inland waterways network rather than by road. I hope that the trophy's journey will be to County Fermanagh, the home of my ancestors.

I have two questions for the Minister.

First, how do we ensure that there is an input into the NSMC deliberations from the Ministers with responsibility for tourism in the North and South respectively?

Secondly, is it possible to ask the Government of the Republic of Ireland to make a contribution towards the cost of the elite facilities that we are developing in Northern Ireland as a result of the national development plan, particularly those that are based around inland waterways, for example, those planned for the Upper Bann area? Such a contribution would recognise that the facilities will not just benefit citizens of Northern Ireland, they will help those from the Republic of Ireland who, undoubtedly, need assistance to match the wonderful achievements of local residents in the field of sport.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member's ingenuity knows no bounds.

The Waterways Ireland marketing and promotion strategy was launched in 2004 and will be reviewed in 2009. Waterways Ireland has a marketing advisory group, which, this year, decided to continue with the implementation of the existing strategy. Members will not be surprised to hear that the strategy has five marketing objectives, which are: awareness creation; development of a corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; working in partnership with

other bodies; and building a platform for sustained development.

The key objective is working in partnership with other bodies, because virtually everyone will agree that we are years behind other regions of the UK and other parts of Europe in the promotion of our waterways as a tourist destination. We must be active in that, but sensitive, because environmental concerns must be considered. My Department and Waterways Ireland will be working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and with Fáilte Ireland on the cross-border aspect, to ensure that we get the most bang for our buck, to use that awful phrase that was coined in America.

As yet, we have not discussed the elite facilities with the Government of the Irish Republic. I know that the Member has a strong interest in those facilities, given that he is a resident of the borough that will receive the first of them under the elite programme. We will review the programme as it unfolds, and will want to consult the Government of the Irish Republic and discuss any cross-border aspects.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that Waterways Ireland also intends to make preliminary investigations into the development of other waterways. Will the Minister state whether any progress has been made into establishing a navigational authority for Lough Neagh so that that area can be developed as a tourist and recreation authority?

The statement refers to the impact of currency fluctuations on the value of allocated budgets. Is the Minister confident that the budget for the scheme will be sufficient, given current economic difficulties?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is exceedingly difficult to give a definitive and comprehensive answer to both of the Member's questions, because — as the Member probably knows — the Lough Neagh area involves several landowners, so there are administrative difficulties in promoting that waterway. However, it is vital that we ensure that that fantastic facility is developed by active promotion, particularly the areas around the Lower Bann and the other waterway stretches that go into the Lough.

The currency fluctuations have created considerable problems, simply because resources are allocated at a given point in time with a given currency exchange rate. When that rate changes, the value of the budget either increases or decreases, depending on the movement. That is very difficult to anticipate and is a challenge for Departments both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, but we must rise to it.

Mr Brolly: I have a particular interest in the section of the waterways between Clones and Upper Lough Erne. I have been told that it will be expensive to reinstate that section of the waterways, given the development that has taken place there over the years.

Does the Minister agree? Further to that, does he have any idea as to what the cost to reinstate it might be?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member is correct in assessing that it will be expensive; all the work in all the waterways will be expensive, and we must endeavour to ensure that we have the resources for their development, promotion and maintenance. I do not have an estimate of the cost to hand, but I will obtain one and forward it to the Member in writing.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is it possible — or too early, perhaps — to ascertain how tourist numbers and boat usage have increased as a result of the work that Waterways Ireland has done on the canals, particularly on the Erne and the Lower Bann?

Members are aware of the credit crunch and how it is hurting many people. The Minister's statement referred to currency fluctuations. Has his Department ascertained whether they are having an effect on the number of people who are using the canals and, therefore, on tourism potential? Is it wise to consider spending a lot of money on this project when the economy is as it is?

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed a proposal for one compulsory purchase order. Will the Minister give some detail on what that refers to?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have a few questions to answer.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It appears that ingenuity is spreading throughout the Chamber. Tourism numbers is an issue primarily for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Fáilte Ireland. I am not aware of the numbers, but I will forward them to the honourable Member if I obtain the figures from both organisations.

Mr Shannon asked about promoting the entirety of the waterways in the environment of a fluctuating currency. That provides a challenge, but it is no different a challenge to that faced by tourists going anywhere in central Europe. When discussing a different aspect of my portfolio yesterday, I made clear that I am in favour of international development. I want to promote good relations between this country — our country — and the Irish Republic. If we can achieve that by getting tourists into the Republic and bringing them here — and vice versa — it should be done, because that is most definitely a win-win situation.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. It is positive, and it comes at a time when there is some kind of cloud hanging over this place. I am pleased also that the Minister anticipates further meetings, because I would not want this to be the last will and testament of Waterways Ireland. The project is long term, and it will require years of planning. I imagine

that the first boat that comes from the River Shannon to the Lower Bann will be as welcome as Sam Maguire.

The Minister will know from his discussions with developers and investors that they need to know when this wonderful event will happen. Given that tourism is our only growth industry, can the Minister gaze into his crystal ball and give us some idea of when the hotels and the other infrastructure — particularly in the Upper Bann, in which he and I have an interest — will be in place, so that the thousands of jobs for Protestants and Catholics will be created?

11.00 am

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is not often that the honourable Member asks me to help dispel the clouds of doubt that hang over anywhere. However, he has asked me to do that and I am happy to be of assistance. Hopefully, I will be able to do so.

On a more serious note, the Lower Bann requires a considerable amount of work done to it. It is a fantastic asset, and one that has been completely underutilised and underdeveloped. It will take a significant amount of resources to develop it in the way that he, I and all the Members of the House would like to see it developed. That development is work for the future, and it is work that I want to raise at an early NSMC meeting. Hopefully we will be in a position to do that, and hopefully last wills and testaments are a long way away.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister. Given the huge amount of resources required to develop the Ulster Canal, can the Minister outline the economic potential for the tourism industry?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster Canal is a phenomenal asset. It is not just an asset for the people who live near it and would use it following its development; it would bring considerable benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland and to Northern Ireland plc. However, there are sections of the Ulster Canal for which feasibility plans have not yet been forwarded, and I want to address that before making any further comment.

The development of all of the waterways of Northern Ireland would require funds in excess of £100 million, and the development would take many years. That is a significant amount of money — money that I do not currently have access to.

These are challenging targets and prospects for the future that we must not lose sight of and which we must actively aim to achieve. The Ulster Canal is central to that and, over the next few years, I want to target development along the lines that the Member and others have itemised. Hopefully then we can reach the desired conclusion.

Lord Morrow: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Mr Shannon has touch on one of the questions that I wanted to ask. In relation to the work that may take place on the River Bann — and the Upper Bann in particular — I hope that the development will enhance salmon fishing, and that it will not have a detrimental effect.

The Minister said that the Council has noted that Waterways Ireland has commenced a pilot study to assess the resources and processes required to register its property. Will that pilot study also include an evaluation of all its assets? Furthermore, in relation to the disposal of any assets — whether in Dublin or here — are those assets to be jointly owned by both jurisdictions? Moreover, what mechanism will be used for the transfer of those assets from Government agencies to Waterways Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My understanding is that the assessment will include the issues that the honourable Member has raised. I know the Member has a deep and abiding interest in fishing as a confirmed and long-standing fisherman — the success of which I do not know, nor will I endeavour to ascertain today. However, in all seriousness, it is something that we are looking at. I will respond in writing to the Member at a later date and will provide him with the minutiae of detail that his question demands.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Language Body Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language body sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I wish to make the following report, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the second North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in language sectoral format since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. The report has been endorsed by Conor Murphy MP MLA, and the meeting was held in the Radisson Roe Hotel, Limavady on 4 July 2008.

I represented the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Conor Murphy MP MLA, Minister for Regional Development. The Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. I chaired the meeting, which dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies: Tha Boord of Ulstèr Scotch, the Ulster-Scots Agency; and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency. The Council noted the progress that both agencies had made since the last meeting, and I will summarise the main points relating to the three issues that we considered and approved.

The Council approved the business plans for 2008 and corporate plans for 2008-10 for Tha Boord of Ulstèr Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge. The Council agreed budgets for 2008 and noted indicative budgets for 2009 and 2010, which will be subject to further discussions between the sponsor Departments and to budgetary considerations by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government.

The Council also noted the proposal to provide further additional funding of £1 million to the Ulster-Scots Agency in 2009 and 2010, and that the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is positively disposed to that proposal — subject to budgetary considerations in both jurisdictions and assurances about the necessary financial accountability systems being in place in the agency. The Ministers requested officials to prepare a more developed paper on that subject, which is to be brought before the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

On the issue of staffing, the Council noted the progress made in relation to the NSMC decision of March 2006 that 30 staff posts of Foras na Gaeilge

should be located in Gweedore, County Donegal. The Council approved the staffing submission for seven posts in Foras na Gaeilge, which concerned the filling of five posts in the organisation located in Gweedore and two in Belfast. We also agreed that the working group, which is made up with representatives from Foras na Gaeilge and the two sponsor Departments, should continue its examination of the Foras na Gaeilge staffing complement and report back to Ministers on further progress at the next NSMC in language sectoral format.

The Council also discussed Colmcille, an organisation that is funded equally by the Administrations in Northern Ireland and Scotland to develop stronger links between Gaelic speakers. At the previous North/South Ministerial Council in language sectoral format, Ministers noted the work that had been undertaken to move Colmcille under the aegis of Foras na Gaeilge in Ireland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland. The council asked officials to continue their work in examining the issues arising, and future options, and agreed to consider the matter further at its next meeting, on the basis of a report prepared by officials. A further submission outlining the future arrangements for Colmcille was considered and, at the meeting on 4 July, Ministers approved the transfer of the organisation's functions, staff and funding to Foras na Gaeilge. It was agreed that Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig would form a partnership to take forward the aims and objectives of Colmcille.

Minister Ó Cuív stated his intention to host the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format in a location that would have significance for the work of the language body — possibly in Donegal. The Council agreed to meet again in language sectoral format in November 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo agus roimh an chruinniú fosta. Tá ceisteanna agam don Aire, agus, ní nach ionadh, tá suim agam go háirithe i bhforbairtí straitéis na Gaeilge a chur chun tosaigh.

I welcome the fact that the meeting took place and that the Minister has presented a statement on it. However, why was the statement delayed? When Members entered the Chamber at 10.32 am, we were in possession of his statement on Waterways Ireland but we were not in possession of his statement on the language body. The delay in our receipt of that statement was unnecessary. The Committee would like to have had access to the document a lot sooner.

Edwin Poots, the then Minister, attended a meeting of the Committee eleven months ago — 25 October 2007 — to brief members on consultations on

proposals for Irish-language legislation. He attended another Committee meeting on 25 January 2008, during which he said that his Department was considering drawing up a strategy that would protect, enhance and promote the development of the Irish language and Ulster Scots as required by the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006.

Was that strategy discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on the language body? What progress has the Minister's Department made in drawing up the strategy? When can the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure expect to receive a briefing on the Department's proposals regarding a positive strategy for the enhancement and promotion of indigenous languages, not least the Irish language and Ulster Scots?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member began his question with a complaint about delay — and I am sure that the irony of that will not be lost on many people. Those people who have spent three months holding up the work of the Executive now have the temerity to say that there has been a delay of a few minutes in receiving a report.

I ensured that the same advance notice was given for this statement as for my statement on Waterways Ireland. Half an hour before I was to get to my feet to speak, the statements were to be put into Members' pigeonholes. There is no distinction between the two statements in that regard, yet I did not hear any complaints about a delay in the receipt of the statement on Waterways Ireland. As I said, the irony of the situation will not be lost on many people.

I turn to what the honourable Member said about languages. There were discussions on how we should promote a language strategy. I hope that I will be in a position to go to the Committee in the next few weeks with an outline of the progress that has been made in developing the language strategy. I cannot be exact about when that will be because of the uncertainty that surrounds the business of the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): Regarding funding for the Ulster-Scots Agency, the report indicates a need for a more developed paper on the necessary financial accountability systems in use in that agency. Will the Minister elaborate on that?

As the Chairperson of the Committee was given substantial leeway to talk about Tyrone's winning of the Sam Maguire Cup, will the Minister comment on the potential sporting repercussions of the BBC's atrocious 'Breakout' programme — shown last night — which glorified the Provos and portrayed the Provo junior Minister as a Cheshire cat, laughing at his part in a violent jailbreak? Will the Minister take that matter up with the BBC, and tell us how he sees the —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member for questions relating to the Minister's statement.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will finish with this question: how does the Minister see the potential for a terrorist shrine — similar to last night's eulogy — to be located beside a stadium on the Maze site?

11.15 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to refrain from straying outside the remit of the statement and to ask a question.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that the Minister heard what I said. Far be it from me to challenge you — because I am not allowed to — but you might perhaps consider the leeway that you gave a party member of yours compared with what —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: There was no chastisement for that Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. The chairman of the Ulster-Scots Agency attended parts of the sectoral meeting, as did representatives from Foras na Gaeilge. The Ulster-Scots Agency has been informed about the relevant financial aspects, and it accepts the need for absolute transparency and for all accountancy procedures to be in place. It is simply a matter of working that issue through the system to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from the additional money that will be allocated to the agency.

I watched the BBC programme to which the honourable Member referred, and I share his feelings of abhorrence. The programme is an appalling indictment on the BBC. No reference whatsoever was made to the murdered prison officer; rather, a platform was given to those who glorify and defend terror and violence.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his statement. I commend him for holding the meeting in Limavady, which is the birthplace of one of the greatest of all Ulster-Scots people, William Ferguson Massey, a former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

I welcome the fact that the Ulster-Scots Agency will receive additional funding in the coming years. In that context, I commend the Minister for moving towards equality of funding for Irish and Ulster Scots. I believe that we all want to subscribe to the principle of equality.

The Ulster-Scots Agency's expenditure can, in some ways, be informed by the expenditure of Foras na Gaeilge. Over the years, Foras na Gaeilge has funded a community-based newspaper and community-based

development workers, thereby promoting empowerment in the Irish-speaking community. I ask the Minister to note those initiatives and the fact that attendees at a recent Ulster-Scots conference on community vision highlighted the importance of empowering and building up the Ulster-Scots community through funding, resourcing and the employment of community-based development workers. When the Minister considers such matters in future, will he encourage the Ulster-Scots Agency to move in that direction, based on the good experience and practice of Foras na Gaeilge?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question and for mentioning Limavady-born William Ferguson Massey, an individual of whom I and all locals are very proud.

The Member mentioned the need to ensure that the Ulster-Scots Agency receives equality of funding; indeed, I take it that his question also refers to the wider Ulster-Scots community. That issue is very close to my heart. On occasion, it annoys me to hear people demanding change as if change would benefit a sector or community that has not experienced fair play in the past. When I compare the origins, development and funding of the Ulster-Scots community with those of the Irish-language community, I see the need for change. Those people who have demanded change and waxed lyrical about it for years are going to get that change. That is what we need to see. People who demand change cannot back off or complain when they receive it. We must focus on change and ensure that there is, to quote another phrase, parity of esteem.

That is a great phrase, which will come back to haunt some people, and I intend to ensure that it does.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. Ar chúiseanna éagsúla, tá áthas orm go bhfuil an Tionscnamh Colm Cille anois faoi choimirce Fhoras na Gaeilge. Is dul chun cinn é sin.

Tá súil agam go mbeidh an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta i nGaeltacht Thír Chonaill, i nGaoth Dobhair nó i Rann na Feirste; nó bheadh sin an-fhóirsteanach.

I welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly welcome the fact that the functions of Colmcille have been transferred to Foras na Gaeilge.

With regard to the Minister's comments about parity of esteem and increasing funding for Ulster Scots, earlier this year, his Department withdrew £1 million of funding from the Ulster-Scots Academy, because it did not get its act together to spend all the money that it was allocated.

I agree with parity of esteem, but there is a lot of capacity building to be done in the Ulster-Scots

community before the academy can spend any extra money that the Minister may allocate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question on the statement.

Mr D Bradley: I welcome the creation of seven new posts in Foras na Gaeilge. How many further jobs will make up the full complement of staff in Foras na Gaeilge? When will those jobs be approved? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no point in my pretending to understand the first part of the Member's question, because I did not, and I am not sure whether it contained any more questions than the English version. However, the Member raised a legitimate point about Colmcille, although I do not know whether he inadvertently omitted the fact that the functions of Colmcille are being transferred to Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig. That is an excellent example of east-west co-operation, and I hope that the honourable Member simply overlooked the western part of that in his comments. As I said, it demonstrates east-west co-operation; therefore, hopefully, it will merit the support of everyone here.

The Member then went on — whether inadvertently or otherwise — to make my point about the academy and the transfer of funds. The Ulster-Scots community requires greater capacity building, and that is why we must ensure that greater resources are put into it. The honourable Member made that point, and it merely reinforces the need to get equality into the picture.

I hope that the Member will also draw from his question the inference that Ulster Scots was underfunded in the past. We have to make up for that, and that is the intent of my Department. We have made significant progress, and we will make further progress. I hope that we will have the support of all Members in doing that, because equality is a great thing, and I hope that everyone is smiling and supporting it as we move towards it. I hope that there will be no complaints, bitterness, whingeing or moaning when equality hits home hard. I hope that Members will bear that mind.

I do not have the number of outstanding posts in Foras na Gaeilge to hand, but I will write to the Member to provide him with the information.

Dr Farry: In light of all the talk of Mr Massey from Limavady, my colleague Mr Lunn has asked me to remind the House of John Ballance from Lisburn, who was the first Prime Minister of New Zealand, and was, incidentally, one of the international pioneers of giving women the vote.

On the international theme, and with regard to increasing the protection of the two indigenous languages on the island of Ireland, what discussions have there been about widening the net and looking to

commonalities with other indigenous languages, such as Scots Gaelic and Welsh, and considering examples of the international export of those languages, such as Scots Gaelic to Cape Breton Island, which is part of the province of Nova Scotia in Canada?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member made a valid and timely point. I do not want to overlook his mention of John Ballance, in the interests of balance — forgive the pun. New Zealand is an aspect of considerable Ulster-Scots interest; we have just heard about two examples of that. John Ballance was the first Prime Minister of New Zealand, and, subsequently, Massey was Prime Minister twice. There is considerable scope for development of tourism and other issues between Northern Ireland and New Zealand, and it is hoped that we will be able to promote that.

On the subject of languages, the honourable Member has given me the direction in which the language strategy must go. For far too long in the past, there were disputes about whether the Irish language was being used in a political or non-political sense, and about the lack of funding and development of Ulster Scots, rather than considering the situation in a holistic manner. We must examine our approach to languages and how they can be developed in a non-contentious way, and determine how people can embrace those languages in a non-threatening way as part of a culture that they may not have recognised decades ago, but are now happy to accept. That will be the essence of the language strategy. The Member has drawn attention to it, and I hope that when the strategy is unveiled, he will be content with it.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that at the North/South language meeting, considerable time was devoted to the discussion of Irish-language matters. Does the Minister believe that there was a fair allocation of time for discussion of Ulster-Scots matters? Does he believe that the additional £1 million for Ulster Scots will address the imbalance of funding between the two languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member has drawn attention to the variety of approaches that were adopted at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Not to be flippant, as I have been accused of being in the recent past, if the outcome of any meeting was that a disproportionate amount of time had been allocated to the promotion of the Irish language, and a disproportionate amount of money were to be allocated to Ulster Scots, I would, on balance, settle for that outcome.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire.

When the Minister answered a question from my colleague Barry McElduff, he talked about delays and people holding up issues. Will he tell the House what the hold-ups and the delays are in implementing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which was signed up to by the British Government and was part of the Good Friday Agreement?

Will he also tell me whether the interdepartmental charter group, which DCAL heads, has met? What has it done up until now?

11.30 am

The former Minister, Edwin Poots, did not seem to do anything with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and I have not heard anything about it from the current Minister. As my colleague Barry McElduff said, my party wants to see the implementation of an Irish language Act, and we await that. However, legislation is already in place — the aforementioned European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. What has the Minister done to ensure that all Departments implement that charter and sign up to their obligations under it, as the British Government have done? It is the law of the land.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member refers to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but he will be aware that there has been no acceptance of the need for an Irish language Act, either in that charter, by the UK Government or through Executive agreement. However, there is acceptance of the need to develop Northern Ireland's various languages, one of which is the Irish language, although there are many others. As I said in response to a previous question, we must move away from standing on ceremony and making a hyper-political point about the non-introduction of an Irish language Act. That matter has been dealt with.

We must now move forward by implementing a languages strategy that will meet the charter's demands and ensure that those who want to develop their language can do so in a way that can command support from this Department, this Minister and the Executive. That, I would have thought, should be every honourable Member's objective. We are making progress towards that objective, and we will continue to do so. I look forward to seeing the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and other Committees, meet to discuss formulation of that strategy. If Members wish, they can propose amendments as the strategy unfolds. We will then proceed with those proposals.

Mr Shannon: I echo my colleague Wallace Browne's concerns about the fact that as much time did not appear to be allocated to discussion of Ulster Scots at the NSMC meeting as was allocated to discussion of Irish.

The Minister said that seven new posts had been created in Foras na Gaeilge. He also agreed that the working group, which includes representatives from the two sponsor Departments, should continue to discuss progress made. The creation of those seven new jobs seems to be at odds with the decline in the use of the Irish language, as is evidenced by the 25% decrease in those who are studying Irish at GSCE and A level. That decline can also be seen in the Republic of Ireland. Is it wise to create seven new jobs, and to consider creating more, when Irish usage appears to be in decline?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member raises a relevant point, although I remind him that most of those jobs — all but two — have been created in the Irish Republic, and, as such, have no impact whatsoever on the departmental budget or the Assembly Budget. Those jobs are paid for, but not by my Department. Therefore, that is a matter for Foras na Gaeilge and the authorities in the Irish Republic. I agree with him that we need to ensure that more attention, time and resources are directed towards the development of Ulster Scots, because that is where the greater need for capacity building lies, as Mr Dominic Bradley suggested. That is where we need to engage in promotion, to generate support, and to ensure that there is adequate funding and resources. I intend to ensure that that is the case.

Lord Morrow: In the last sentence of his statement, the Minister said that the Council agreed to meet again in language sectoral format in November 2008. Is he confident that that will happen? If not, why not?

Will the Minister confirm whether some 80 languages are used in Northern Ireland? Is any time given to other minority languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Some Ministers face questions with trepidation, but I could answer questions such as those all day, and twice on a Sunday.

Everyone knows why the date of the next meeting might be delayed. My statement was prepared after the Council's meeting in July, when we were hopeful that the work of the NSMC would continue and that the Executive would meet. As time has dragged on and on and on, there has been no Executive meeting, principally due to the actions of Sinn Féin. Hopefully, that situation will be resolved.

In the spirit of co-operation, let us move forward so that the days of hold-ups, literally and figuratively, are over and we can get down to the business of making both countries on the island — Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic — better places for their citizens. We should advance with a spirit of mutual co-operation and an acceptance of the right of the other to live, which was not always the case.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Referral of Matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the referral of matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The Business Committee has agreed that this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 59(4)(b), this Assembly refers the following matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee:

(a) a review of progress on the implementation of the recommendations of, and the resolution of outstanding issues identified in, the Report on the Inquiry into the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters (22/07/08R); and

(b) consideration of any other matter relating to the devolution of policing and justice matters. — [*The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr Spratt).*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Integrated Schools

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 move the motion and 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools.

Despite considerable difficulties and opposition from the establishment, integrated education has managed to take root and flourish in Northern Ireland. That opposition exists despite integrated education being the preferred option for a large proportion of the population. The Alliance Party wants a resetting of the parameters to be considered in order to allow the proper development of integrated education.

Contrary to the popular perception that integrated schools receive preferential treatment in the allocation of funding, the Minister's bias is, and always has been, against integrated schools. She is specifically against the creation of integrated schools, be that through new build or the transformation of existing schools.

That is because the system being operated by officials sees integrated education as a threat to the status quo and, therefore, to the viability of existing segregated schools. The challenge is to reverse that mindset fundamentally and to make integrated education the default option. An integrated solution should be the assumption — that is what survey after survey, including the most recent 'Belfast Telegraph' survey, has indicated to be the popular option.

The Alliance Party is convinced that the integration of school systems is the most valuable step forward for society in a generation. However, it does not advocate, necessarily, the current model, of which it takes the same view as it does of the structures in this place: that any system that relies on labelling people is not sustainable in the long term. Nor does it suggest enforced integration. It simply challenges the Government to do two things.

First, ensure that all parents who seek integrated education for their children — and that has been indicated consistently by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey as being their desired option — have access to it, even if it has to be provided under a broader definition of "integration". Secondly, the Government should encourage the integrated movement by recognising, officially, that it provides the most sustainable option socially, financially and environmentally.

Viability criteria are discriminatory and flawed. First, we are stuck in a time-warped assumption of Protestant versus Catholic; can we not move forward from that? When the criteria were produced 20 years ago, "others" were ignored. They are still ignored, even though they represent around 14% of the population. Secondly, the criteria are flawed because they are frequently unrealistic. In practice, unless the catchment area is wide — for example, in a densely populated urban area — there is little chance of attaining the required mix. Try achieving a 30% Catholic threshold in much of East Antrim, or a 30% Protestant threshold on the west bank of the Foyle. It just will not happen. There is limited geographical access under the current criteria, and change is necessary if maximum access to the integrated sector is to be achieved.

Thirdly, given the basic purpose of integrated schools — to move away from division and to focus on the person rather than the label — surely thresholds are now nonsense. A significant proportion of schools' intake now comes from families who have arrived in Northern Ireland recently. There was never a good reason to put people into ethnic or national blocks. However, given the recent trend of immigration, the system has become so completely outdated that it is utter nonsense. It ignores welcome diversity in the community, including not only recent arrivals to the country, but children of mixed marriages and those who simply do not want to be labelled along any lines by bureaucrats. The ultimate nonsense is, of course, pressurising parents to sign up to a religious identity simply to meet a threshold. That runs contrary to the very ethos of shared or integrated education and works against those who want to move on from a position of stand-off.

The long-term objective of overall public policy should be the abolition of the requirement for selection using any religious, national or political criteria. If it is inappropriate for job candidates to be discriminated against on those grounds, how can it be justified for a school place? By any assessment of equality, that is blatant discrimination. The focus must be on ethos — not a neutral ethos, but a shared one — which may well, according to parental choice or demand, have a Christian basis. The criteria that constitute "integrated" must be opened up and, perhaps, the meaning of the term broadened.

My party proposes, as a temporary measure, reversal of the requirement that schools must try to prevent the smaller religious-background percentages falling below a threshold level. Instead of requiring that neither communal label should fall below 30%, the rule should be that neither should rise above 70%. That would allow for children who do not fit either the Protestant or Catholic label to be counted while

ensuring, effectively, the same level of integration that is currently in place. It would also prove the sustainability of integrated schools, which have, understandably, become the schools of choice of parents who have arrived in the country recently.

11.45 am

There are other options for shared education which may be of value, and which draw considerable parental support, as is evidenced by the recent polls in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. They include joint faith schools and shared and enhanced campuses. Although local circumstances will be a major factor in whether they are adopted, those options deserve further research.

There is a cross-cutting issue: education cannot meaningfully be separated from the shared future agenda or the cost of division. It is a fundamental building block of the 'A Shared Future' strategy, and future strategies must reflect that.

For all the progress made in integrated education and all the much-vaunted mixing of some well-known grammar schools, more than 90% of schoolchildren still attend schools with a dominant tradition making up over 90% of their school's intake. No one claims that integrated education is the only answer, but, in its broadest sense, it is the most sustainable option. It enjoys parental support and provides for a genuinely shared future from the earliest years.

The pressures of a segregated society should have been enough to see Government make far more progress on the issue of shared classrooms. The requirements of Government budgets should also have secured the status of broadly integrated education as the default option, not as an add-on sector. The issues of amalgamations, mergers, shared facilities and broad sustainability offer us another — and perhaps final — chance to get it right. That point should be built into every aspect of public policy, from the review of public administration to the new education and skills authority.

We seek enhancement, not enforcement; provision of integrated education in line with parental demand, not as a troublesome add-on. To achieve that, given geographical realities and parental opinion, we need to broaden the means by which a school may be described as "integrated", and that includes the joint faith option. We must move on from the flawed, discriminatory and ultimately nonsensical system of labelling our children in order for them to share.

In the long term, public policy should seek to promote a society that simply has no need for those terms for candidates for a place in a school. In the medium term, the focus should be on ethos, not labels; and in the short term — especially given recent demographic trends towards immigration, rather than emigration — "others" must be calculated fairly within the criteria for determining integrated status.

No party can claim to be serious about the shared future, or even about equality, if it is not prepared to prioritise this issue. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of Ballymoney High School and Ballymoney Model Primary School.

My opening remarks will be made as Chairperson of the Education Committee but, if time permits, I will also comment on my own behalf.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I offer the following comments and observations. The Committee has not specifically scrutinised the viability criteria for integrated schools, but it has examined some policy areas relevant to the subject, including the Department's 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', which is currently before it. My understanding of the sustainable schools policy is that when, in response to parental demand, the integrated sector seeks to establish a new school, the Department of Education applies the same criteria — including enrolment thresholds — as for other sectors. Likewise, when the Department is considering the long-term viability of a school, the sustainable schools policy stipulates that the same quantitative and qualitative criteria and indicators be applied for all sectors.

However, the Department of Education has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. The Bain Report recommended that the Department should explain that it is committed to facilitating and encouraging a variety of approaches to integrating education within a framework of sustainable schools. The Committee has highlighted the benefits of integrating education — as opposed to integrated schools — in the context of area-based planning of the school estate.

One benefit is the move away from integrated schools, which must have a set balance of pupil representation from the two main faith traditions, as the Department of Education prescribes, to grant-maintained integrated schools that have a threshold at opening of 30% of pupils from the minority community; and to controlled integrated schools that have a threshold at opening of 10% of pupils from the minority community, building to 30% thereafter.

Finally, the Committee for Education was particularly concerned that the integrated-school sector can establish speculatively an independent school, and subsequently get the Department to reimburse fully its capital expenditure. That runs contrary to an area-based planning approach, particularly when there are many thousand surplus school places, which can range from 50,000 to 53,000, and up to 55,000, depending on the figure that is plucked out of the air. That arrangement,

and the associated club-bank arrangements, should cease under an area-based planning approach, whereby a new school should need only to be considered as part of coherent plans to meet the educational needs of a particular area.

I now wish to make some comments as a private Member. It is regrettable that we are having this debate today, while the education system in Northern Ireland faces a crisis. It is deplorable that the Minister prefers to bury her head in the sand, despite her comment yesterday, and again today, that no confusion surrounds what will happen to P6 pupils and to the schools estate. She continues to give stated positions, yet she has not faced up to reality.

It is sad and disappointing that the party opposite is more interested in political ideology and chasing a political agenda than in prioritising the citizens of Northern Ireland, and children in particular. How many times has the Minister said that she has compassion for children and that they are at the heart of all that she does? She has such compassion for children, including those in the integrated sector, that she is not prepared to attend an Executive meeting. She has such compassion and love for the children of Northern Ireland that she spends more time in the Irish Republic, where she talks about issues that have little or no relevance to the educational estate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the context of the debate is regrettable.

Members from the Alliance Party will not be surprised to learn that, for a variety of reasons, we will support the motion. My colleagues will outline the other reasons for that support. There should be a review, but not along the lines of that that Alliance Party Members envisage. I will leave it to my colleagues to provide detail on that.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My party broadly supports the motion. We do not do so because we are opposed to integrated education. Mervyn Storey hinted that his party is opposed to integrated education, a position on which the party has waxed lyrical in other forums. We support integrated education. Indeed, it was my colleague the now deputy First Minister who introduced legislation that has helped to sustain and support that sector through some difficult years.

Trevor Lunn outlined his views on the difficulties facing the integrated sector. A review must be set in the context of the broader educational debate. It has to be conducted under the remit of sustainable schools and area-based planning, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education said, because we must build a modern education system for the twenty-first century. All sectors must be supported rather than alienated within the new vision that has been outlined. The education and skills authority proposes sectoral

support for the integrated sector. I do not doubt that the Minister's support for integration will continue.

It is hardly surprising, when Members look toward the future of our education system, that the debate has turned to the subject of post-primary school transfer. We should not focus simply on the transfer issue. I accept and understand, however, that it is the focus of attention in the community and of debate in primary and post-primary schools. The fact that we have the opportunity to discuss another sector — the integrated sector — is welcome, as is the opportunity to listen to the views of that lobby on where it believes that that sector of the educational system is heading.

Mr B McCrea: I agree with the Member — it is good that we can debate the subject in this way. Will the Member consider having a similar open and frank discussion about transfer arrangements? Will he encourage the Minister to bring the matter to the House so that we can have a similar open, friendly and frank discussion?

Mr O'Dowd: I will return to Mr McCrea's point.

Current figures show that 98% of parents who indicate that their first choice is integrated education achieve that choice — their children go through the integrated system. The demand for integrated education is being met. If the demand expands, it is the Department of Education's responsibility to meet that need, and the review will consider those factors. I emphasise that any review into any education sector must take place in line with the current and developing policies.

The subject of transfer has been debated in this House on numerous occasions, and I would have no difficulty with it being debated again. The LeasCheann Comhairle will be aware that the Business Committee decides which motions will be debated, and if a motion on transfer is proposed and is accepted by the Business Committee, Sinn Féin will robustly defend its position.

There is a collective responsibility upon us all to ensure that we give clarity and assurances to parents, teachers and pupils in the wider society. If the transfer issue is to be resolved — and I have no doubt that it can be — there will be a collective responsibility for all the politicians in this Chamber to take a deep intake of breath and approach it maturely. As a result of doing so, I have no doubt that we will have a successful education system of which we can be justifiably proud, and which will meet the needs of all children.

There have also been ongoing debates in the media about post-primary transfer. Parents need to be reassured about what primary schools should be doing at the moment; they should be teaching the revised curriculum. Pupils and teachers should enjoy the primary-school experience and let us, as politicians, sort out what happens about post-primary education. Primary-school education follows a steady course, and I believe that

the revised curriculum is a good course for our education system to follow. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: Parents with whom I have spoken have suggested that they intend to bring teachers in to teach their children out of hours in case there will be some form of prepared test. That seems to me to be unfair on people who cannot afford to do that. Furthermore, it is ridiculous that the nearest school that can take children from Kinallen in my constituency who achieve 20 points in their GCSEs is the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. Children, therefore, have to travel 30 miles just to get to a school that can take them. Clearly, something is not right.

If I can address the motion —

Mr Lunn: The Member has finally come to the point, and I remind Members that we are supposed to be talking about integrated education and not transfer. I am glad that the Member is getting to the point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the subject for today's debate. There may be other debates, but let us keep to the subject for today.

12.00 noon

Mr B McCrea: I absolutely take that point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am now moving on to talk about the issue. Thank you for the interruption.

As a party — and we have thought long and hard about this — we cannot support the motion, because it is moving in the direction of some people having some sort of favoured status. What we believe in, as an absolute core value, is a level playing field.

Mr T Clarke: The Member said that he cannot support the motion; will he tell the House why all the Members of the Ulster Unionist Party in Antrim town supported the transformation of a school to integrated status?

Mr B McCrea: What we are arguing about, I believe, is not the specifics of transformation, but changing the criteria by which it would happen. We do not want to see a favoured status coming to any one issue; it may be that in some circumstances changing to integrated status is the right thing to do for a particular school, and we will look at it in that way.

The real problem with integrated education is the law of unintended consequences. There is a knock-on effect on the viability of other schools. Look at, for example, the Bain Report, sustainability criteria or area-based planning — you cannot take those things in isolation. It is a very complicated situation.

Dr Farry: May I say, in an effort to help direct the Member to the core issue, that when the Alliance Party talks about looking at the viability criteria for integrated schools, we are not talking about tipping the playing field in any one direction with respect to start-up

numbers; we appreciate that that is not the important issue. What we are talking about is how to count those people who are classified in our society as “others” and who are ignored by the system. Mr McCrea, who claims to be a fair-minded and sometimes, I dare suggest, liberal man, would surely wish to ensure that all sections of society are reflected when it comes to public policy-making.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I take exception to the Member's suggestion that no right-thinking person could possibly oppose the motion that has been put down. The Ulster Unionist Party is not sectarian; it is here to argue for what is best for all the people of Northern Ireland. For the Alliance Party to get on its high horse and yet deliver nothing, frankly, is a little bit rich.

The Ulster Unionist Party is for shared education, of which there are numerous examples, including the Roe Valley learning partnership. I draw Members' attention to the excellent pack produced by three primary schools in my constituency, St Aloysius, Harmony Hill, and St Joseph's. For 10 years, there were discussions about how to bring people from different backgrounds together through talking, learning and getting it right. The Minister was there at the same time as me to hear about the excellent work that they have done.

We are particularly pleased to see the suggestion in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that two thirds of people would support the idea of a shared faith school bringing together the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the transferor representatives council. We think that that model deserves further investigation and that it could revitalise the controlled and maintained sectors. We affirm our commitment to a level playing field for all and we want to ensure that a counter-productive top-down solution is not imposed. Having taken on board what other people have to say, we oppose the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo inniu.

I consider the motion to be somewhat broad and ill-defined. Mr Lunn provided some clarity in his speech; it is a pity that that was not reflected in a more precise motion.

Members of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) say that they are not particularly concerned with numerical viability criteria for integrated schools. Those criteria are: 15-pupil intake in P1, increasing to 20 over five years in urban areas; 12-pupil intake in P1, increasing to 15 over five years in rural areas; and, for post-primary schools, 50 pupils per annum in urban and rural settings.

The integrated sector is more concerned with the stipulation that 30% of the intake from P1 onwards must be from the minority community, whichever that happens to be in a particular area — an issue to which Mr Lunn referred. One can see why that stipulation was included in the criteria for integrated schools. However, experience has demonstrated over the years that that is an extremely difficult criterion to fulfil in certain geographical settings. A good mix of communities is required for schools to be truly integrated, but that mix can be achieved other than with Catholics and Protestants solely.

Mr Storey: Can the Member provide an example of a maintained school that has moved to integrated status, because it seems as though there are sectors in Northern Ireland that are quite happy to stay in their own silo, yet expect others to go down a particular road?

Mr D Bradley: Many maintained schools are attended by both sections of the community and work very well on that basis — and I encourage more of that. However, I will return to the point of the debate, and away from the diversion that was introduced by Mr Storey.

There has been an influx of newcomers to Northern Ireland in recent years, and traditional definitions that we are used to hearing are totally strange to them. Their understanding and description of themselves should be reflected in the criteria for integrated schools.

Many natural supporters of integrated education object to being forced to define themselves as Catholic or Protestant. Indeed, that is anathema to them. People should not be forced to define themselves in that way, particularly in an educational context.

In the 2002 census, 14% of the population defined themselves as “other”, but that designation is not recognised in the criteria for integrated schools. If people are permitted to describe themselves as “other” for census purposes, that should be recognised in the criteria for an integrated school.

I would support the motion’s call for a review of the viability criteria for integrated schools if it included a mechanism for recognising those who define themselves as “other”. Unfortunately, the motion does not do that.

There would, of course, be potential to abuse such a criterion — not that I believe that anyone seeking to establish an integrated school would sink to such depths. However, a percentage of the 30% minority stipulation could be made up of those who define themselves as “other”. Such a change, in addition to recognising those who wish to be described in that way, would facilitate parental choice.

The SDLP is strongly in favour of parental choice, and that includes integrated education. That has been

the SDLP’s policy for many years, Mr Storey, and if you read our documents carefully, you would know that, but you obviously do not.

In any case, I have difficulty in supporting the motion as it stands, and I regret that Mr Lunn did not define more precisely the terms of the motion and the criteria that must be addressed.

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

Mr D Bradley: I ask the Minister to take on board the points that are made during the debate as part of the consultation on sustainable schools.

Miss McIlveen: Although I am uncomfortable with the motion and despite my reservations, I am content to support it. However, I do so for different reasons than those outlined by the proposer of the motion, Mr Lunn, and in the hope that a review will come to a different conclusion than the one for which he hopes.

The viability criteria for integrated schools must be reviewed, but that is not a reference to the 70:30 split. The criteria must be overhauled to remove the sword of Damocles that hangs over the head of controlled schools throughout Northern Ireland. The current criteria are so favourable to integrated schools, and, indeed, to Irish-medium schools that operate in a similar way, that the controlled sector cannot compete.

I criticised the use of the club-bank scheme by Irish-medium schools because of the damage that it caused to the Catholic maintained sector in the past, and the same criticism can be levelled at the scheme’s use for integrated schools. If an integrated school that wants to build a new school can draw on a capital fund with favourable loan conditions, such as those that exist in the club-bank scheme, how can an existing local controlled school hope to attract pupils? Parents will, of course, send their children to a new school at the expense of a school that the Department has neglected to maintain or refurbish. I have witnessed examples of that in my constituency.

Integrated primary schools need achieve only an incredibly low enrolment of 12 or 15 pupils in year 1, and integrated secondary schools must have a 50-pupil intake for year 8. The viability criteria for integrated secondary schools were changed as recently as 2000, when the then Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, reduced the required year 8 intake from 80 to 50. How can a school in the controlled sector hope to compete? Members should note that I said a school in the “controlled sector” and not a Catholic maintained school.

The Alliance Party now requests that the viability criteria become even more favourable to integrated schools. At present, if a school in a mainly Protestant area wants to be granted integrated status, a minimum of 30% of its intake must be Catholic. However, it

seems that that figure can be fudged to include children who come from a mixed marriage. The Alliance Party wants that to be fudged still further to bring into play pupils from other religions, non-religions or ethnic backgrounds when calculating the 30% figure.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No; I have enough to say today without taking an intervention.

I agree with the proposer of the motion that an education sector that asks a child to declare his or her religion is fundamentally flawed, but the current integrated model does exactly that. Is Northern Ireland not supposed to be moving on from sectarian headcounts? The controlled sector does not ask children to declare their faith before being admitted to a school.

Members have heard that the current criteria are discriminatory and flawed, and I agree completely. However, changing the criteria from Protestant versus Catholic in the 70:30 split to 70% from one faith and 30% from a collection of other faiths or non-faith children does not change that. A child's faith should have no bearing on his or her admission to a school. I go beyond asking the Minister to carry out a review of viability criteria for integrated schools; I ask her to carry out a fundamental review of whether Northern Ireland can afford to sustain a controlled sector, a Catholic maintained sector and an integrated sector.

Mr Storey: There is an Irish-medium sector, too.

Miss McIlveen: My goodness, I forgot about that.

If the Assembly is truly serious about integrating education and society, along with maximising educational resources, a review of current provisions must be carried out. The Alliance Party loves to wave around the Deloitte report on the cost of division in Northern Ireland, but the multi-sector system of education does not escape criticism in that report.

I take the opportunity afforded by today's debate to call on the Minister to declare a moratorium on announcing any new integrated schools until the completion and implementation of the area-based planning review. It seems grossly illogical to continue to open new schools when the results of that review are still unknown.

12.15 pm

As we debate the issue, we should understand that the main reason that schools opt to become integrated is because of the favourable conditions under which integrated schools exist. It is about self-preservation.

Mr T Clarke: The Member referred to favourable conditions. Does she agree that favourable conditions did not apply in Antrim, where the only remaining controlled school in the borough was forced to put the question to a third vote so that it could be asked to

transform into an integrated school? That is not a favourable condition.

Miss McIlveen: It is an absolute disgrace.

The conditions fly in the face of area-based planning, and if a failing school were to achieve integrated status under the Alliance Party's proposals, it would not mean that it would cease to be a failing school. It would merely mean that the school would be propped up by the Department for longer because its criteria for existing would be easier to achieve. All that adds to the financial burden on the Department, when money could be spent on other areas that are crying out for additional funding. Among many others, those areas include special-needs education, early years and extended schools. For those reasons, the DUP supports the motion.

Mr McCausland: I will begin by picking up on some points that were made by previous Members who spoke. John O'Dowd said:

"We should not focus simply on the transfer issue."

The problem is that the Minister of Education has presented selection as the cause of all the ills of the education system. If children fall behind, or if there are funding issues, the Minister views those problems as being the fault of the selection system. Her single-minded obsession with selection and transfer has contributed much to the crisis in the education system that has been identified by several Members today.

Dominic Bradley was asked whether any Catholic-maintained schools had transferred to integrated status. He struggled with that question, and, although he managed to speak for quite a while, he could not answer it. No Catholic-maintained school has transferred to integrated status, but Mr Bradley could not bring himself to admit that. The only schools that have ever transferred to integrated status are those from the controlled sector.

Mr D Bradley: What has that got to do with it?

Mr McCausland: It has a lot to do with it, because the subject for debate is integrated schools. Dominic has a problem in that he does not like to be reminded of that fact, and he does not want it to be highlighted that not a single Catholic-maintained school has ever transferred to integrated status.

Along with Miss McIlveen, I have reservations about the motion, but I will support it, and I will do so for different reasons. I anticipate a different outcome from that which was intended by the proposer of the motion, so he should not presume that we are of like mind on the issue; we have a clear divergence of views. The motion is so vague and bland that the DUP is able to support it, with the hope and desire for a different outcome.

The problem with the education system in Northern Ireland is that an ad hoc growth of sectors has taken place over the years, to the point that a controlled sector, a Catholic-maintained sector, an integrated sector, an Irish-medium sector and a voluntary-grammar sector have all built up. I favour a comprehensive review of education provision and of the education sectors. When such a review takes place, it will be essential that commitment to equality is at its core. The point has already been made that preferential and special treatment is being given to some sectors, particularly the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. This week, in my constituency, the Minister, unfortunately, announced the decision to transform Ballymoney Model Primary School into a controlled integrated school. When the consultation was conducted with the parents, only information on transformation was included in the ballot paper, and, therefore, an advantage was gained at the expense of the controlled sector. Yet again, there is no equality.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his contribution; his point is important and can be applied to Belfast, too. I will discuss that in due course.

I want a comprehensive review — with equality — of educational provision and the sectors, because, if we believe in a shared and better future — and that phrase is often bandied about in the Chamber — one of the core principles of a shared future is that of equality. There should be no discrimination or favouring of one particular sector.

Finally, I return to Mr Storey's point. In Belfast, a school transformation took place during a board discussion about the reorganisation of schools in that area. During discussions on the reorganisation of controlled schools, one school, suddenly, claimed it was to become integrated and, therefore, removed itself from consideration. The Minister, of course, was happy to facilitate that transformation. For those reasons, I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest as a governor in Hollybank Primary School in Newtownabbey and Whiteabbey Primary School, which is naturally integrated and has been for many years.

At the beginning of his speech, Mr Lunn painted a picture of establishment opposition to, and a bias against, integrated schools. Moreover, he said that they were considered a threat to the status quo. I disagree. Mr Lunn must realise that there is a wide perception that integrated schools have been given more than a fair wind by the establishment. It is perceived that the bias is against the controlled and maintained sectors. Why else would the Irish-medium sector, as a template for its progress, choose a model that is so similar to the

existing integrated model? Those factors negate Mr Lunn's argument.

However, no sensible person rejects the idea that integration in education is desirable. It is a concept that underpins our shared future in the Province. It is good that children are educated together; through that experience, they develop relationships that build bridges in our communities and help different communities understand each other better. That will be positive and beneficial for the community in the long term.

The problem with most widely accepted ideas is that most people accept them without question. Indeed, to ask questions about the operation of those widely accepted truths is considered overly controversial and not mainstream. That leads to an abandonment of the proper scrutiny that should be applied to all our work in the public domain, which is funded by public money. We must differentiate between the idea of integration in education, which is widely accepted, and the methods of delivery, which are not.

If an idea is delivered outside the existing structures, it encourages the creation of new structures, which leads to mushrooming bureaucracy. That must come under the cold light of public scrutiny, especially in these stringent financial times. What might have passed unnoticed a few years ago, when the economy was buoyant and there was less pressure on the public pocket, must now be examined more rigorously and questioned in more depth. Several Members have called for that day to arrive sooner rather than later.

Many schools are integrated in fact, without being integrated in a system. Pupils from diverse backgrounds and from the two main communities in the Province are educated side by side and mix freely in the classroom, playground and in society. Many large grammar schools — some have been mentioned during the debate — operate under a 70:30 or 60:40 community split in pupil population and have done so for generations. However, the great and the good in Northern Ireland, and beyond, extol the virtues of the integrated sector with a capital "I", as opposed to those that have been referred to today with a lower case "i", which do not receive a penny extra or any public plaudits.

Those schools do not receive any recognition, yet they are integrated and children from different community backgrounds are educated and play side by side.

Their integration is natural and easy. It requires no additional education bureaucracy or system to keep it in place. It is an integration that is driven by education market forces and by the wish and will of parental selection. It is a testament to improving community relations and harmony.

The problem is that social engineering, education standards, efficient delivery and attainment do not necessarily make good bedfellows. If we follow an

integrated or an Irish-medium agenda — which, essentially, is a social-engineering agenda — we must be careful that we do not impair the effectiveness or efficiency of the education service, or, in the process, damage existing good practice through the diversion of funds and the impact that those agendas have on Irish-medium units in existing schools.

There is an inherent contradiction in the Department of Education's stance on the broad range of education issues. How is it possible to hold and promote a view that we must rationalise schools, have sustainable schools and combine schools in district partnerships to ensure that resources are used efficiently — as Sir George Bain recommended — and sponsor five different school systems at the same time? How can we sustain state, maintained, voluntary, integrated and Irish-language schools while espousing efficiency in the use of resources and embarking on school closures? Such a plethora of school types is a recipe for inequality and a prescription for unfairness in the allocation of resources.

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

Mr K Robinson: Is it fair to award additional funding to a school that embarks on integrated status — yet only 10% of its pupils come from a different community — while there are other schools that do not receive an extra penny; even though 30% of their pupils come from a different community?

Mr O'Loan: Dominic Bradley made the SDLP's position on integrated schools very clear — we support parental choice. Some parents want integrated education for their children, and that should be provided. Nonetheless, we find the motion strange. There is an onus on those who propose a motion to make their purpose and intention clear. Members should not have to guess what is in the minds of the proposers, but that was the position in which we found ourselves today. The purpose of the motion was made a little clearer by the initial speeches, but the Assembly should not have to wait until then to find out what a motion means.

The proper context in which to discuss viability criteria for integrated schools is within the ongoing discussions about the creation of a sustainable schools policy. That is a very important discussion — and not an easy one. The thresholds for integrated schools are already quite low. Something that I also find slightly strange about the motion is the cost of division, which the Alliance Party talks about. That party needs to consider how any alterations might add to public costs, although that issue was clarified a little in the earlier speeches.

The cost of division is a real issue, but many strange things are said about it. One could choose many different figures from the Deloitte report — and many people do. The figure of £1.5 billion is sometimes quoted, but

that is when people pick up the total cost of running the Catholic-schools sector, as if that could somehow disappear. The real cost is the weakness that is consequent in our division, which must be considered — not merely the costs of duplication and inefficiency.

The fundamental issue about integrated education is what it is for. On the home page of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education website, there is a question asking whether integrated education contributes to peace in Northern Ireland. It is absolutely the right question, because the test for integrated education is its contribution to reconciliation. What disappoints me about the question is that it offers only two alternatives — yes or no. The situation is considerably more complex than that.

12.30 pm

Mrs I Robinson: The Member mentioned the part that integrated education has played in creating peace. Is he suggesting that the controlled sector did anything other than that; that it created mayhem and problems?

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Member for her comments. However, if she had waited, she would have heard me argue that other sectors make a significant contribution to the creation of a reconciled society. Some, although not all, people who support integrated education believe that the secret of reconciliation here is for our children to grow up together, leading to mutual understanding and to peace and reconciliation. People outside Northern Ireland have put —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will, although I may not do so again.

Mr T Clarke: Is the Member's speech following lines similar to his wife's statement about Protestants being brought up to hate Catholics?

Mr O'Loan: I will make no reference to the Member's comment.

Some of what has been proposed conforms to a seriously inadequate model. Reconciliation and stability here requires, and has always required, fundamental political change; it needs a shift in society's power balance. To a significant degree, that shift has happened, continues to happen, and must continue to happen. Achieving reconciliation here is not as simple as achieving tolerance. Certainly, different groups must tolerate each other more, but there must also be substantive change.

I wish to make a positive argument for faith schools, because that is not often done. Faith schools here are predominately in the Catholic maintained sector; however, I also wish to argue strongly for the transferor interest, because there is a danger of that interest being lost. Why should the state put money into faith schools? They are in the state's interest because they

are in the interest of society, which the state represents. Our schools and education system require values, and parents want to see values in the schools to which they send their children.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Even with additional time, I am running out of time, so, for that reason only, I cannot give way. I ask that Mr Deputy Speaker be as kind as possible.

Church schools are valued even in countries with low rates of church attendance. Ultimately, such matters depend on what parents ask for. If parents request — and they do — the continuance of church schools, society should deliver that.

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Poots: I support the motion, not for the reasons that its proposer gave but because of the preferential treatment that has been offered to the integrated sector for some years. Indeed, preferential treatment has been shown not only to the integrated sector but to the Irish-medium sector. That should be noted.

Northern Ireland's controlled sector was originally established with the intention of providing integrated education, but others decided to opt out of it. Since then, to a greater or lesser degree, we have had an integrated sector within the controlled sector. Many schools in the controlled sector attract pupils from almost every background.

Members who have contributed to the debate, in particular Mr O'Loan, have asked the same question as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) asks in a poll on its website's home page:

"Do you think that Integrated Education contributes to peace in Northern Ireland?"

All schools in all sectors in Northern Ireland contribute to peace in Northern Ireland. It does not fall within the remit of a particular sector to claim exclusively that its work contributes to a peaceful and a better Northern Ireland.

All schools have a role to play in encouraging peace in Northern Ireland. All schools have a contribution to make in educating children to understand one another's ethos, and in raising awareness of what happens in other schools and other parts of society that may not be easily accessible to them. It must be demonstrated that it is nonsense to suggest that the integrated sector has some divine right to perform that function.

A school that recently opened in my constituency basically bullied its way to being granted integrated status. It first asked local schools to change to integrated status. That did not suit the three local schools, two of which had amalgamated with other schools. In one case, two schools had merged into one, while the other case involved three schools being combined. They were new schools on new sites, and, all of a sudden, the integrated sector asked them to go integrated. At the time, those schools decided that it was not appropriate to consider seeking integrated status. Campaigners for the school involved forced the agenda until they eventually got an integrated school of their own. That happened in spite of the fact that three new schools, with hundreds of available places, had been developed in that area.

Another integrated school in my constituency opposed the opening of a new integrated school. Since that new integrated school opened, it has been announced that

the other school will close. That leaves a ridiculous situation, where a larger integrated school is to close and a smaller integrated school has opened. At the same time, teachers are being paid off in the controlled sector and there are more empty places in classrooms.

We must focus on doing the right thing for our children. There are 50,000 empty school places across Northern Ireland, to which the Minister of Education often refers. How will we deal with that issue? It is good news that more children are being born than anticipated, because that will help to address the issue. There must be rationalisation in some areas. Thus far, it is the controlled sector in which rationalisation has taken place and from where there has been movement into the integrated sector.

We must see a fair and equitable sharing-out of the pain involved in rationalisation across all education sectors. The controlled sector cannot suffer alone. It cannot be argued that the maintained sector can go on for ever without significant rationalisation, when the controlled sector has suffered the consequences.

I support the motion. I want the Minister to consider the issues involved and to end the preferential treatment that the integrated and Irish-medium sectors have received, and to stop the nonsense of starting up schools with as few as 12 children. That practice should be ceased forthwith, in particular when there are empty classrooms and empty desks in the immediate area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that mobile phones should be switched off.

Mrs I Robinson: One could be forgiven for being paranoid about state-controlled schools being picked on and being told that if they do not become integrated they are on their way out. In the context of what Nuala O'Loan and Mary McAleese said about how they regard Protestants in Northern Ireland, one may believe that there is an attempt to destroy state-controlled and grammar schools and everything that we hold dear, because such schools reflect the Britishness of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

The Alliance Party promotes the NICIE guidelines and is, in a way, at the front of the campaign to see schools transformed to become integrated, because that party is hoping that that will produce little Alliance voters of the future. I support people having the right to choose, but that choice should be based on truth and equality; let us not simply pick on controlled schools.

In my constituency alone, there is evidence of the controlled sector being targeted as schools in Dundonald are being allowed to become rundown, and there are no schools along the carriageway at Newtownbreda. Despite that, we are seeing the mushrooming of integrated schools in areas where they should not be, because schools existed in those areas already and

would have been able to continue in the controlled sector had money been invested in them.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that it is somewhat ironic that there seems to be greater emphasis on opening integrated schools in leafy suburbs and that there are remarkably few integrated schools being opened at interface areas, where a real contribution to peace building could be made?

Mrs I Robinson: I concur with my colleague's comments. I recall that there was a dispute about the planning criteria for Lagan College and the Millennium Integrated Primary School in my constituency, as we argued that their locations were hazardous to children. Lo and behold, a few years later, after those schools have been expanded, have had Portakabins added and are getting increasing amounts of money thrown at them because they are bussing children from all over the Province — the pupils are not coming from just local schools, they are coming from areas right across the board, and controlled schools cannot offer such a service — an application has been made for road-widening schemes.

The Alliance Party in Castlereagh will defend the life of a tree should their own lives be lost in the battle, yet every tree was pulled down at Lagan College to enable the road to be widened and there was not a cheep out of the Alliance Party. We were called bigots and all sorts of things by the Alliance Party in Castlereagh and around the Province because we said that the schools were not in a suitable location because they were on little back roads in the country, but that is par for the course.

I believe with all my heart that our children should learn together; however, I do not believe that a tiny minority of children should receive preferential treatment over the overwhelming majority, particularly when that ultimately serves to jeopardise the delivery of education to those attending established schools. Although the Alliance Party might want to see the viability criteria relaxed, I contend that any such move will only compound problems that are being experienced in education and will further undermine the delivery of education to pupils.

In fact, those who wish to see true integration — in which the delivery of education to the majority of our children is not challenged or threatened — will want to see the criteria tightened up. There will be those who will, undoubtedly, react with horror to any suggestion that the integrated sector could possibly be discriminatory or sectarian.

Although integrated education might seem like a good idea, it is discriminatory and sectarian in practice. The integrated sector would not exist were it not for segregated education. Therefore, integrated schools are part of the sectarian system of education.

The integrated sector receives preferential financial and operational treatment compared to established schools, and it is, therefore, overtly discriminatory. At a time when school numbers are in decline —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs I Robinson: At a time when the Department cannot provide established schools such as Tor Bank with the required funds to improve and expand their services — one of the most disgraceful situations in my constituency of Strangford — it is madness to spend millions of pounds on a new tier of education.

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

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I do not intend to get involved in this game of ping-pong between the DUP and the Alliance Party. I hope that all children have their radios switched off.

Mrs I Robinson: Why?

Mr Dallat: Because this is not what education is about. Having spent 30 years in the profession, I speak with a degree of experience. I spent seven years in an integrated school in Donegal, where the Protestant community was in the minority but cherished and appreciated for its difference and diversity, and the following 23 years in St Paul's College in Kilrea — a town that experienced trouble. I did not hear one sectarian, biased or bigoted remark in all those years; I applaud that school.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to teachers in all schools, particularly the controlled and maintained schools. I do not think that they were ever thanked for the contribution that they made towards keeping children away from bigotry and the Troubles through the years. I acknowledge the work of the teachers and the boards of governors in the controlled and maintained schools who provided an oasis of peace for children who, when outside school, often became contaminated by people — including politicians — who should have known better.

In the worst of times, teachers played a vital role in steering their pupils away from trouble, away from paramilitaries and such like, and not once have they been thanked. In fact, most VIP visitors to this part of Ireland are brought first to an integrated school. That has a negative reflection on the other schools, because it suggests that only the integrated schools made a contribution. All schools made a contribution.

I wanted to say that now, because I hope and pray that the Troubles are at an end, and all people who made a contribution to peace deserve to be recognised. Teachers in all schools, particularly in the controlled and maintained sector, made a contribution that was

bigger than anyone appreciates. I make no apology for saying that.

I am not against a change in criteria for schools, so long as it does not have implications for those schools of which I spoke so highly. Some of them are under threat of closure because of the numbers game — I think that the new minimum enrolment is to be 105 for primary schools and 500 for secondary schools, but I am sure that the Minister will put me right on that. Many of those schools are in the hubs of their communities, and that is important. They make an outstanding contribution to education. That is particularly true in rural communities, where there is increasing collaboration between schools that provide education for children from different backgrounds. That is to be encouraged, and it is working successfully.

Partnerships were mentioned earlier. There are highly successful partnerships in my constituency of East Derry. Nothing pleases me more than to see children outside school, wearing different uniforms and in friendship. That is the way forward.

Community schools were forgotten in the mists of time around the 1980s, but, finally, there has been a rediscovery of the community-type schools, which reach out to the educational needs of those whom the education system missed — the 250,000 people over 16 who have problems with literacy and numeracy.

The schools that I have referred to are providing that service. The way forward for many of our schools is for them to reach out into the community, reinvent themselves as community schools, and encourage not only higher levels of literacy and numeracy but healthier lifestyles.

2.15 pm

Education is not a subject to which one can apply the principles of mass production. Each community has its own needs and wants. The education system should apply equally across the board.

When I was a teacher I used to give out lines, and I apologise for that now. However, I would love to give Mr Storey a few lines, because he never seems to keep quiet when other people are speaking [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is in danger of receiving some lines himself.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you. I welcome the debate, and I thank Trevor Lunn for tabling the motion today. The motion and the debate allow us to consider how the strategic landscape in education is being improved for the benefit of all children, regardless of school type or sector.

I have a specific duty, which I welcome — it is to encourage and facilitate, under law, the Irish-medium

and integrated sectors. In addition to my duty, I believe not just in integrated education but in the integrating of education and I am often struck by similarities in stories between the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. Cuireadh tús leis an dá earnáil i bhfoirgnimh nár mhó ná botháin iad. Iad á dtiomáint ag tuismitheoirí a raibh prionsabal dian daingean acu. Each began in what were little more than huts, driven by parents of utter conviction; a conviction that I have witnessed at first hand during my visits.

I have visited a number of integrated schools including: the All Children Integrated Primary School in Newcastle; Omagh Integrated Primary and Nursery School; and the McClintock Controlled Primary School. Furthermore, I have opened the children's garden at New Lodge Nursery School and visited the excel club in Hazelwood Integrated College.

Additionally, I have carried out many different launches in the integrated and other sectors, and I believe that the points made by John Dallat, in that respect, are well made. For example, I launched the electoral registration week at Priory Integrated College in Holywood, and this Friday I am going to be visiting Shimna Integrated College in Newcastle. Moreover, members of the party opposite will be glad to know that Gregory Campbell and I visited Oakgrove Integrated Primary School in Derry last week.

Is saibhre iad ár bpáistí inniu de thoradh ar an dea-obair a rinne na daoine díograiseacha úd ag an tús. Our children are richer for what those dedicated individuals have given us and I want to say thanks to them all.

In today's debate, some Members mentioned diversity. I agree that we have a much more diverse Ireland — both North and South. Children from many countries in the world are coming into our education sector. However, I do not think that we should make any presumptions that they are all in the integrated sector. In fact, they are in many different sectors: the controlled sector; the Catholic sector; the Irish-medium sector, and the integrated sector. Therefore, any policies that we introduce must focus on those newcomers, and that is a presumption in any of the policies that I am examining.

Although we have the integrated sector, we also have other sectors that are integrating. I have seen tremendous work in the integrated sector, but, equally, I have seen tremendous work with the different sectors working together.

Basil McCrea referred to the diversity pack, which was brought together by three different schools in his constituency. I was at that launch. It was the culmination of years of work doing real integration work between those schools. I commend those schools for their efforts, efforts that are being replicated right across the North.

There are also 31 learning communities across the North. Indeed, I am hosting events that bring together school principals from the same area and from different sectors. We are sitting down together over a bite to eat, discussing what provisions those principals require.

I was in County Fermanagh last week and I will be in County Down this week. Some of those discussions have been very good. In some cases, the principals have told me that they, as part of the learning community, are discussing many issues, and they have found those discussions useful because everything is on the table for discussion.

We are discussing the integrated sector today, and I take on board Trevor Lunn's points. I am not going to go into the transfer issue, or any other issues, as there are many aspects of education, and I want to focus on the integrated sector.

Demand from parents for integrated education is growing. Currently, we have 58 integrated schools, accommodating over 18,000 children and young people: that is a lot of children, and they deserve our support. The motion is underpinned by an issue of great importance to education today — viability. Everybody wants viable schools: no one argues against that, and we must start with the strategic context. I am crystal clear about the big issue in education in the North — raising standards for all our children, based on equality.

I want to secure the strategic, sustainable future of all sectors. I recognise that the needs of schools in different sectors are not the same. The integrated and Irish-medium sectors are growing, while other sectors are contracting. We facilitated the integrated sector by opening new schools and supporting transformation in a unique twin-track approach. People must remember that proposals for schools in all the different sectors are brought to me — I do not initiate them.

I will seek to meet the needs of the growing sectors while taking care to consider the needs of those in which the numbers of children are falling. Education must always be about the children — all the children — and not just the schools. I consider all proposals for new schools, or changes to existing schools, with the best educational interests of children in mind.

Since becoming Aire Oideachais, or Minister of Education, I have had the opportunity to approve a new integrated nursery unit, a new integrated post-primary college and the transformation of two existing primary schools to integrated status. Whenever I have turned down requests for transformation to integrated status, or approved the closure of an integrated school, I have done so with the education of the children in those schools, and schools likely to be affected, uppermost in my mind. I do not take such decisions lightly, and all are based on sound evidence. Children deserve equality.

Many people in the North still think about schools as institutions, and that is fine, as long as we remember that the schools are there to serve the children, and that the children are in the centre. Some Members are beginning to understand that distinction and see the benefit in it for all of society.

I have asked my Department to prioritise action that I believe will address properly the duty to encourage and facilitate. That step change in support for schools, including the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, is my priority, as that will deliver what the sectors need and deserve. I am putting in place strategic actions to deliver those aims: a sustainable-schools policy; area-based planning; and the review of public administration (RPA). Those actions will support greater sharing and integration across all our schools, because a commitment to greater sharing among schools is at the heart of those policies.

Sustainable schools and area-based planning both explicitly take account of the Department of Education's duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. They aim to put integrating across a range of diversities at the centre of the way forward across all school sectors. However, formally integrated schools will have an important part to play, and they deserve our support.

Forward planning for integrated and Irish-medium schools does not take place at the moment, and that must change. Area-based planning will provide forward planning for those two sectors. It will enhance the educational experience of the children in integrated or Irish-medium schools, and it will demonstrate a commitment to encourage and facilitate. I have ensured that NICIE and the Irish-medium sector are represented on all the working groups that I have established — whether they relate to RPA, area-based planning, or any policy that is being introduced — so that they are at the core of the decision making.

On many occasions in the past, NICIE and the Irish-medium sector were not consulted until the end of the process. The Irish-medium and integrated sectors were told to fit their schools into policies that had already been implemented. Fortunately, we have rectified that situation. The Irish-medium and integrated sectors are now taken into consideration at the beginning of the planning process.

Along with the most senior people in the Department, I am chairing a high-level group of the review of public administration. I have heard talk across the Chamber about the importance of people sitting down and planning together, and that is what I am doing. For the first time in the North of Ireland, all the different sectors are coming together around a table and planning administration on an area basis. Around that table are all the senior partners: Protestant Churches, transferors, Catholic bishops, NICIE, the Irish-medium

sector and the boards. We are taking planning and strategic planning very seriously.

The RPA will ensure that the education and skills authority provides more coherent support to schools. That will especially benefit the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. As I have said, the more that those sectors are involved in the earliest stages of planning, the better. Sectoral support will provide a voice for each sector and level the playing field for all, regardless of the number of institutions represented; it must be remembered that every institution serves children.

Sustainable schools deal with the viability issues that are common to all sectors, including stable enrolments, sound finance, strong leadership, accessibility and links with the community. There is one difference for integrated schools: the law requires that an integrated school must have a mix of Catholics and Protestants to be viable.

I mentioned ethnic minorities earlier, and I listened very carefully to the discussion about ethnic minorities. Every sector has ethnic minorities but — as Members will know — there is a law about viability and integration. Setting up a new school or approving a school transformation is a very serious commitment. In all the decisions that I make, I consider the children and the teachers in integrated schools and other schools. I will consider the impact on public finances, and I will not put the survival of an unviable transforming school above the needs of children. There are decisions that should have been taken before my tenure as Minister of Education that were not taken. Schools that are left to wither on the vine face serious difficulties, and that is simply not fair.

People claim that rationalisation is affecting only one sector. I ask those people to examine the decisions that I have made. I have not simply made decisions about schools in the controlled sector. Irish-medium schools have been closed; integrated schools have been closed; controlled schools have been closed; and Catholic schools have been closed. We can have robust political debate, but please let those debates be truthful.

I welcome the fact that integrated education is afforded a special place in law. However, religious mixing is at the heart of that special place. The current definition of reasonable numbers of Catholics and Protestants states that the minority community must constitute a minimum of 30% of the pupils. The threshold of 30% was introduced in 1996 and is based on experience. That experience shows that minorities below 30% struggle to attract more pupils from the minority community. Indeed, in some schools, the minority community shrank when it was below 30%.

However, it is important to make the distinction that we do not insist that transformed schools achieve that 30% target from the outset; that would be very inflexible.

Some people in the sector confuse flexibility with an acceptable lower standard of mixing, but that is not the case. Transformed schools are expected to increase their minority community representation from 10% to 30% over time.

2.30 pm

There is clearly no consensus in the Chamber today on the way forward. However, I will carry out a review in the Department, but it will be in the context of existing policy and legislation. I believe firmly that integrated education is a valuable contributor to our educational landscape. Its merits speak for themselves.

I will set out some of the facts about integrated education to ensure that the House is clear about the issue. There are schools in the integrated sector that have more children applying to them than they have capacity to accept. They are popular, oversubscribed schools across the sectors.

I asked my Department how many first-preference applicants to post-primary integrated schools were accepted this year. This September, 1,952 children made first-preference applications to integrated post-primary schools, of whom 1,930 were accepted. That means that 99% of those who applied to the integrated post-primary sector as their first preference found a place in an integrated school. That compares to the 84% of children who successfully applied to a grammar school. I know that that means —

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

The Minister of Education: I know that that means that 22 children who made a first-preference application to an integrated post-primary school were not successful, and that there will have been unsuccessful lower-preference applications. However, at a general level —

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

The Minister of Education: At a general level, integrated post-primary education has the capacity to admit practically all who choose it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for the debate today and for your lenience.

Dr Farry: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today. To date, our education debates have focused almost exclusively on post-primary transfer, so it is useful to move away from that and to reflect on the wider educational issues — although I do not necessarily welcome the tenor of some of the remarks made today.

It is worth stressing that integrated education is both a successful and popular form of education, and that is reflected in a succession of opinion polls that stress overwhelming support from all sides of the community

for integration and other forms of mixing in education. There is considerable demand from parents for integrated places, yet only 6% of our children attend integrated schools, a fact that many people in the rest of the world find quite bizarre.

Like the Minister, I, too, pay tribute to the work of NICIE, the Integrated Education Fund and those many hundreds of parents who have taken the initiative and tried to set up integrated schools. We have now reached that 6% threshold, and we must consider how we can take the next step and meet the demand from right across society for integrated schools. Of course, that goal cannot be achieved in isolation — we must also tackle the broader demographic crisis in our school system. Many Members have mentioned the 50,000 empty school places, and that figure is rising.

However, a fundamental mistake is being made in the system. Far too many people, both in political parties and the educational establishment, view integrated schools as a further fragmentation of an already fragmented system.

A change of mindset is needed, and integrated schools must be viewed as part of the solution. A newbuild or a transformed school — the latter being the more likely option in the current situation — would provide a much more sustainable, local solution. For example, two rural primary schools in a village may be under threat of closure. As much rationalisation is taking place on a sectoral basis, rather than across the sectors, the tendency would be to close both schools. The students from both sides of the community would then have to be bussed to schools in a different town or village. Surely we should consider a solution —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Sorry. Surely we should consider having a single school in that community. Many parents would welcome such a solution.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to consider the issue further and to address the needs of the integrated sector in particular. I take much comfort from her comment that the Department may need to revisit the way in which it fulfils its duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, because the system has been too passive in the past.

Having said that, I am concerned about the approach to the review of the viability criteria, because the Minister has stated that it will be undertaken in the context of current policy and legislation. Surely a review should be much broader than that, and it should examine both legislation and policy.

I shall now focus on how people from different backgrounds are reflected in the viability criteria. The issue of start-up numbers is not critical for the integrated-education movement — the issue is how

people are treated and counted. Pupils in the “other” category were effectively neglected from the viability criteria, which states that there should be a 70% to 30% split, which was recently changed from a 75% to 25% split.

According to Department of Education figures, around 20% of children in integrated primary schools come from “other” backgrounds, and around 16% of children in integrated secondary schools come from “other” backgrounds. Those figures include children from mixed marriages or relationships, new residents in Northern Ireland, and parents who want their children to break away from traditional definitions of identity. For example, people who come here from Great Britain, such as members of the security forces, may come from Protestant backgrounds in English terms, but they do not wish to be treated as Protestants in Northern Irish terms.

Labelling runs very much against the ethos of integration, and people make conscious decisions to send their children to integrated schools to get away from the situation that exists in Northern Ireland. However, they end up in the perverse situation whereby, in some schools, parents are pressurised to sign their children up as either Protestants or Catholics in order to meet the artificial criteria that have been set down by Government. Many people find that distasteful, and it is, ultimately, counterproductive.

We need to move to a new phase where there is no labelling whatsoever in schools. That transition can happen by counting “others” as part of the 30% minority. As long as the majority does not pass the 70% threshold, we can maintain the ethos behind the policy while reflecting the changing situation on the ground.

I welcome, with some trepidation, the DUP's support for the motion. However, that party seems to be labouring under the illusion that examining the viability criteria for integrated schools will open up the opportunity for an attack on integrated schools. I can say with total confidence that the integrated-schools movement in Northern Ireland has vitality and sustainability. Integrated schools are the most sustainable form of education financially, economically, educationally and socially. Any review will establish that.

Mr Kennedy: Has the Member had a chance to analyse the experience of Armagh Integrated College, which opened a few years ago, but now faces closure due to a lack of viability?

Dr Farry: I am familiar with some extremely successful integrated schools across Northern Ireland. However, if an integrated school is suffering and is not sustainable, it should be subject to the same analysis as schools in other sectors. In my constituency of North Down, an integrated school closed because it did not meet the criteria. Therefore, although I support integrated

schools, a blanket approach cannot be adopted whereby they are defended at all costs.

I welcome Sinn Féin's support for the motion and I stress that we are talking about a range of sectors, and within the subject of sharing, there are different options, including faith schools and shared campuses. Integrated education is probably the apex of a range of options for sharing, but all options should be put on the table. There are a diverse number of sectors that provide value in their own right.

I regret the position adopted by the Ulster Unionist Party in opposing the motion. That party speaks the language of shared education. However, once again, the rhetoric is right, but the actions are wrong, and that party has made clear its intention to oppose the further development of integrated schools.

There is no distinction between capital “I” integration and lower case “i” integration. Integrated schools are integrated schools. The other schools, which have mixed populations, are mixed schools, but have an ethos that is fundamentally grounded in one or other of the dominant traditions in Northern Ireland. It is important that people are crystal clear on that point.

I am somewhat confused by the SDLP's approach to the motion. On the one hand, it seems to agree that there is a need to review the viability criteria for integrated schools. However, because the motion does not prejudice the conclusion of a review by putting it down on paper, the SDLP seems to be intent on opposing it. Although the SDLP is going to some lengths to dance on the head of a pin on some issues, that is taking things to the extreme. I urge the SDLP to back what is, in effect, the progressive way forward for education in our society, and not to leave itself on the wrong side of such an important argument.

In response to Michelle McIlveen's remarks, several DUP politicians have weighed in heavily behind controlled schools that have sought to transform to integrated status. I am mystified why they would do that at constituency level but oppose integrated schools at policy level right across Northern Ireland. Indeed, the viability criteria will give many of the schools that seek to transform from controlled to integrated status a better chance of survival and meeting the 30% target.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: I urge support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Planning in Residential Areas

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.

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to review, and where necessary to amend, planning policies to protect the character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

The issue of planning has continued to cause great concern and controversy, not only in my constituency of South Belfast, but right across Northern Ireland. Many MLAs are approached by constituents who face the frustrating prospect of liaising with the Planning Service and who feel, from the start, that they are fighting a losing battle in trying to preserve their neighbourhoods.

Both the regional development strategy and the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan promote a drive to provide more housing in urban areas and advocate an increase in the density of urban housing. However, they also caution that this should not be achieved through overdevelopment or unsympathetic housing proposals in established residential areas. In addition, planning policies provide the guidance to achieve a more balanced approach. Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS 7), which addresses the quality of residential environment, states:

"In established residential areas proposals for housing developments will not be permitted where they would result in unacceptable damage to the local character, environmental quality or residential amenity of these areas."

Planning Policy Statement 12 (PPS 12) focuses on the issues associated with making better use of existing land within settlements for housing. However, like PPS 7, PPS 12 aims to promote the increase of housing density in urban areas while also preserving residential and environmental amenity, with particular emphasis on the protection of areas of distinctive townscape character.

2.45 pm

Those who object to planning applications find that it is all too often a disparaging and fruitless exercise. The shortcomings of the Planning Service have left many serious issues to be addressed if a balance is to be struck between creating new and sustainable communities and preserving established residential spaces.

The cumulative effect of planning proposals in certain areas can have a major impact on residents. In August

2007, the then Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, addressed that issue in a planning circular, stating:

"The Minister wishes to ensure the established character of these areas is properly protected in line with policy objectives and that the individual or cumulative effects of proposals do not significantly erode the environmental quality, character and amenity of existing areas, for example through inappropriate design or through over development."

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that, since the former Minister announced that policy, significant improvements have been made through PPS 7 in all council areas, and that we are all very grateful for that?

Ms Lo: I thank my colleague for that intervention. Overdevelopment places a huge strain on local infrastructure, particularly on road safety, weight of traffic, and parking. As the Department for Social Development's (DSD) recently introduced residents' parking scheme initiative highlights, there is already a desperate need for parking provision in urban areas.

The introduction of increased-density housing would serve only to exacerbate the problem. Overdevelopment has led to the erosion of areas of townscape character, with the architecture, size and scale of new developments not in keeping with current or long-established areas. Garden grabbing in residential areas, the loss of green space, and the illegal removal of trees can all have a detrimental impact on the environment, on account of increased density of housing.

Individuals have been placed under immense stress through the loss of privacy and daylight, and the increase in noise caused by new buildings that are crammed up against their homes. Some people have been approached by developers who use aggressive tactics or who pester them with continual offers.

The impact on established communities is easy to see when one considers the Holyland area of South Belfast — a residential area that is now swamped by apartments and houses in multiple occupation (HMO), with the associated problems of crime, antisocial behaviour and loss of amenities for families. It is unfair that applicants have the right to appeal decisions, but objectors do not. The only recourse for objectors is a judicial review, which is costly; or a complaint to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman. Both options apply only to procedural issues, rather than the decision on an application.

Piney Hills provides a good example of all those problems, and represents the erosion of an established community at the heart of South Belfast. The gradual removal of purpose-built family homes in favour of high-density apartment dwellings for individuals and couples is having a huge impact, not only on the community in residence, but on the aesthetic character and environmental amenity of the area.

Although it is situated in a conservation area, Piney Hills has been affected by the depletion of a number of established green areas, gardens and trees, some of which were subject to preservation orders that were flagrantly disregarded by developers. Some properties have been purchased and subsequently abandoned due to the slump in the housing market, causing unsightly neglect and further damage to the environmental amenity and townscape character.

In conclusion, the Planning Service needs an overhaul. A policy review is required to provide strong and clear guidelines so that there is no room for abuse or misinterpretation of terminology. A brownfield site refers to a previously developed but unused site — it does not mean that developers can participate in garden grabbing.

Better community consultation will ensure that every step of the planning process is transparent and understood by all, which will cut out unnecessary planning work and arguments. A right of appeal for third parties should be introduced for cases where a planning decision will have far-reaching implications. More powers of enforcement should be allocated to the Planning Service and the courts, so that they can impose heavier fines and penalties on developers. Stringent supervision of developments is required, and a record of offences could be kept where conditions of an application have been breached.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member agree that, in addition to the penalties that she outlined, costs should be awarded to those developers who appeal successfully?

Ms Lo: I will continue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member not recognise that the stringent penalties that she outlined will lead to the dissipation of frivolous objections and the emergence of solid objections and that, therefore, awarding costs to those developers who successfully appeal would also be sensible?

Ms Lo: In many instances, developers railroad residents who have very little power or money to support their objections.

There should be an emphasis on quality design and construction, including preventative measures, such as flood prevention and the utilisation of renewable materials and energy. Developers should be forced to maintain purchased properties to a reasonable standard while they await a decision or when development work does not commence immediately. Perhaps, there should also be a time limit for developers to begin work on site. It should be a priority to raise the quality and volume of staff in the Department to address the slow turnaround of work.

I call on the House to support my motion, which calls for a review of planning policies to protect the

character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

Mr Ross: Over the past 18 months, I doubt that any Member has not been visited by constituents who are concerned about garden grabbing. In many cases, massive apartment blocks are being built that totally change the look and feel of a local community. Not only do such apartment blocks have a visual impact, but they impact on the traffic in the area and are often built without due consideration for car parking.

This time last year, we were talking about the explosion of development in urban areas and the multitude of apartments being built left, right and centre. Not all development is bad — it is entirely necessary, and I do not advocate a blanket ban. However, it is important that when there is development in residential areas, due consideration is given to residents and the impact that the new houses or apartments will have on the local area.

It is impossible to argue that in the vast majority of cases, multiple-occupancy apartment blocks do not dramatically alter the character of the areas in which they are built, particularly when compared with streets that have been untouched for several decades. However, as building around the country has slowed down or, in some cases, stopped completely, that problem has ceased to some extent. Property investment by developers is not at its previous level when any small pieces of land were being filled by towering blocks of apartments.

In addition to the credit crunch and nosediving property prices, that decrease is due to the guidelines that were issued by the previous Minister of the Environment, Mrs Arlene Foster, which made it more difficult for developers to build multi-occupancy dwellings in residential areas. That direction had an impact, as planners paid particular attention to the Minister's circular and the impact of any new developments on the overall character of an area. That was referred to by both Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

Although the current downturn in the housing market has been acknowledged, it is hoped that it will not be the case for much longer. Therefore, it is important that when building begins again, the Minister takes practical steps to ensure that, first, the character of an area will not be unduly impacted upon and, secondly, that the environmental impact on existing amenities and drainage will not result in flooding.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that there is a particular problem in the East Antrim constituency, particularly in the borough of Newtownabbey, where, during the approach to a holiday period — be it May Day, the eve of St Patrick's Day, the Twelfth of July or Christmas — the area is afflicted by a strange visitation in which trees and, in some instances, houses suddenly

fall down? Has the Minister a role to play in the future prevention of that particular scourge?

Mr Ross: Of course, when such mysterious incidents happen, it is important that they are investigated. In East Antrim, there have been incidents of flooding recently and in 2007, when the flooding was, perhaps, more severe. Much of that has been blamed on inadequate drainage in new developments and the fact that, in many cases, buildings have been erected on flood plains. It is, therefore, important that the Minister ensures that building does not occur on flood plains and that developments have adequate drainage.

Indeed, the current slowing down of the property market allows the Department the space to define proposals and policies in time for the inevitable upturn in construction, so that, where it can be avoided, there is no excessive development in already built-up areas. I understand that the Department is already dealing with many of the issues to which the motion refers. I support the Minister's work in that regard. Perhaps he will indicate whether he will re-examine PPS 7: Quality Residential Environments, to determine what additions could be made to deal with the increasing number of flat conversions and apartments.

Furthermore, it is important to consider reducing the coverage of hard surfacing, which has become a feature of many new developments. That would ensure that greater volumes of rainwater are retained on sites, thereby reducing the surge of water that runs into rivers and can cause flooding, particularly in more vulnerable areas of Northern Ireland.

I support the motion and look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an ruin.

I thank the Members who brought the motion before the House. I welcome the opportunity to speak on it.

In October 2007, "garden grabbing"—the practice of replacing homes and gardens with high-occupancy townhouses and apartment blocks—was debated in the Chamber. Thankfully, the previous Environment Minister was committed to deal with the issue to ensure that back gardens are not categorised as brownfield sites. The exercise of cramming new housing developments into residential areas is not a suitable way to alleviate housing pressures. It takes away from local character, as well as from the environmental and social quality of life of residents and communities. Sinn Féin called for those practices to be monitored to ensure that suitable housing should be properly designed and kept in context with the local area and surroundings. Current planning policy should be amended to protect explicitly the character of existing residential areas, which have recently been under threat from inappropriate densities of new residential development.

Sinn Féin would welcome a review of policies in relation to PPS12. I understand that guidance was issued by the previous Environment Minister. At the end of that process, a policy is needed that advocates a sustainable approach to housing through increased density and use of brownfield sites. That must be balanced with the need to protect the character of existing residential areas.

In the current economic climate, social and affordable housing should be promoted through policy. Under the Semple Report's proposals and recommendations, the Housing Executive should be more proactive in vesting land for social housing. In disposal of land to the private sector, the Housing Executive should, in appropriate circumstances, seek to ensure that significantly more than 20% of the development is provided for social and affordable housing.

Social and affordable housing should form the building blocks of renewed communities. Research has shown that mixed-income and mixed-tenure communities have been a success. Residents consider their neighbours to be ordinary people like themselves. Young families are attracted to such areas. Problems that are often associated with low-income areas do not occur.

3.00 pm

Any policy should be inclusive. The provision of public open space, governed by PPS 8, is also an important element of any scheme and must be incorporated in such a way as to enhance the overall living conditions of residents. In the recent past, developers have tried to cram in as many houses as they can; where they are required to provide open space, it is normally at the bottom of the site or out of the road, whereas it should be suitably positioned to enhance developments.

Sinn Féin supports the motion. Planning policy should be reviewed and amended to ensure that all future residential development respects the character and the amenity of existing areas and contributes to environmental quality. Future developments must be sustainable in many ways; they must be accessible to existing infrastructure and facilities; and they must provide good quality living accommodation across a mix of tenures in a way that encourages successful and vibrant communities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the fact that we are debating planning and development in residential areas, and I congratulate the proposers of the motion for raising the issue in the Assembly.

New developments can cause real trauma to homeowners when new planning proposals are issued for their neighbourhoods which can adversely affect their homes and lives. Even planning applications for areas further afield, which are seen as threatening to

the neighbourhood, can cause upset and motivate people to oppose new proposals.

However, I wish the proposers of the motion had been more specific and less woolly. The wording of the motion is very general; in order to change the planning system, we need to get down to specifics. I hope that the Alliance Party is not more interested in headline-grabbing and leading a debate in the Assembly than in bringing about real change — such as that achieved on the garden grabbing issue, where the Minister has removed mention of gardens from the definition of “brownfield site”. There, a change was achieved.

The motion contains a strange mix of components. The first part of it concerns the protection of residential character; the second, the creation of mixed and balanced communities. I view those as different aspects of the planning system.

Change to residential character is ongoing, as older homes with real character and larger plots are replaced by multiple dwellings or blocks of apartments. Insufficient emphasis has been placed on the importance of preserving residential character. It would have been helpful had the proposers of the motion come forward with specific proposals as to how PPS 7 or PPS 12 should be changed. That would effect change in the planning system and affect how planning officers go about their duties.

I welcome the circular issued by the Planning Service's director of operations, Anne Garvey, to all planning officers in August 2007, which highlighted the references to protection of residential character in PPSs and reminded all staff to take particular care when determining the outcome of planning applications in residential areas.

Like other Members, I have noticed some movement in the balance of the decision-making process in the Planning Service. More frequently, one sees terminology such as:

“the proposal is contrary to policy QD1 of the planning policy statement on quality residential environments.”

That has to be welcomed. I hope that the Minister will undertake to continue to ensure that planning officers give serious weight to aspects of the planning system that give protection to the character of residential properties.

The planning system is complicated. The regional development strategy is at the highest level, and beneath it are area plans, areas of townscape character, conservation areas, listed-building protection and PPS 7 and PPS 12, which largely govern this issue.

Everyone will agree that there is room for further improvement. I hope that those matters will be reviewed to afford greater protection. Unfortunately, reviews of planning policy such as PPS 5, which was debated yesterday, seem, on occasion, to take an eternity. I hope that such a lengthy process will not be repeated.

Finally, in PPS 12, the reference to mixed or balanced residential communities has a number of meanings, including the regional spread of homes, mixed tenure and the encouragement of the development of balanced local communities. However, it is not clear at which interpretation the motion is steered. Ultimately, it is people who create communities. I look forward to learning about specific proposals for effecting change in the planning system from the proposers of the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it.

As is the case with many Members, planning issues comprise a considerable amount of my constituency work. I appreciate Mr Beggs's remarks. It is hard to be too specific when speaking about a broad area, especially as planning issues can vary considerably, particularly between rural and urban areas.

I represent South Belfast, which is a diverse and vibrant constituency. It encompasses: the leafy suburbs of the Malone Road; the excesses of commercialism and its associated problems on the Golden Mile; the new and expanding housing developments in Castlereagh; and the terraced housing of the Village area, off the Lisburn Road.

Certainly, it is perceived to be, and is in parts, a leafy, affluent suburb, but it also comprises two of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, resulting in a huge demand for diverse and, indeed, affordable housing.

Aggressive development activity and too many multiple occupancy houses threaten the already fragile balance between residential and commercial development. South Belfast has a good architectural heritage of sound Victorian and Edwardian buildings. Some of those substantial and attractive buildings are being demolished at a rate of knots, which detracts from the attractiveness of the area.

I was not brought up in leafy suburbs of South Belfast, but it is an attractive area that must be maintained and balanced. Often those large, attractive buildings are seen to be less valuable than the sites on which they are located. Certainly, it has become too expensive for many families to live in South Belfast. That will result in a distorted age profile for the population of the area. Communities will not be viable unless we examine those problems. More imagination creates more diverse housing developments.

When I was a councillor for Balmoral, I found it frustrating that we had only a consultative role in the planning process and that we had no decision-making powers. Local residents and representatives unanimously opposed a development, but it was difficult to effect any change. I appreciate that the planners listened politely. A bit of change is coming and more people are listening, but there is certainly a way to go. Decisions can have a huge impact on a big area; they can change

its character and affect the viability of its communities, which is the most important issue. If people leave, it becomes a no-go area. Areas lose balance and mix through over-aggressive and intensified development. Planning policies appear to be weighted in favour of development rather than the protection of the environment. In years gone by, perhaps that was the policy, because there was little development, but that must change. Major developments must be postponed until we have a better and more integrated transport system.

It was good to see the introduction of the SmartPass for the over-60s — I have just received mine through the post and I am delighted with it.

Some Members: You are not old enough.

Mrs Hanna: I wish I were not. The bus service has certainly improved, but it is too expensive for people who do not have cars and are dependent on it — that must also be examined.

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) has made some controversial decisions. The commission is not democratically accountable, and planners are often afraid to make recommendations in case they are overturned by the PAC — incurring expensive legal costs. I appreciate that that issue has to be weighed.

Of course, the increase in single-person households is affecting the social mix. Apartments are needed, but the issue is about being more imaginative about where they are located in relation to main arterial routes. It is the case that some older people in residential areas like to downsize: and it would be lovely to replace a home with four apartments, but what is happening is that apartments are being crammed together to make more money, which is spoiling the idea.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs Hanna: In closing, planners should focus on smaller areas when drawing up plans. It is important to keep communities viable and together.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Wells, with or without his SmartPass.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker; it is a disgrace that the honourable Member for South Belfast has had to lie about her age by adding a decade to it in order to get her bus pass. I am sure that there is no way that she could be anywhere near the age for getting a bus pass.

Mrs Hanna: Thank you.

Mr Wells: Planning in residential areas is a burning issue in my constituency of South Down. There are 17 applications for controversial, high-density, apartments in Newcastle that are awaiting approval, and local residents are opposed to every one of them. Phrases such as “garden grabbing”, overdevelopment, and apartment blitz are everywhere.

Members will be aware of the disgraceful incident that took place at Myrtle Lodge in Newcastle in March this year when a developer ripped out trees in order to create space for a forthcoming apartment development. An unacceptable change of character has been seen in many of our historic communities. I have seen incidences where a developer has knocked down one house in a long row of detached houses in a leafy suburb and submitted an application to build 20 or 24 apartments. That would result in a complete and utter change of the character of the area.

One of the benefits of the Assembly is that the previous Minister of the Environment Mrs Foster listened to the concerns that had been expressed in a previous debate.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Mr Wells: Mrs Foster rushed out a circular — PC03/07 — which has led to considerable changes in my constituency. Applications that would have been approved on the nod have been turned down as a result of that circular. That is good news: that is progress. Well done to the honourable Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone; but — and it is a big “but” — that circular has not been tested at PAC. Inevitably, some applications that have rightly been turned down as a result of the circular will go before the Planning Appeals Commission, which will result in a multi-millionaire developer and a group of residents appealing to an under-resourced planning service — it will be a very unequal battle. Considering the resources that the large developers have, some appeals will inevitably be successful. That will drive down the quality of decision-making, because the Planning Service will not see the point in turning down applications if they are going to lose on appeal. A precedent will be set.

First, it is vital that we have not only the circular, but a change in policy. PPS 7 must be upgraded to take account of our changed circumstances. I hope that the Minister will provide some indication as to when that will happen because it is a big problem for communities in South Down and particularly those in the east of the Province. Some of my colleagues from west of the Bann ask what apartments, garden grabbing and overdevelopment are because they do not seem to have those problems. In County Down, south-east Belfast and Antrim, however, they are big problems. The policy must be enshrined so that the residents have a strong document with which they can fight the developers.

Secondly, another change was made. It is unfair to say that the Minister of the Environment removed gardens from the concept of brownfield development — it was actually the Department for Regional Development through its review of the regional development strategy. As a result of that review, gardens are no longer defined as brownfield sites.

3.15 pm

That is important because the regional development strategy has set a target that 60% of housing in urban areas should be on what are called brownfield development sites. When I was first elected and that regional strategy was going through, I, and many others, thought that that applied to warehouses, offices and industrial landscapes. In other words, if an old office block was knocked down, no one would complain if apartments were built on that site. There was a loophole, of course. The developers spotted that gardens also constituted previously developed land; that has left us in the position that we are in.

In June 2008, the Department did change its definition of "brownfield", but I have not seen a ha'p'orth of difference in the decisions that have been made since that happened. One of the things that the Committee for Regional Development is trying to tease out from the Department is what that new definition means in terms of change. There must be a presumption against the use of gardens as brownfield sites.

We are, hopefully, making progress; I think that there is unanimity in the Assembly. We cannot allow the heritage of large parts of our suburbs to go out the window and into the back of a lorry as builder's rubble or chopped-down trees. We have to take a stand: if the Assembly can deliver on this issue, Mr Wilson will find that that will be an extremely popular decision throughout Northern Ireland, including East Antrim.

Mr McKay: Thank you, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The character of our towns and villages is worth protecting. If developers are building new homes within settlements, then those homes should be built to meet a minimum standard with regard to character, residential privacy and the existing infrastructure. I for one, and I am sure that there are others, have seen more than one example of developments going ahead without the local sewerage systems having the adequate capacity to deal with further additions to the network. That leads to serious problems, not only in that neighbourhood, but for the entire settlement. Communication problems between the different Departments that result in problems like that should be resolved constructively, rather than individual Departments passing the buck when things go wrong, as is so often the case.

A marker needs to be put down. Squeezing as many sites as possible into a backyard to make as much profit as possible is not the ethos that developers should be implementing at the heart of our communities. Instead, the Department of the Environment (DOE) should be ensuring that quality development and quality of life are the cornerstones of planning policy. In all that, community planning needs to be central.

Anna Lo raised the very important issue of the removal of trees. We are all aware of the problems around tree preservation orders (TPOs), and that legislation is something that needs strengthened. Very often, developers come in and remove large areas of trees without any support from the local community. Before decisions like that are made, there is a need for some sort of community consultation.

Last year, a former divisional planning manager for Belfast, Professor Bill Morrison, reflected on how planning has lost sight of the quality aspect of housing:

"It pays to ... do without gardens if you can get away with it, and get as many units as you possibly can on every site ... Compared with what went before, 21st century homes are like prison cells."

I think that we can all cite examples from our respective constituencies of the sort of housing that the professor was referring to.

A balance needs to be struck between the need to increase the use of brownfield sites and the need to protect the character of existing residential areas. Alternative housing proposals, such as the successful Living Over The Shop scheme, should be further encouraged to try to breath new life into urban areas. My colleague Cathal Boylan referred to the need for social and affordable housing to be at the forefront of new communities. Research shows that mixed-income communities are successful and that where they have been introduced, the expectations of developers, residents and housing managers have been met.

In closing, a LeasCheann Comhairle, we support the motion and seek a commitment from the Minister to protect those communities that are being threatened by garden grabbing and town cramming. The Minister must promote social and affordable housing through planning policy by ensuring that there is a minimum percentage of new housing development ringfenced for that particular sector. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: A'hm weill kent in mae constituency fer gien boadies a han' wi' issues adae wi' plennin. Monie times A hae writ screeds tae heft plennin' applications an in the same wie screeds agin applications. Bein' an elected representative wha wrochts haird fer es constituency oan the grun, A knaw aboot the gye baag need at thair bes fer affordable hoosin fer fowk. Hooiniver, a balance can an maun bae found quhar we're fit tae bigg oan lan' wi'oot destroyin' character an' thon bes wha this motion bes aa aboot.

I am well known in my constituency for helping people with planning issues, often writing letters of support for, and in opposition to, planning applications. Being an elected representative who works hard on the ground, I am also aware of the great need for affordable housing. However, a balance can, and must, be found whereby land can be developed without destroying

character, and that is what this motion is about. How many times have Members mentioned “balance”?

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of garden grabbing — developers squeezing as much as they can out of a small space. That approach can work only if there is respect for the surrounding area and for the people who live nearby.

In my own area there have been established developments with large houses and large gardens. Someone then comes along and buys two houses and decides to build 40 flats. There are other planning applications — on the Manse Road and the Mountain Road in Newtownards, where there has been established housing for over 40 years — for someone to buy two houses in order to build 10 flats or four semi-detached houses in their place, which changes the whole character of the area.

There is a long waiting list for housing in Newtownards. In principle, therefore, I am in favour of as much social housing as it is feasible to build. The key issue for this motion, however, is what is feasible.

There are homes in my constituency with an acre and a half of land behind them and they are close to busy roads on which the infrastructure is already strained. Is it feasible to build more homes on such land? If more homes were to be built, the roads and sewerage systems would have to be overhauled just to try to cram in those developments. There are also prime lots of ground where there are no outstanding problems with enough land to build what are known as quad houses, which can provide homes for 16 families without adversely affecting an area. It is a question of balance and how one retains the character of an area while at the same time trying to address the issue of housing, particularly social housing.

As with any progress, it is important to bring everybody of all ages alongside. Development is no different, and it is important that a gothic mansion is not built beside an ultra-modern skyscraper apartment block — extremes of building that would destroy an area's character forever. Furthermore, as much as apartment blocks seem to be the best way to get a return on money — and that is why they are built — they are not always what is needed, and that must be considered by the Planning Service.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member has spoken of the need for social housing, and we all agree with him on that point. In my experience, however, none of the apartments built as a result of garden grabbing provide an extra single unit of social housing. It is simply greed, not need. Those flats are sold for £200,000 to £300,000 and none of my constituents in need of social housing could afford them.

Mr Shannon: I was just about to say that when apartments are built for elderly people, they are

unsuitable. Lifts may be installed because the elderly people cannot use the stairs; however, at the end of the day, those elderly residents know that that type of apartment block is unsuitable.

The Member is correct — I am not aware of any developments in my constituency that have been specifically for social housing. They have all been in order to fill the pockets of developers.

Surely it makes more sense to build a terrace bungalow in order to help the elderly, and to build a family home in order to meet the needs of a family. If one looks at an estate agent's leaflet in order to see how many apartments are being bought or leased, they will see that such properties are lying vacant because there is no demand for them.

PPS 7 and PPS 12 are the two key issues that the Minister must address when he responds to the motion. A review of PPS 12 is under way, and perhaps now is the perfect time for the Assembly to present its views on the subject.

Much could be said about the motion, but its main ideal is that more social housing should be built in the correct manner. I await with anticipation my honourable colleague the Minister of the Environment's paper on planning. The Minister, well known in the past as “Red Sam” is now known as “Green Sam”, although some say that he is “Not-So-Green Sam”. I refer to Sammy Wilson, who will, as the Minister responsible, respond to Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his comments to a close?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Members for their contributions to the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Armstrong: I, in common with most people, support the retention of the character of residential areas. One of the most concerning aspects of the development boom in Northern Ireland over the past decade has been the seeming inability of the Planning Service to police the planning system properly in order to protect the public from what can only be described as rash, inappropriate development.

Throughout the country, Members have witnessed single dwellings being demolished and replaced by multiple houses or apartment developments that are all too often totally out of character with neighbouring buildings and amount to little more than blights on the landscape. Members have highlighted numerous examples of those developments in areas such as north Down, particularly in Holywood, and on the north coast, particularly in Portrush and Portstewart. However, such developments also exist in mid-Ulster towns such as Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt.

Large lawns of residential houses have been removed to accommodate high-rise flats that are totally out of character with the area. The problem is not the lack of legislation governing such development but the lack of enforcement of the relevant planning policy statements. I have no doubt that the Minister's officials and the Planning Service will assure him that all is well, but the evidence on the ground tells a different story. The Assembly must be prepared to help those communities that propose local initiatives to create a shared future and to grow organically. However, that cannot be imposed on them.

Mr K Robinson: I have heard several comments about a shared future. Will the Member clarify whether he is talking about two communities living together and sharing a space or about people with wealth and position in society sharing a space with those who seek such wealth and position?

Mr Armstrong: I agree with the Member's comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Has the Member finished?

Mr Armstrong: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): It was terrible to see one of Mr Armstrong's colleagues finish him off like that.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I will not be as churlish as Mr Beggs, who suggested that the motion was concerned only with headline grabbing. I am sure that it is no more about headline grabbing than the motion about PPS 5 and shopping centres that was debated in the House yesterday.

The debate presents an important opportunity to air views on an issue that, as reflected by the contributions of many Members, causes widespread concern. It is not only an issue in Belfast, and Members mentioned that Cookstown, provincial towns and even some smaller rural villages have been affected.

I was a bit disappointed that the speech by the proposer of the motion, Ms Lo, did not give sufficient weight to the steps taken by the Planning Service and the former Minister. I am glad that other Members, of the Alliance Party and other parties, acknowledged that the steps that Arlene Foster took as Minister helped to improve the situation.

Mr McCarthy: In defence of my colleague, the rest of the Alliance Party MLAs are, for our sins, local councillors, but Anna is not. Therefore, as I am sure the Minister will accept, she does not have the same experience of changes that have taken place.

3.30 pm

The Minister of the Environment: It is fairly apparent to any public representative, especially one with an interest in planning, that changes have taken place and that a substantial number of applications that

may have gone through previously have now been turned down. Mr Wells's caveat is important; however, it remains to be seen how the Planning Appeals Commission deals with that issue. I will come later to the point that he made earlier about the need to change policy.

The circular that was sent out made it clear that the former Minister had concerns, and it pointed to the policies that were in place and to how she believed that they should be interpreted. It went on to give examples of appeals that the Planning Appeals Commission had dismissed, and it listed the reasons that were given. It suggested that planning officers could use those decisions as templates when considering particular planning applications. The Minister's robust attention helped to guide planning officers and to clarify the situation for them.

Ms Lo also raised the issue of houses in multiple occupation, which is a particularly important issue in South Belfast. She will know that as part of the re-examination of PPS 7, that issue will be considered again. However, that is not only a planning issue; it is a multi-faceted issue that cannot be tackled by one Department. It needs a multi-agency approach, and I am glad to say that an inter-agency group has been set up in Belfast City Council under the chairmanship of the chief executive. It is the primary role of the Planning Service to prepare and publish an HMO subject plan for Belfast, which should be available later this year. Other agencies will also be involved in that.

The issue is about mixed development. Ms Lo mentioned it, and I notice that other Members picked up on it. She gave the interesting example of the changes that have taken place at Piney Hills. Those illustrate the difficult planning decisions that have to be made on, for example, apartment developments in areas where there are large houses with gardens. I have experienced such decisions in my involvement with Belfast City Council.

Nearly all the apartment developments at Piney Hills have been of 1,500 sq ft and 2,000 sq ft, and they have been aimed specifically at people who have lived in large houses and brought up their families in the area. Their houses are now too big for them, but they wish to stay in the community in which they live. In discussing mixed developments, planners must consider such issues. It illustrates the point that other Members have made: not all apartment development is inappropriate. Consideration must be given to how a balanced approach can best be achieved to deal with such issues.

As has been pointed out, the definition of gardens as brownfield sites is not an issue for the Department of the Environment; it is a matter for the Department for Regional Development. Indeed, the former Minister addressed that point. As Mr Wells pointed out, the impact

that that will have on planning decisions is yet to be determined, but at least the request that was made for the Minister to address that problem has been acceded to.

Mr K Robinson: The point that folk who have lived in Piney Hills for a long time wish to remain in the area was well made by the Minister. Will he also note that many people who have lived in social-housing areas for many years and whose families have grown up find that the accommodation is no longer suitable for them? The Planning Service could help by re-zoning greenfield land in those housing estates so that proper housing that is suitable for older residents could be provided for those who wish to remain in those areas.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member makes an important point. Recently, on the edge of his constituency, a redundant school was made available for housing. That housing will be built with the specific aims of accommodating families who have lived in the area for a long time and of allowing young people to stay there. The re-zoning of land — in all areas — must be considered in that context.

Mr Ross, my colleague from East Antrim, raised the issue of flooding, which can occur for two reasons. First, some floods result from rivers that overflow onto flood plains and, subsequently, impact on developments that are situated there. PPS 15, a precautionary approach and the strategic flooding maps that will be introduced should address that matter. However, measures must be applied carefully, and we must not become overcautious and restrict development in massive areas of Northern Ireland. We should consider whether mitigation steps can be taken, rather than wipe out development in large areas.

The other type of flooding arises from an area's infrastructure. I have considered PPS 7, spoken to officials about that matter, and have witnessed some good practice on the part of developers in Northern Ireland. I hope that when changes to PPS 7 are agreed, they will include views on how to address such flooding.

Recently, I visited a housing development in Lisburn that spans scores of acres where, as a result of measures such as the treatment of driveways, planting of hedges around houses, collection of run-off water from the site, providing water barrels for every household, and so on, the run-off will be no more than if the area had been left as agricultural land. That is possible, if developers put their minds to it. However, if developers do not introduce such measures, we must formulate policies that compel them to do so. Not all developers have adopted the same attitude as the developer in Lisburn.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Boylan mentioned social housing. The Department will examine PPS 12 and the provision of social housing. However, one must accept that it is not a simple case — especially in the current economic climate — of

forcing a developer to make a certain percentage of houses available for social housing. We must accept that many developers bought land when it was expensive and, since then, there has been a downturn in the market. As Members have said repeatedly, we must keep the building industry buoyant at a time when many people are being laid off in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we must ensure that our chosen policy does not slow up the planning process.

We must avoid a situation in which legal requirements in respect of tying down developer contributions add years to the development process. That can happen with article 40 agreements. We cannot wave a magic wand and produce social housing — economic, planning and legal factors must be considered.

Mr Boylan also mentioned the importance of zoning land, which will, under local development plans, soon become the responsibility of local councils.

I will quickly address the comments that were made by Mr Beggs, who pleaded with the proposers of the motion to be specific about what changes should be made to PPS 7 and PPS 12. I would have loved to hear what specific proposals Mr Beggs had for changing those documents, rather than simply asking questions; or what he understood “mixed and balanced” communities to mean, rather than simply asking the proposers what they meant. In a debate, the views of the Members who take part are considered, as well as the views of the proposers of the motion.

I turn to the comments of the birthday girl, the Member for South Belfast Carmel Hanna. She does not look a day over 50, despite getting her bus pass — as Mr Wells pointed out. As Minister of the Environment, I hope that she will use her bus pass to come to Parliament Buildings, thus reducing her carbon footprint, because Members know how concerned I am about that issue. *[Laughter.]*

The Member made an important point about people downsizing and wanting to live in communities. She also mentioned that it was appropriate for developments to be located on arterial routes. Taller buildings could define arterial routes, so those are appropriate places to build smaller, single-person apartments. That is something that planning officers should consider.

I turn to the comments of my colleague Mr Wells, who made history this week. Yesterday, the green wing of the party congratulated this Minister of the Environment and, today, he congratulated the previous Minister of the Environment. That is something. However, he also gave a qualified signal of approval to the Sinn Féin Minister for Regional Development on the issue of the definition of gardens. That last point is even more historic than the first — although perhaps that should be the other way around; I do not know.

He made a number of points that I will address —

Lord Morrow: Perhaps he is turning green.

The Minister of the Environment: Perhaps he is. The point that he made about the Planning Appeals Commission is very important. I hope that it gets the message that there has been a change in policy. Mr Wells is quite right that there is an obligation on the Department to make sure that the policy is in place and enforced. For that reason, I hope to quickly introduce addenda to PPS 7 so that the criteria against which those applications are judged are quite explicit. The second point that Mr Wells made, as did other Members, concerned the ripping up of trees. The penalties for that must be beefed up.

I do not have time to comment on what other Members said —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister must draw his remarks to a close.

The Minister of the Environment: I trust that other Members do not feel miffed that I did not have a chance to respond to their points, but many of those points have much in common with issues that I have already addressed.

Mr B Wilson: During the debate, a number of Members referred to failures in the planning process. As far as North Down is concerned, the planning policies that were designed to protect our built environment have totally failed. For almost 30 years, I have sat in the North Down Borough Council chamber, listening to planners approving applications that were totally against the wishes of the council and the local people. In many cases, there were acts of environmental vandalism.

Something should be done to introduce some democracy into the planning system. I am sorry that no one else raised that issue. Other countries make every effort to preserve and restore their built heritage, but we seem determined to eliminate it. As a result, over the years, we in North Down have seen our leafy suburbs destroyed and turned into concrete jungles. Picturesque villages have become dominated by apartments, and mature trees have been felled to enable yet another row of town houses to be crammed in. The destruction has accelerated in recent years, as speculators explore new ways to cram more houses into smaller spaces.

That is highlighted by the garden-grabbing epidemic, which most Members mentioned, and which is particularly prevalent in urban areas of Bangor and Holywood.

3.45 pm

Garden grabbing is endemic in North Down. For example, last year, speculators delivered leaflets in Bangor that asked whether householders were willing to sell their properties. That practice has destabilised some well-established communities, as each resident wonders whether his or her next-door neighbour will

sell out, leaving him or her to face the prospect of apartments being built in the next garden.

In one particularly disturbing case, an elderly widow who did not wish to sell her house, in which she had brought up her family and had lived for more than 40 years, was pressurised to sell by her neighbours, because they would not get their money unless the entire row of six houses was sold.

In another case, a householder refused to sell, so the developer bought the houses on each side. My constituent's property is now surrounded on three sides by a fourteen-unit apartment block, which denies that person any sense of privacy.

I shall now deal with points raised by Members. Alastair Ross mentioned the problem of flooding. A couple of weeks ago, on a Saturday evening, I was called out three times because houses were being flooded. They were flooded because water was not able to drain away due to the lack of open, green space. Water ran down the road and into gardens as a result of overdevelopment and the loss of green space.

Cathal Boylan mentioned PPS 8, which I find interesting, as it deals with the sale of council land. Some councils have sold off small parcels of land, particularly in towns and villages, resulting in a loss of local amenities. Ards Borough Council has been particularly good at getting rid of small pieces of public open space.

Mr McCarthy: I am a member of Ards Borough Council, and the Member is right to say that the council tried to sell several pieces of land. None of the nine plots that it attempted to sell have been sold so far, for whatever reasons.

I am particularly concerned about coastal land, which has not been mentioned, so I will use this opportunity to appeal to the Minister to say no to the destruction of our coastline. It is disappearing fast, and I have been leading the charge against Ards Borough Council's attempts to sell coastal land.

Mr B Wilson: Jim Wells, with whom I often agree, mentioned tree preservation orders (TPOs), which are a matter of great concern to me. Trees add character to an area, and their demolition totally transforms that character. I am concerned by the fact that developers ignore TPOs. Jim Wells mentioned the case of Myrtle Lodge, Newcastle, and there has been another instance in Shandon Park, Belfast. In each case, the developer knew that there was a TPO, but was willing to accept whatever fine the court imposed.

Over the years, the courts' record has been pretty miserable. I recall the case of the City of Derry Golf Club, which was fined £200 for cutting down a tree that was subject to a TPO. What does such a fine mean to a developer who will make millions? Such a sum

means absolutely nothing. Consequently, developers cut down trees and face the courts, knowing that their actions will have little impact.

I want the Minister to ensure that developers who deliberately ignore tree preservation orders face the full rigour of the law. They should be forced to replant trees in the same area.

Mr Wells: A policy that prevents developers from ever gaining from their vandalism would be more of a deterrent. In other words, future apartment development on the area that those trees covered should be banned.

Moreover, I understand why the Member is concerned, but has he not noticed some changes since the introduction of planning circular 03/07? The tide has turned since that was introduced. We must encourage the Department to ensure that the tide flows against such vandalism for ever.

Mr B Wilson: The tide may have turned, but it has not yet reached North Down. In June, planning permission was given to replace two Victorian detached dwellings with 24 new apartments. That again relates to the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) 2015, and it reflects a trend in that part of Bangor.

North Down Borough Council has fought for years to have that part of Bangor declared an area of townscape character. That is now included in the draft BMAP. The problem is that the draft BMAP has not yet been adopted. Therefore, developers are knocking down houses before it is implemented. If we do not ensure that the draft BMAP is adopted soon, there will be nothing left in that area to protect. The BMAP issues paper was published in 2001, and we are still waiting for its approval. Expediting that process would certainly help North Down, and it would clarify many issues in other parts of greater Belfast.

The Minister's decision to amend PPS 7 is welcome and extremely useful. There is a lack of clarity at present, and I am concerned by the number of applications that the Planning Appeals Commission has overturned. Planners sometimes question the point of turning down applications that the PAC subsequently approves. The PAC must be told exactly —

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to review, and where necessary to amend, planning policies to protect the character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

20 mph Speed Limit Near Schools

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 wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and is 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 Molloy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to consider introducing a 20 mph restricted speed limit as part of a broader package of traffic calming measures in the vicinity of schools.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion calls on the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Conor Murphy, to consider, along with other measures, a 20 mph speed limit near schools. In particular, that limit should be applied near rural schools, around some of which there is currently a 60 mph speed limit.

If one considers the isolation of some rural schools, the build-up of traffic around them and the number of children crossing roads and going to and from vehicles, a very dangerous situation exists. We want to reduce that risk to children, and that is why the proposal to have a 20 mph speed limit is important, particularly in rural areas.

Road signs can take various forms. One option is the fixed sign, but we know that, over the years, all of us have become complacent about the school sign that is displayed before every school — many of them have been in place for years, have not changed in design and no longer have an effect on motorists.

The job of the Assembly is to change or introduce new legislation to create a safer situation for children around their schools. Therefore, it is important that we introduce measures to change people's ideas about the signage around schools.

A pedestrian who is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph has a one in 40 chance of being killed or a 97% chance of survival — that is a 17% greater chance of survival than if the vehicle were travelling at 30 mph. Therefore, the change would be important, and that is only in relation to the 30 mph speed limit that exists in urban areas — in general, the speed limit in a rural area is 60 mph and so a person's — particularly a child's — chance of survival will be little or none.

We must increase a pedestrian's chance of survival and make motorists more alert when approaching a school. A school is not just a building; it is a place where children as young as four — who may not have

much experience of road use — are crossing the road, and motorists must take that into account when they are passing a rural school. We are focusing mainly on primary schools, but that also applies to secondary schools.

A 20 mph speed limit could become an important signal for people in that situation. Various forms of signage can be used, but the main aim is to make motorists alert when approaching schools. Vehicle-activated signs could be introduced, along the lines of what is being used in pilot schemes in various locations, where there is a 60 mph sign that lights up when a vehicle is exceeding that speed or when a vehicle is approaching a hazard or road works, for example. Those pilot schemes have shown that changing signage is very effective, as it is not something that is there all the time, but is rather something that lights up and attracts a motorist's attention.

We accept John Dallat's amendment, suggesting a general speed limit of 20 mph in areas where many elderly and young people cross the road. However, we must not lose the focus on schools in the motion, because the main issue is the number of children at risk in the vicinity of schools and the importance of changing motorists' attitudes towards school crossings and school vicinities. Therefore, although we accept the amendment, we believe that there is a need to have a variation between the signage that is used at a school and that used in a housing estate or in an area where many elderly or young people cross the road.

Some may argue that a 20 mph speed limit is needed only at certain times of the day, particularly during the school day. However, if one considers the curriculum, as well as facilities that are now available, such as after-school and breakfast clubs, it is clear that the school day is now quite long. There are also after-school meetings with parents and other meetings happening in schools, so it is important that signage highlighting a 20 mph speed limit be still in place, because it is important to remember that, in rural areas, that involves a reduction from a 60 mph to a 20 mph speed limit.

The signage that we are talking about can be switched on or off and lights up when a vehicle is travelling too fast. Although the normal school working day may be over, there may still be children and vehicles, or other dangers, in the vicinity.

4.00 pm

My first and saddest experience of a school accident happened when my best friend, who was staying late at school for extra work in preparation for the 11-plus, was killed coming out of the school at 4.30 pm. The driver of the vehicle did not expect a 10-year-old child to be cycling out of the school at that time of the evening. At that young age, I learned of the importance of signage outside school hours.

Over the years, a lot of the signage has become overgrown and occluded in different ways. Therefore,

something different from what we had in the past is required. The old school sign that has been on display for years may have been sufficient when people were travelling on bicycles or horses and carts, but times have changed dramatically since then. The signage must be upgraded. Vehicle-activated signs can provide the flexibility that is required when dealing with a new situation.

I decided to table the motion following the school bus tragedy in Ballygawley, in which a young girl was killed. That was a different situation in that it was not a speed-related accident, but the issue is the protection of children.

Parents send their children out to school in the morning. They put them on the bus and hand them into the protection of someone else. Parents expect their children to return home safely, and they expect that they will be safe during the school day. Furthermore, they expect us — the people who make the legislation — to ensure that the safety of their children is protected. It is important that the Assembly respond to the needs of the community. If extra signage is required, we must find different ways of providing it. I am certain that the driver travelling behind the school bus in the Ballygawley incident would have been aware that the bus had come to a standstill if there had been flashing lights on the back of the bus.

Every day on the motorways, we see a large vehicle — or sometimes two or three — with large flashing lights alerting motorists that there are roadworks, and, therefore, dangers ahead. If it is possible to provide flashing lights on slow vehicles to alert drivers of the presence of workmen ahead, it should be possible to provide a similar facility at schools.

It is important to look at ways of creating protection for children who are going to school. We must ensure that parents are instilled with the confidence that their children will return home from school safely and that they are not in danger.

The school location is important, and it is imperative that children get out of vehicles or cross roads securely. As Members know, many rural schools are in secluded areas and surrounded by trees and hedges. Vehicle drivers and strangers in the vicinity may not know that there is a school in the area, because the signage has become covered by a hedge, for instance.

It is important to reduce the speed limit, but it is also important to draw the driver's attention to the fact that there is a school in a particular location. The restriction of speed limits to 20 mph, and the associated provision of signs, might be only one part of the solution. There might also be a need for ramps, cameras and other devices to capture the attention of drivers and to police the area. It is important that the areas in which schools are located are policed to ensure that drivers

respond to the signage, but the first stage is the provision of modern signage that responds to vehicle speed and informs drivers that there is a school in that location. It should inform drivers of the danger in that location. We must ensure that the protection of our children is paramount by drawing up legislation.

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert:

“and neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians, especially children and older people.”

I welcome the motion, and I thank Francie and Michelle for tabling it. So far this year, 75 people have lost their lives on the roads. Last year, 112 people were killed on our roads — that is more than two people killed every week — and more than 6,000 were injured, 813 of whom were children. If that number of people had been injured or killed as a result of the past conflict, there would be roadblocks and an outcry; it would be international news.

I am grateful that the Minister for Regional Development is in the Chamber. The SDLP is demanding that he, in conjunction with other Ministers, take urgent action on road accidents.

The motion should have gone further, and that is why the SDLP has proposed an amendment. The motion asks only that the Minister consider a measure that is already under consideration. Surely the time for consideration and studies is over? It is now time for action.

Furthermore, the original motion refers only to schools and not to other places where children are present, such as housing estates and residential areas. Why should we be allowed to speed in places meant for living and for play? Our housing estates and residential areas have become deserted because the car has taken precedence over people. That is wrong and should be changed.

In November 2007, I asked the Minister what impact on road safety a reduction of speed would have. He answered:

“A further TRL study found that, in a review of 250 traffic calming schemes across England, Scotland and Wales, average speeds fell by 9 mph, collisions fell by 60%, collisions involving children fell by 67% and collisions involving cyclists fell by 29%.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, pWA248, Col 1*].

However, the Minister does not seem to be of a mind to introduce general, reduced speed limits in residential areas here. In May of this year, I asked him to reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. His answer was:

“While my Department’s Roads Service encourages and supports 20mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users, I have no plans to generally reduce speed limits in housing estates and other built up areas to 20 mph.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 30, pWA269, Col 2*].

I ask the Minister why that is the case? Can any Member think of a single housing estate in his or her constituency

where the speed limit should be more than 20 mph? I will give way to any Member who feels that that is the case or who would like to specify such an estate.

In a debate on graduated driving licences, in April of this year, the SDLP advocated several measures, including: housing estates having speed limits of 20 miles per hour; greatly reduced speed limits — as Mr Molloy specifically mentioned — around schools, particularly at times when pupils are arriving and leaving school; the creation of better footpaths, away from busy roads, especially on school routes; and the introduction of much heavier penalties for speeding, particularly when people are significantly over the speed limit. There should be much heavier penalties for drink driving, because we all know the consequences of that. There should be a re-evaluation and reduction of speed limits across hundreds of our roads. Greater restrictions should be placed on the performance of cars that are sold to inexperienced drivers. That would include car companies being forced to stop marketing cars as though our roads were race tracks and to stop associating engine performance with virility.

Changing the various rules entails financial cost. The Minister and the Executive should weigh the financial cost against the cost of human life and health. In any case, the cost of changing speed-limit signs would be heavily outweighed by the savings in lifelong health care, rehabilitation and disability benefits that follow many road traffic accidents.

Of course, all such cross-cutting decisions would require Executive meetings. While the blocking of those meetings remains, people remain unnecessarily at risk, because decisions are not being made.

The SDLP urges the relevant Ministers to cut through bureaucracy. It also urges the Executive to engage with partners and Governments in the Republic of Ireland and Britain, to do whatever must be done to introduce those measures urgently. That co-operation would require North/South meetings, which require Executive consent. However, as we know, the Executive are not meeting.

The SDLP wants the Executive to set up the necessary cross-cutting structures to research and implement a raft of road safety measures in the North and across this island. Furthermore, the SDLP not only wants speed restrictions imposed immediately outside schools, we want greater speed restrictions in other areas as well. Moreover, we want a raft of measures in the North as well as North/South and east-west measures — all of which require Executive meetings. We call on Sinn Féin — the party that sponsored the motion under debate — to allow the Executive to get on with the business of governance with immediate effect.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Wells): Before I put on

my Committee hat, a scurrilous accusation was made against me in the previous debate claiming that I had congratulated the Minister for Regional Development. I make it absolutely clear that I would never — in any circumstances — congratulate the Minister for Regional Development. I simply noted that the Department for Regional Development had introduced the new definition of brownfield land. It is important that my whole political career does not go down the plughole because of one individual's slip of the tongue.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important motion. It is well known in the House that Northern Ireland has a poor safety record in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom, and some of the stats are quite frightening. Speed is responsible for the greatest number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads. Indeed, research conducted by the Northern Ireland Audit Office found that 78% of deaths or serious injuries on Northern Ireland's roads in 2005 were as a result of excessive speed.

The Department for Transport in GB highlights the gravity of that issue with a report that states that when a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle travelling at 40 mph, there is a nine in 10 chance of that pedestrian being killed; whereas if a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph, there is a one in 40 chance of that pedestrian being killed. Those frightening figures speak for themselves.

Earlier this year, the Committee for Regional Development examined the issue of speed limits at schools as part of its consideration of the draft speed-management policy for Northern Ireland. As part of its scrutiny, the Committee considered the views of a range of stakeholders, including the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Minister of Education. It considered the issue of a 20 mph restricted speed limit and various other measures aimed at increasing the safety of pedestrians and other vulnerable road users. On behalf of the Committee, I thank those who contributed their views and provided valuable information which greatly assisted us in reaching a considered course of action on this serious issue.

In informing its views on speed management, the Committee for Regional Development was strongly in favour of the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit at schools — especially on rural roads where the national speed limit applies, or on high-speed locations.

More specifically, Committee members thought that the 20 mph limits appear to be highly effective when they are variable and time dependent. Research indicates that the operation of a 20 mph limit in the vicinity of schools should coincide with children arriving at, or leaving, the school premises. That means that children and parents walking or cycling to and from their school

are protected. When the roads are free from schoolchildren and other vulnerable users, for example, at weekends and during school holidays, the normal speed limits would apply.

Variable speed-limit pilot test schemes outside five schools in Scotland reported that speeds did reduce. The Scottish Twenty's Plenty initiative resulted in a reduction in average speeds at 60% of the trial sites, and a considerable drop in the number and severity of accidents.

Pilot schemes are now in place at Hezlett Primary School, which I understand is near Castlerock in east Londonderry — the two gentlemen to my left put me right on that — and Kilmoyle Primary School, which I understand is in north Antrim, but I do not have a clue where Kilmoyle is.

Mr Dallat: Ballybogy.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Ballybogy is on the way to Portrush, so I know where I am now.

Those pilot schemes are due to be completed in 2010. The Committee supports fully those initiatives and will take a keen interest in their progress.

The Committee for Regional Development also supports the use of other engineering-based traffic-calming measures where necessary to forcibly reduce vehicle speeds in the vicinity of schools. As I drive round parts of Northern Ireland — slowly, of course — I have started to notice illuminated-screen speed detectors, which display the motorist's speed. In my case it is 29 mph, 28 mph, 27 mph, or whatever. Those detectors are effective, and there is a need for such technology as it develops.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: The evidence in favour of 20 mph speed limits in the vicinity of schools is strong. A 20 mph limit, combined with other traffic-calming measures and the involvement and support of schools, parents and communities will bring enormous road safety benefits to the whole community.

4.15 pm

Mr McCallister: I congratulate Mr Wells on his speeding record, and I am happy to nominate him for citizen of the year. I thank and congratulate the Members who tabled the motion. My party colleagues and I fully support the principle of the motion and the SDLP amendment, and we look forward to the Minister's response.

As has been said, Northern Ireland has a poor record on road safety. That is apparent in the vicinity of schools where, unfortunately, schoolchildren are killed or seriously

injured every year. Six pupils aged between four and 18 were killed between 2002 and 2006. Some 103 schoolchildren were seriously injured in that period, and a staggering 1,039 pupils were slightly injured while travelling to or from school. Almost two thirds of pupils killed or seriously injured on their way to or from school were on foot at the time of the accident. We all agree that any death or injury of a schoolchild in Northern Ireland is one too many.

As the Minister has referenced in the past, research carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory in England indicates that it is expected that each 1 mph reduction in average speed will reduce collision frequency by 5%. The statistics that have been related by several other Members provide a compelling argument for reducing the speed limit in the vicinity of schools to 20 mph. A reduction in speed limits — along with a broader package of traffic-calming measures — in the vicinity of schools should be seriously considered by the Minister. The Ulster Unionist Party acknowledges the Minister's announcement in May that Roads Service is — as Mr Wells mentioned — piloting two schemes in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister will update us on the progress of those schemes.

It should be taken into account that reduced speed limits in the vicinity of schools may be inappropriate for a large percentage of time — for example, at night and during holiday periods. Reduced speed limits unaccompanied by a broader and more permanent package of traffic-calming measures — such as speed humps or gateway features — may not be wholly successful. That is exemplified by reduced speed limits effectively having been ignored in certain places in the Republic of Ireland.

However, there are examples of successful initiatives. The city of Hull has more than 115 20 mph traffic-calming zones. It is estimated that over 200 deaths or serious injuries, and 1,000 other injuries, have been prevented since the first of those zones was implemented in Hull in the 1990s. The total number of crashes within the 20 mph zones has fallen by 56%. The number of crashes, deaths and serious injuries has been cut by 90%, and the number of child-pedestrian casualties is down by 74%.

Edinburgh has 38 variable 20 mph zones, and almost all schools in Edinburgh have 20 mph limits around their entrance and local area. Those schemes were introduced in Edinburgh in 2005, and the number of child-pedestrian casualties has fallen from 119 in 2004 to 83 in 2006. The introduction of such schemes and the implementation of the SDLP's amendment would represent sensible and welcome progression; my party and I fully support them.

The debate also concerns the sustainability and health of children in Northern Ireland. We must

encourage and facilitate more children to walk or cycle to school. That would reduce traffic congestion and, more importantly, improve those children's health. Parents are much more likely to encourage their children to walk or cycle to school if they have the peace of mind that their children can do so in relative safety.

With that in mind, the introduction of a restricted, 20 mph speed limit should be considered as part of a broader package. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party also supports the motion and the amendment, although it supports the motion with a bit more enthusiasm. I was told off earlier for tabling a motion that was a bit woolly and vague, and the same could be said of the amendment. It includes the words:

“neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians”.

That covers most of Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, in the spirit of charity and kindness, the Alliance Party will support the amendment.

I do not want to repeat what has already been said, but I must say that the Scottish experience appears to have been a bit contradictory. There have been success stories: in 2001, North Lanarkshire Council introduced a 20 mph speed limit in nearly all its residential areas, and, at one time, it achieved an 18% reduction in pedestrian accidents, so its efforts were obviously well worthwhile. However, that initiative was introduced in conjunction with other initiatives, so the reduction was not simply down to a 20 mph speed limit.

Angus Council found it extremely difficult to enforce a 20 mph speed limit. It said that success was dependent on local residents, but it found that once the residents realised that the speed limit was not enforceable, the effect wore off, and nobody paid any attention to it. The council decided not to introduce any more 20 mph speed limits and to review all existing schemes. Scotland's Finance and Sustainable Growth Department, which has responsibility for transport functions, has stated that the most effective way in which to reduce vehicle speeds to 20 mph or less is through engineering measures, which, I presume, means speed bumps. It seems that the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit is not an effective way in which to control traffic, unless it is accompanied by other traffic-calming measures. A 20 mph speed limit slows most vehicles down by only 1 mph — and that figure comes from the Scottish Minister for Transport.

The most effective way in which to ensure compliance with speed limits is enforcement. This country's attitude to speeding and speeding fines has always been a wee bit ambivalent. In fact, we had a laugh about that today. The authorities also condone that attitude, because, as we all know, in most instances, a

driver can get away with being 10% over the speed limit, plus 5 mph. The PSNI will not admit it, but that is more or less the case. If a 20 mph speed limit were imposed at the right times of day in the vicinity of all schools, people who got caught speeding there would not receive the same sympathy as they do for general speeding convictions. Such a measure would be regarded as a useful traffic control if it were designed to do something important — in this case, save children's lives. I am perfectly happy to support the motion in those terms.

I am not sure who is responsible for the variable traffic controls at schools both here and around the world. I imagine that here it is the Roads Service, or perhaps the police, and that the controls are set automatically. I travel past a set of controls at a school in the Lisburn area fairly regularly on a Sunday. Even though the school gates are closed, the controls blink at 20 mph, advocating that people slow down to that speed. There is absolutely no need for such a speed restriction on a Sunday on a major road to the airport — the speed limit would otherwise be 60 mph. Schools could perhaps control the operation of traffic lights outside their own premises. They know best when large numbers of children come and go and when many cars will be parked outside the school — another factor that adds to the risk of road accidents. That said, the Alliance Party has no problem in supporting the motion and the amendment.

Mr I McCrea: This important motion raises an issue that impacts on all our lives, and on the lives of our children. It should command the support of all Members, and that appears to be the case. I raised the issue previously, and therefore I have no problem whatsoever with the motion.

However, like Mr Lunn, I am not sure about the amendment, as traffic-calming measures are already in place in some neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, I understand the sentiments of the amendment.

It is important that we take into consideration the Twenty's Plenty initiative, which was introduced in Scotland. Mr Lunn mentioned a few negatives aspects of the initiative, but it has proved to be successful in reducing the speed of motorists. When the Scottish Executive conducted a three-year Scotland-wide trial in 1998, the result was a reduction in speed at 60% of sites. It demonstrates that a 20 mph speed limit has an impact and will result in motorists reducing their speeds.

In 2004, the Scottish Executive issued guidance that a 20 mph speed limit should be the norm outside schools. It is important that Members consider the vital difference that a speed limit of 20 mph would make, and my colleague Jim Wells referred to the statistics. There is a one in 40 chance of a pedestrian being killed if he or she is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph.

There is a staggering difference between that and the survival rates of people who have been hit at higher speeds. If the 20 mph speed limit were in operation at peak times in the vicinity of schools, many lives could be saved.

There have been many minor accidents near schools over the years, and there have been many fatal accidents. Not all of those accidents can be attributed to speed, but if the speed limit is reduced to 20 mph in the vicinity of schools, drivers will at least be more aware of their surroundings and they will be able to react more quickly.

As a parent, the safety of my children is of the utmost importance. My children have now reached the age where they are continually asking when they will be allowed to walk or cycle to school. However, my wife and I feel that the roads are too dangerous. The Government and other associated bodies place much emphasis on the health and well-being of children; therefore, walking to school should be encouraged as a means of tackling obesity. However, many education and library boards are gradually removing the provision of lollipop ladies and men, and there is a lack of safe crossing facilities, therefore parents have little option but to drive their children to school.

That aside, over the past few years, great strides have been taken, especially around rural schools, to erect flashing signs, among other signs, to make drivers aware that there is a school nearby. I welcome the initiative, but that alone will not save lives.

I welcome the pilot schemes. I have no doubt that they will prove that a 20 mph speed limit will contribute to making roads in the vicinity of schools safer for schoolchildren. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. As Sinn Féin's road safety spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank my colleagues for securing the debate.

Reducing the speed of traffic in the vicinity of schools is an important initiative, as every effort must be taken to improve road safety, especially given the North's poor record for fatalities and serious injuries on the roads.

Speed limits of 20 mph, especially at schools, should be variable and time-dependent to coincide with pupils arriving and leaving school. I welcome the Minister's introduction of the pilot schemes to give the benefit of the speed management at rural schools programme at Castlerock and Ballybogy. It will involve signs with flashing lights at certain times of the day advising drivers to reduce their speed to 20 mph. As other Members have mentioned, there are similar schemes in the Twenty-six Counties and in Scotland. Research from those schemes has shown that there has been a reduction in overall speeds.

We are all too familiar with the difference in survival rates depending on speed, and many colleagues referred to the difference in survival rates at 20 mph and at 40 mph. Therefore, there is a need to reduce speed in the vicinity of schools and neighbourhoods where there is a danger to pedestrians. However, key to the success of any scheme will be an appropriate level of enforcement, especially in addressing speed in rural areas.

Perhaps we should consider the installation of speed cameras. In order for any such initiative to work, we must ensure that drivers are made aware that failure to comply will bring penalties for those who ignore the need to reduce their speed.

4.30 pm

We must also examine the practicalities of this initiative from both urban and rural perspectives. Many rural schools are situated on roads that have high speed limits. We welcome the Minister's initiative. There is not so much of a problem in urban areas, where many speed limits are set at 30 mph. In general, therefore, the initiative will be easier to implement in urban areas.

I welcome the motion and support it. Any initiative that will help to reduce road fatalities will have our support.

Mr Ross: On the face of it, the motion seems like a sensible proposal, which could reduce the chances of children being killed or seriously injured in the vicinity of schools across Northern Ireland. The pilot programmes that are operating in Castlerock and Ballybogy have already been mentioned. Those programmes operate variable speed limits, which are preferable to simply changing the speed limit to a speed that would be enforced in the evenings, or when the schools are off on holidays. Similar schemes in Scotland have also been mentioned, along with ones in New Zealand and Australia, where several progressive road safety programmes have been implemented, including the graduated driving licence scheme, which I support strongly.

Something inventive is required: figures confirm that the majority of drivers exceed the current 30 mph speed limit on our roads. Reports suggest that 58% of car drivers, 54% of motorcyclists and 53% of HGV drivers currently break the speed limits. As we have heard, there is a 20% chance of being killed by a vehicle that is travelling at 30 mph; a fifty-fifty chance of survival at 35 mph, reducing to a 10% chance of survival at 40 mph. The statistics hide the fact that we are talking about people's lives; children are at risk of serious injury. We must discuss practical measures that we can implement in order to reduce the risk of serious injury or death.

The variable signage that alerts motorists when speeding restrictions apply can have a positive impact on reducing driver speeds. Variable signage gives motorists more time to react and reduces stopping distances. Evidence backs up the notion that areas with

20 mph zones have reduced rates of road-traffic accidents. In those areas where reduced speed zones are in operation, accidents involving children have been reduced by 66%. In fact, for every one mile an hour that a motorist reduces his or her speed, the frequency of accidents reduces by a margin of 5%.

It is also worth noting that those types of measures are extremely popular with the public, which goes a long way towards encouraging drivers to obey the speed limit. It is also important that there is clear evidence that those measures are working, as there is a general public cynicism that some measures are more about generating cash through enforcement fines than reducing road deaths and saving lives. The evidence, by and large, suggests that the measures are working, so we must get that message out. The Scottish Executive, for instance, found that speeds were reduced in all regions.

Several Members have quoted from the Department for Transport document, 'Speed: Know your limits', which reports that average speeds in 20 mph zones have reduced by 9 mph, and that there has been a 60% reduction in accident frequency. There has also been a 67% overall reduction in child accidents and a 27% reduction in accidents involving cyclists.

It is also important to recognise that simply installing 20 mph zones will not work. We must continue our efforts to educate drivers and children about the dangers of busy traffic times close to schools. In fact, some of the most dangerous situations for children are when parents are manoeuvring in and out of parking spaces at school entrances, and the children dart in and out between cars without paying attention. Schools and parents, in conjunction with the police in many cases, have an important role to play in ensuring that children are aware of the dangers and take care when around cars at school entrances.

Pedestrians and cyclists must also be aware of the dangers when high volumes of vehicles are parked outside schools at peak times. The speed limit outside one of the schools that was included in the pilot was 60 mph. It is important that in such areas, where a 20 mph zone is being considered, that a gradual slowing down is allowed before entering the slow zone. Likewise, some schools may not need those measures; perhaps we should examine the requirements of each school in isolation.

In my last minute, I will briefly address the amendment tabled by Mr Dallat and Mr Ramsey. Although many of us could identify areas that are in particular need of speed-calming measures, we should concentrate on 20 mph zones outside schools, as that is, at least, a manageable and attainable goal.

I know of a few areas in my constituency whose residents feel that a 20 mph zone is hugely beneficial and dramatically improves road safety. However, to roll out the scheme to all areas of Northern Ireland

would be a mammoth task. There must be a continuation of the efforts to educate motorists on the dangers of speeding and the requirement of safe driving, particularly in built-up areas. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: The number of lives being lost on the roads, although falling, is still unacceptably high. I am happy to support both the motion and the amendment — the motion refers to young people, whereas the amendment covers a wider remit. I will first address my remarks to the issue of a restricted speed limit as part of broader traffic-calming measures in the vicinity of schools.

Statistics show that an average of 22 pupils are killed or injured each year when travelling to or from school. Although any death is a huge tragedy for the family and loved ones of the deceased, there is a heightened sense of grief when the victim is a child. It is vital that everything possible is done to protect all children, and that means promoting road safety initiatives. Although children and young people must be taught to stop, look and listen when crossing the road, we must also be mindful that children, especially younger children, are not fully aware of the dangers that they face. The onus is on adults and road users to take extra care.

There is a 25 mph speed limit at a housing estate in Stewartstown, and it makes a difference to the people of that area. The motion merely gives official sanction to something that road users should already be doing as a matter of course; namely, slowing down and taking extra care when driving near a school or any other place where young people are likely to be.

I support the amendment, which seeks to extend the restricted speed limits — part of the broader strategy of traffic-calming measures in the vicinity of schools — to neighbourhoods where speeding traffic poses a risk to people of all ages.

We have won the battle to make drink-driving socially unacceptable and the battle for the compulsory wearing of seatbelts. We must now fight the battle against excessive speed and lack of consideration for other road users, and we must win. I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr Dallat: As a former teacher of road-traffic studies, I fully appreciate the importance of this debate, and am particularly pleased that both the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Education are present. I am sorry that Mr Wilson, the Minister of the Environment, could not be here, because the Department of the Environment has overall responsibility for road safety. However, I am sure that he is otherwise occupied; perhaps he has sent the private detective whom he mentioned yesterday.

Members will remember that an all-party group on road safety was established some time ago. That group is very important, but Pat Ramsey and I were the only

Members present at its most recent meeting last week. That is not a party-political plug; it is simply an appeal to Members to take a special interest in that group and, where possible, to attend its meetings. Road safety is a cross-cutting theme, and, sooner or later, there will be a need for an authority with over-arching responsibility for road safety, similar to that established some time ago in the Republic of Ireland.

Jim Wells referred to the involvement of the Committee for Regional Development. In case Members are unaware, the Committee considered the draft speed-management policy on 12 December 2007 and received an oral briefing from departmental officials.

Members will be pleased to know that, with support from the Assembly's Research and Library Service, we discussed the issue again on 5 March and 9 April. On 23 April, we examined the study of a variable speed limit outside schools in the Republic of Ireland. As Mr Ross said, we also examined the Twenty's Plenty scheme in Scotland. I went to see that scheme in operation — at my own expense, I should add, Mr Deputy Speaker — and was impressed. The amendment is critical because, as Members know, most fatal accidents involving schoolchildren happen within one mile of the child's home.

I was at the launch of the 20 mph speed limit at the Hezlett Primary School near Castlerock, and it was a useful experience. I am not sure whether any Member was at the launch of the scheme at Kilmoyle PS, near Ballybogy. The pilot schemes cost £60,000 each and fully involve the school principal, the school governors and the local community. Therefore, the local communities have assumed ownership of the schemes, which is critical to their success.

If such schemes are to be successful, motorists must react positively to them — if they do not, the schemes are as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike, which is why community involvement is critical. I hope that the widely advertised schemes influence the way that motorists across Northern Ireland — not just those in Castlerock and Ballybogy — drive past schools.

It is important to note that although the number of deaths and serious injuries caused by excessive speed has declined, we are nowhere near as successful as other regions at tackling the problem. In France, the President risked a considerable number of votes by making road safety a political issue. Consequently, the number of deaths on French roads has plummeted, and the same has happened in Scandinavian countries. Therefore, we must be prepared to take decisions that are initially unpopular, just as the smoking ban in pubs was, to address the problem.

It is sad that over the past 40 years, more people were killed on the roads than in the Troubles, and many of those who died were children. I hope that all

Members appreciate the need for the amendment to the motion. We must make a commitment to practise what we preach.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion and the amendment, because our children must be safe, not just during their journeys to and from school, but also after school when they are at home and at play.

It is an inescapable fact that more people die or are seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads than on roads in England, Scotland and Wales. We all have a responsibility to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

Part-time speed limits in the vicinity of schools have proven a very effective measure to improve the safety of our children. In my constituency, which is almost entirely urban and where it is difficult to find a school that is not in a built-up area or near a road, I have seen how traffic-calming measures can help to reduce the speed of motorists and increase the safety of children outside schools. For example, speed ramps in Mersey Street have reduced the speed of motorists from 60 mph to 20 mph. On the Ravenhill Road, the Safer Routes to School scheme was introduced several years ago, and there are several initiatives to ensure that motorists know to reduce their speed to 20 mph when children are arriving at or leaving school.

The initiatives include flashing lights that remind motorists that they are in a school-safety zone, large road markings, traffic islands, and sections of road in which motorists are restricted to driving at 20 mph.

4.45 pm

A 20 mph speed limit alone is not adequate, because drivers would become complacent if there were simply a speed-limit sign and nothing else. The speed limit must be introduced in conjunction with other measures. Motorists can spot a 20 mph speed-limit sign, but the speed of those who drive past it day after day could creep up. They need a reminder, such as that which Jim Wells mentioned earlier. When they drive into a speed-restriction zone, a flashing light could tell motorists the speed at which they are travelling or remind them that they are in a restricted zone. Motorists will pay attention and slow down only if they are reminded of where they are. That is most important.

Other Members mentioned enforcement, which presents difficulties. However, when motorists are reminded of the speed at which they should drive, they take responsibility to slow down. According to the campaign group Brake, which has examined statistics on children's safety, a child who is struck by a car that is travelling at 20 mph has a 90% chance of survival. However, if the child is struck at 40 mph, he or she has an 85% chance of being killed. Combine that with the statistic that 53 children are killed or seriously injured on foot and on bicycles each week in the United

Kingdom — around seven children each day — and that reduction in miles per hour does not seem like such an imposition.

Everyone has a responsibility to ensure children's safety — not only when they are travelling to and from school, and while they are there, but after school hours as well. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion. A recent television advertising campaign that was aimed at drivers presented the message effectively that the risk of killing or injuring a pedestrian, especially a child, is lowered when speed is reduced. That message reflects statistical evidence from the rest of the UK, and around the world, that speed kills. A child who is struck by a car that is travelling at 20 mph has a 3% chance of being killed; however, if the child is struck by a car that is travelling at 40 mph, he or she has a 90% chance of being killed, according to the Department for Transport in 2004. A 20 mph speed limit makes sense and will save parents from heartbreak.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

A pilot scheme that uses electronically triggered warning lights was run successfully at Hezlett Primary School in my constituency of East Londonderry, and at a school in Ballybogy. The announcement in June 2008 of schemes in the Ballymoney area demonstrates the Minister's belief in the benefits of that method of speed reduction in school environments. The Department for Transport's 2004 report entitled 'Speed: Know your limits' states:

"These measures are not always popular but nevertheless they do work."

That is a sure indication that a 20 mph speed limit is essential in the vicinity of schools or in any built-up area.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware that the road safety organisation Brake conducted a survey of around 16,000 children? It presented the results of that survey to Downing Street and requested that the speed limit be reduced to 20 mph outside every school. That document was presented by seven children, who represented the seven children who are knocked down and killed or seriously injured every day.

The results of that survey indicate that six out of 10 of the children who were surveyed felt that roads near their schools are dangerous; a third of them knew someone who had been knocked down; and eight out of 10 teachers said that roads near their schools are dangerous. Does the Member agree that those figures, more than any others, reinforce the need for a 20 mph speed limit outside schools?

Mr G Robinson: The Member makes a valid point.

In areas where the 20 mph speed limit was applied, there was an overall reduction of 67% in the numbers of accidents involving children. In Scotland, where

political will has resulted in proactive decisions, lights are used to warn of the proximity of a school. Results show that there was no significant variation in the reduction of speed on a country-wide basis. That was achieved without significant publicity or enforcement. As the Scots appear to value highly the safety of their children, should we not ensure the same protection from road accidents for our children? A one mph reduction in speed lessens the risk of accident by 5%. We must apply the same protection for our children as is applied in Scotland. As my colleague Jim Shannon said, we need a 20 mph speed limit.

I appreciate that the initial financial outlay is high and that running costs may cause concern. However, solar-powered lights are available and may be used.

What price do we put on a child's life? Let us protect our children as far as we possibly can from danger on the road. The motion for a 20 mph speed limit has a positive part in providing such protection. As the safety message says: speed kills.

I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment tabled by my colleagues Pat Ramsey and John Dallat. In November 2007, I asked the Minister a question about a small primary school in my constituency that was eager to be included in a pilot scheme to introduce part-time speed limits. The school's request was refused. As a result, the staff are in dire straits as they try to keep the children who walk to and from school safe. The school is on a rural road, which presents an open invitation to motorists to speed. Some drivers make the unfortunate assumption that this rural road, which is not policed for speed, can be used as an ad hoc racetrack.

In the Shantallow ward in the Foyle constituency, there are 11 primary and secondary schools in social-housing areas. Their pupils run a daily gauntlet of problems associated with ever-increasing traffic.

Children, whatever their age, have a basic right to be safe while travelling to and from school. At present, for many children, their daily walk to school is similar to Russian roulette. A speed of 20 mph is significant where children are about; at that speed, a collision between a car and humans will do considerable harm.

I urge the Minister to give due consideration to the motion and the amendment, and I hope that he will have the good counsel to implement the 20 mph rule in and around schools, whether rural or urban.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt do mo chara Francie Molloy.

I thank my colleague Francie Molloy for tabling the motion and all Members present for a constructive

debate. Support for the motion has been expressed on all sides of the Chamber, which is encouraging. The Committee for Regional Development has conducted prolonged discussion and examination of the issue, and it is encouraging that members of the Committee who spoke support the pilot projects that have been introduced and variable speed limits. That augurs well, and it seems that a consensus about the best way forward is emerging.

I have asked my officials to read the Hansard report so that if I fail to pick up any of the points made, I can write to the Members concerned after the debate.

Road safety is a key priority for my Department, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI; we all work together to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads — including children. For many years, my Department's Roads Service has been proactive in promoting safety at schools through its annual programme of traffic-management measures. In the past, my Department has been asked to consider speed limits at all schools across the North. A previous Minister considered that option but ruled it out in favour of a more targeted approach, and there are good reasons for that.

For much of the time, reduced speed limits at schools may be totally inappropriate, such as at night or at weekends. Experience shows that motorists often ignore appropriate speed limits, thereby bringing such limits into disrepute, and some Members mentioned that in their contributions. Enforcing those speed limits will be a major resource issue for the police. Experience shows that unenforced speed limits fall into disrepute.

As I have said, Roads Service is pursuing a more targeted approach. In 2004, as part of its Safer Routes to School programme, my Department accelerated the provision of signs, road markings and engineering measures outside schools to highlight the presence of schools to motorists. Many of the Members who contributed to today's debate highlighted that 20 mph zones alone would not be enough to guarantee safety and that a range of measures is needed. That is the approach that has been adopted in the Safer Routes to School programme.

Since then, about 140 schools have had measures provided. However, the Department is never complacent, and in 2006, Roads Service accelerated its programme to provide signs and road markings outside schools in rural areas where the speed limit of 60 mph applies. My Department will continue to seek new or innovative measures and methods to reduce the speed of traffic on the road network as a whole. In that regard, new technology has proved particularly effective. Several Members referred to vehicle-activated signs, which tell motorists to slow down, along various roads across the network.

I fully recognise that speeding outside schools is of concern to pupils and parents alike. Earlier this month,

Roads Service initiated a trial of part-time 20 mph speed limits at two schools, one near Castlerock and the other near Ballymoney, to which numerous Members referred. Those 20 mph speed limits are enforced only at the start and finish of the school day when children are most at risk of being involved in a car accident. Early indications show that the pilots, which have been broadly welcomed by the schools and communities involved, have been successful in reducing the speed of traffic.

Trevor Lunn asked about the programming of such signs. I assure him that the programming is carried out in conjunction with schools to ensure that the signs are not in use at the wrong times. Drivers tend to ignore general speed limit signs that operate when they are not needed. The signs used in the pilots must be activated in line with the agreed school activities so that they are effective when they are needed. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess those pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

I want to add a note of caution: the measures are expensive. John Dallat quoted a figure of £60,000 as the cost for each trial site, but it costs around £50,000. We do not have an unlimited budget. Pat Ramsey made a series of demands of DRD, and I look forward to hearing him passionately repeat those demands at the next Budget debate. I will give him my support on that issue.

In 2003, the Scottish Government provided some £27 million worth of funding to roll out a similar initiative at all schools in Scotland, to which various Members made reference. I accept entirely the Members' point that the cost cannot be weighed against the life of a child. However, some 209 schools are situated on the road network where the 60 mph speed limit applies. If we were to roll out the initiative across all those rural schools, it would involve an investment of around £10 million, plus maintenance.

Mr T Clarke: You have given a figure for the cost of the investment; however, I have heard that every life lost on Northern Ireland's roads costs about £1 million.

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept what the Member says, and I do not quote those figures to avoid dealing with the issue. Often, after a Budget debate, Members tell me what resources I should allocate, but it is important that they understand the resource implications. I will remain proactive in seeking solutions to road safety issues outside schools and we will seek to identify the resources required to effect such solutions. I am committed to achieving that.

I am not outlining resource implications as a way to avoid finding solutions to the problem. The issue is very important, and I fully accept the implications of

resources on the loss of life as well as their implications on measures to prevent the loss of life.

5.00 pm

Regarding the introduction of 20 mph speed limits in all neighbourhoods where there is a perceived danger from speeding traffic, I emphasise that the PSNI is responsible for the enforcement of speeding restrictions through its safety-camera scheme. Although my Department's Roads Service encourages and supports 20 mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road-users, I have no plans to reduce speed limits in housing estates and other built-up areas to 20 mph. Mr Ramsey asked why this was not planned, and other Members have answered that question in their discussion of the amendment. They stated that where Roads Service has limited resources, resources must be targeted at the areas most at risk. Roads Service targets its resources for traffic calming in residential areas where a need has already been assessed.

I am aware of the introduction of the Twenty's Plenty initiative of advisory 20 mph speed limits and zones in Scotland. My officials have discussed the experiences of that operation with Transport Scotland and other local authorities. Trevor Lunn referred to mixed results from some of those schemes when they were enforced. Other Members referred to examples of best practice elsewhere. I assure Members that the Department will continue to look to other countries and cities for examples of best practice and will try to adopt them.

In some areas — particularly in the case of Scotland — some speed-reducing measures have been very successful, and some not so. They are not a panacea for all our ills. Experience from here and elsewhere has shown that such schemes are only effective when they have the support of the entire local community. John Dallat referred to similar schemes in his constituency and to the community buy-in that exists for them. Such schemes are also effective where the roads on which signs are located do not carry through-traffic. I am referring to residential areas and not the areas outside schools.

Roads Service has provided a number of advisory 20 mph zones in order to test the concept. Members are aware that speed is one of the major causes of traffic collisions on our roads. My Department has recently reviewed its approach to the setting of speed limits. The draft guidelines set out a new approach to the setting of local speed limits across the North, and I hope to bring the speed-management review to the Executive Committee shortly to seek the views of ministerial colleagues before wider consultation.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI work in a co-ordinated manner to promote road

safety across the North through education measures, enforcement and road safety engineering measures respectively.

Members will be aware that the 'Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy 2002-12' includes a target of a one-third reduction from the period of 1996-2000 in the average number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads annually. It also aims for a 50% reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured on our roads each year. Statistics gathered up to 2007 show significant improvements, with reductions of 31% and 57% respectively against the targets for the number of people and children killed or seriously injured, when measured against the average annual number of fatal and serious injuries between 1996 and 2000.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service is fully committed to reducing the carnage on our roads and to helping to achieve the casualty-reduction targets set out in the road safety strategy. I thank Members for the many constructive contributions that have been made in what has been a constructive debate.

It is regrettable that Pat Ramsey strayed into the political problems that the Executive are experiencing, and I am very heartened that having spent the past 16 months attacking the Executive, he now feels that one meeting of the Executive would address all the problems.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I am pleased to take part in this important debate. Francie Molloy emphasised the need for obvious signage outside school buildings. He mentioned flashing signs, such as there are in the Republic of Ireland — signs that are powered by solar panels and are, therefore, green.

Mr Molloy also mentioned speed-sensitive warning lights that would alert drivers about excessive speed as they approach schools. He referred to the tragic accident near Ballygawley and suggested that if flashing lights had been fitted to the rear of the bus involved, that accident could have been avoided. He spoke about the importance of signage to draw drivers' attention to the existence of a school in a certain locality. He quoted those awful 2007 statistics of 112 people being killed on our roads and 6,000 people being injured, 813 of them children

Mr Ramsey explained the amendment and underlined the need for speed restrictions in estates and residential areas. He referred to the Transport Research Laboratory study; it reviewed 250 traffic-calming measures and showed that a 9 mph reduction in speed could lead to a fall of 60% in collisions, a fall of 67% in collisions involving children and a fall of 20% in collisions involving cyclists. He called for the introduction of a

raft of measures in order to make our roads safer not only in the vicinity of schools but in residential areas.

Jim Wells referred to Northern Ireland's poor road safety record, a view that was echoed by John McCallister, who told us the tragic news that between 2002 and 2006, six school pupils were killed on our roads and over 1,000 children were injured. Mr Wells proposed time-targeted 20 mph speed limits outside schools at peak times, referencing Scotland's Twenty's Plenty initiative, which has reduced accidents by 60%. Mr Wells also mentioned the need to facilitate more children being able to walk or cycle to school and said that a speed limit would encourage parents to have the confidence to support their children to get up on their feet or on their bicycles.

Trevor Lunn underlined the need not only for speed restrictions but for the enforcement of speed limits, saying that speed limits alone are not effective unless they are enforced. Ian McCrea was unsure about the amendment, believing that traffic-calming measures that are already in place act as a deterrent to speeding in residential areas. However, if 20 mph speed limits were properly enforced in residential areas, surely there would be no need for traffic-calming measures, which are extremely difficult to secure from the authorities.

The Minister must take Members' comments on board and act to save lives. However, what we have heard from the Minister is that we will get more of the same, and that is disappointing. We need consistency in policy; inconsistency will lead to confusion, which will, sadly, lead to loss of life. Drivers need to know what restrictions have been imposed outside all schools and in all residential areas. We cannot have different sets of regulations for every school and residential area. I ask the Minister to listen carefully to what Members have said and to consult, once again, with his officials, based on this debate. The Minister must ensure that a 20 mph speed limit is enforced outside schools and in residential areas.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who contributed to this constructive debate. Francie Molloy and I tabled the motion because of our frustration in trying to secure increased traffic-calming measures and reduced speed limits in the vicinity of schools. I have been contacted by many principals and concerned parents about child safety at the peak times of the start and finish of the school day.

As I said, I found myself quite frustrated in my attempts to have traffic calming measures introduced outside schools, and several Members spoke of similar experiences.

Many schools in my Mid Ulster constituency fall into the category that would allow them to have traffic-calming measures introduced. Mid Ulster is a

rural constituency, and many of its rural primary schools are on roads that have 60 mph speed limits. One such school is St Joseph's Primary School at Galbally, County Tyrone. The road that runs in front of that school has a speed limit of 60 mph. Over the years, parents have expressed concern about the safety of their children and about the potential dangers of the speed and volume of traffic using that road during the school term.

Despite the fact that, over the years, there has been constant lobbying on the matter, we have been unsuccessful in securing the introduction of traffic-calming measures on that road. That is because the legislation states that in order to be considered for traffic-calming measures, such as speed bumps, there must be a speed limit of 30 mph on the stretch of road in question. As a result, schools that are on roads that have speed limits of more than 30 mph are excluded from having traffic-calming measures introduced.

The motion is an attempt to highlight to the Minister that there is a definite need to have traffic-calming measures outside every school. I am sure that he is only too aware of the concerns that Members expressed during the debate. He obviously considered those concerns to be valid when he introduced the pilot project — to which several Members referred — at two schools in the North.

That pilot project is a trial of part-time speed limits, which means that they are enforceable at the beginning and the end of the school day, which are the periods of greatest risk to the children. On the BBC radio programme 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, the principal of one of the pilot-project schools suggested that there has already been an improvement in the traffic situation outside his school, and that is with the project having been in place since only the start of the school year.

I hope that the success of those pilot schemes continues and that that will be sufficient evidence to persuade the Minister to implement a 20 mph speed limit, with associated traffic-calming measures, in the vicinity of all schools.

Speed is one of the biggest contributory factors to carnage on the roads. Many Members referred to startling facts and statistics about speed and its effects. I will give three examples with regard to those statistics. If a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle at 20 mph, there is a 2·5% chance of being killed; if hit at 30 mph, there is a 20% chance of being killed; and if hit at 40 mph, there is a 90% chance of being killed. Those statistics alone should be enough to warrant a 20 mph speed limit outside our schools.

Many Members referred to the Scottish model, whereby the Scottish Executive issued guidance stating that a 20 mph speed limit should be the norm outside all schools. A key finding of a review of a trial of

part-time speed limits outside schools in Scotland was that speed was reduced. Indeed, the working group that was established to deal with that was surprised to find that the results were better than expected.

I hope that at the end of the trial period of the two pilot schemes introduced by the Minister we, too, find positive results and that he will implement a system that will improve the safety of all our children.

The Minister made the point, as did Dawn Purvis, that research suggests that reducing speed limits without associated signage is not effective and that it usually slows traffic by approximately only one mph. Associated signage is, therefore, needed in order to maximise the potential of any changes.

Pat Ramsey expressed concern about the motion not going far enough. I reiterate to the SDLP that Sinn Féin is committed to overall road safety, but the motion focused on schools because that is where children are concentrated most. That said, however, we have decided to accept the amendment.

Jim Wells began his contribution by worrying about his career. I am not sure whether he has left the Chamber, but he said that he wanted to congratulate the Minister. However, he should never say never; one never knows when one might decide to congratulate the Minister. He spoke of the good work of the Committee for Regional Development in considering traffic calming and road safety in general.

John McCallister and Ian McCrea spoke of the health benefits to be gained if children can walk to school and about how parental confidence is necessary in order for that to happen. Trevor Lunn and Cathal Boylan spoke of problems with enforcement, and I agree that there is a role for DRD, DOE and the PSNI in ensuring increased levels of road safety.

5.15 pm

Alastair Ross spoke of the need for more education for drivers, and I share his concern. All Members have a role to play in that. I noted that the Minister of Education was present for a large part of the debate, and I am sure that she listened to everything that was said.

I welcome John Dallat's comment that road safety is a cross-cutting issue, and I appreciate that other Departments have a role to play. Dawn Purvis mentioned that she had experience of how reduced speed limits and traffic calming led to improvements in her area.

I thank the Minister for his comments and for his commitment to addressing road safety issues. I note the draft policy on speed management, and I look forward to the Minister introducing policies and measures that will lead to a safer environment for all children.

In conclusion, the safety of children is paramount. From the moment that they leave home in the morning,

until their return in the evening, parents want them to be in the safest possible environment. The proposal for a restricted speed limit would lead to enhanced safety for all children, and I thank Members for their support. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to consider introducing a 20 mph restricted speed limit as part of a broader package of traffic calming measures in the vicinity of schools and neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians, especially children and older people.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Development of the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic has 15 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak have approximately 12 minutes.

Mr P Ramsey: I doubt that I will speak for the full 15 minutes.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning to the debate, and I thank all other Members who have remained in the Chamber.

I am here to argue for more university places for the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. Urgent action must be taken, and plans must be made, for the development of that campus. The city needs the university to achieve — as soon as possible — its stated aim of growing the campus to accommodate at least 10,000 students. Such development is by far the most important economic initiative that could happen in the region.

Derry is the capital of the north-west of Ireland and the centre of a drive-to-work population far in excess of 350,000. Over the past decade at least, cities of a similar size in Ireland — specifically Cork, Limerick and Galway — have experienced high levels of high-value-added employment and low levels of unemployment. Those university cities each have a student population of approximately 14,000. The universities are powerful providers of knowledge; they supply graduates to the economy, facilitate technology transfer and lead to the creation of spin-off companies. Universities are the consistent drivers of the economy and are the speculative engines that produce knowledge for future industries.

The substantial universities in Cork, Limerick and Galway have grown as a direct result of a deliberate Government policy to develop those regions. It is worth noting that those cities achieved full employment before other major infrastructural investments in transport, and so forth, were made. The primary and strategically most important investments were made in the universities. Given the economic success of those regional cities, their developmental example should be copied.

The University of Ulster's campus in Derry has a student body of fewer than 3,000 undergraduates. In 2005, the University of Ulster's announcement of its

strategic intention to expand the Magee campus to accommodate 10,000 students was warmly welcomed by all sectors in the city. Before 2005, the university had acquired new land for development, with the full support of those sectors in the city. Since then, the number of students at the campus has decreased, and there is no apparent drive or determination to reverse that trend.

Excluding the school of art and design in Belfast, the Magee campus is the smallest of the University of Ulster's campuses. Belfast, including Queen's University, the Jordanstown campus and the school of art and design, has more than 24,000 undergraduate students. That is around nine times the number of university students in Derry. The Coleraine campus has 3,800 students, yet Coleraine is a medium-sized regional town that does not have the economic development potential or requirement of Derry.

The whole point of the persistent arguments for growth at the Magee campus is that investment in higher education can be turned into investment in high-quality jobs. Magee Science Research Park, which employs 370 people, is by far the most successful of the university's science parks. Coleraine Science Research Park has 49 employees, despite the fact that the Coleraine campus has more IT students than the Magee campus and has a major centre for life and health sciences.

Derry has received major investment from IT companies, including Seagate, Stream, Fujitsu and Northbrook Technology, but the number of graduates limits its ability to grow the sector. In order for the city to reach its economic potential, investment must be made in the campus.

A further potential economic advantage is that Derry is on the border. Three miles from Derry city centre is a region that enjoys a corporation tax regime of 12.5%. Were Belfast to have such an advantage, there is no doubt that such an opportunity would be seized and that the location would be bursting at the seams with investment. That source of competitive advantage that Derry has is ignored. Although that tax zone is so close to Derry, I know of no strategy that aims to take advantage of it, and I do not know the reason for that.

There is no reason why major manufacturing companies in advanced technologies should not locate there to take advantage of the entire north-west's advanced workforce. However, the economic offering must include a much more substantial university presence than currently exists.

Given the importance of university activities to economic development, it is a matter of extreme concern that the Minister for Employment and Learning, nor anyone else in the Executive, seems to have control over where investments are made. In response to a

question for written answer that I submitted to the Minister on the locations of student numbers, he stated:

"The distribution of places across individual campuses is entirely a matter for each university". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, pWA23, col 1*].

I urge the Minister to seek some control over that. When I discussed the matter with senior members of the University of Ulster's management, they were surprised and shocked to learn his response. They explained that previous Ministers had made it clear where investments should be made during the university's various development phases.

I know that the Minister believes passionately in education and that he is committed to economic development and fairness. I know that because of the decisions that he made in his previous ministerial post. He made courageous and imaginative decisions, because those were the right decisions to make. From a north-west perspective, he was closely involved — along with Mark Durkan, who was the then Minister of Finance and Personnel — with the gas-pipeline decision that brought gas to the north-west and allowed electricity generation to continue at Coolkeeragh power station.

The Minister for Employment and Learning now has an opportunity to make an even greater contribution — one that would mean that the north-west would no longer be a place of high unemployment but a place of high employment. The people of the north-west are committed to a better future, and to creating a city and region of which to be proud. They want to create a welcoming, open and prosperous place for their children and for people who wish to make the region their home. However, that cannot be done unless there are visionary leaders in positions of power who will make the right strategic decisions on regional infrastructure.

The Minister has shown that he is a man of vision and of action. He is in a position to have a profound, positive and sustained impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. We want a bright, brand new day and hope for the future. I appeal to the Minister to consider strongly the arguments that have been presented to him today. We had a brief meeting with the Minister last week, at which the issue was discussed. I hope that, after listening to Members' contributions to the debate, a meeting to follow through on that can be arranged in a more informal setting on the case that is required for the north-west of Ireland.

That case is overwhelming and has, clearly, been a sore point in Derry for decades. John Hume took up politics in 1966 after the then Stormont regime's decision to locate the University of Ulster in Coleraine. That decision was wrong, and we need coherent and decisive strategic leadership from the Department for Employment and Learning. I urge the Minister to listen to other Members and to introduce such proposals.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo chéad buíochas a thabhairt do Pat Ramsey as an díospóireacht seo a thógáil. Tugaim buíochas fosta don Aire as a bheith anseo inniu.

I thank Pat Ramsey for securing the Adjournment debate, and I welcome the Minister's presence. The expansion of Magee university is an issue that, as the Minister knows, unites the city politically, culturally and socially. As Pat Ramsey said, the expansion of Magee — which makes its own case — must be put in the context of the regeneration of Derry and the entire north-west region. It would help the area to achieve the Executive's goal of tackling regional disparity and uneven development.

Uneven development has, for decades, been a characteristic of life in the north-west. However, the purpose of today's debate is not to apportion blame or to complain about the past, but to outline to the Minister the reasons why the expansion of Magee could be a key driver in tackling regional disparity and the ensuing inequality.

Despite its large population, Derry does not enjoy the status of a university city. Pat Ramsey outlined the experiences of Limerick, Cork and other cities, and on examination of cities in England and Scotland, it is apparent that Derry should have a better university. That necessity is reflected in Derry's low number of private-sector graduates, research and development projects and departments. Moreover, in Derry, more people leave to attend university than in other towns, and it has the lowest percentage of population — of any city of its size — attending university. That is the wider impact of not having a big enough university.

That situation could change and, perhaps, should change, and I hope that the Minister will play his part in that. The university has outlined its case and pointed the way, and one immediate step could be to raise the student cap from 4,000 to 10,000. Irrespective of the impact on the university, that measure would have wider social and economic benefits for our city. It would enable the university to extend its range of courses and thus attract important facilities and departments such as research and development and, in particular, medical training.

Magee has already conducted some imaging work, and that excellent facility could grow. The existence of two major hospitals in Letterkenny and Derry would assist that growth. That growth would allow courses to be taught on site, and would reflect the need for inward investment. Moreover, as the Minister will be aware, it would encourage graduates to stay in Derry after the completion of their degree. The city could benefit economically from those people's skills and knowledge.

However, much land is needed for such an expansion; that is a problem that the Minister, and the university, must face. The Minister has a role — not alone, but with others — and I hope that he will, today, outline his engagement with the Department of Education, the University of Ulster and the various landholders. The university is concerned that a complicated property chain might delay any expansion if not everybody was in agreement. Through our political contacts — and I am sure that all Members from the city have similar experiences — we have found that everyone wants to play their part and assist the expansion of the university and the social and economic growth of the city. Go raibh maith agat.

5.30 pm

Mrs M Bradley: I apologise for the absence of Mark Durkan, the MP for Foyle. He very much wanted to be part of this debate, but he is unable to be here.

I thank the Minister for attending this adjournment debate. My colleague Pat Ramsey already covered many of the points of contention pertaining to the Magee campus. Therefore, I have no intention of going over ground that has already been covered.

There is a distinct and well-defined need for job creation in the Foyle constituency. It is vital that the university is nurtured and catered for in order to enhance the academic opportunities that are open to students from the city and from further afield. The university has already secured land in and around the existing campus, so there is an urgent need for it to develop its course availability. The creation of additional courses should help to create the jobs to which I referred.

Many young people do not want to study outside their home town. However, many of those students have no option but to travel to other universities and — in the majority of cases — incur additional living expenses and the need to rent accommodation.

Over the years, many university cities have experienced huge economic growth as a direct result of investment in the universities and their course provision. Many of those places have much smaller populations than Derry. Foyle is in need: it needs jobs, but the city's industry that is gaining economic investment is the very sector that cannot find enough graduates to employ. That is an atrocious situation — one that must be rectified urgently.

It is my wish that — for the first time ever — the city's students can stay in their own homes while studying for the third-level qualification of their choice and that they should not be selective or punished financially just because their chosen course is not on offer at their local university. Derry is growing at a constant rate, and the associated academic opportunities must ultimately accompany that rate of growth if any sound economic base is to be developed.

Derry is in a prime position, as its natural hinterland is Donegal. At present, the Magee campus loses thousands of students from Donegal to universities further afield. It makes good economic sense to assist development at Magee and, in turn, to enhance the links that have already been forged with Donegal in areas such as the economy and healthcare.

I have every confidence that the Minister will give whatever support he can to this matter. I thank him for listening to the case.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank the Members for bringing this debate to the House and for their participation in it. I know that the issue is particularly important to Mr Pat Ramsey and his constituents, and the matter has been raised with me several times. The issue is also of strategic importance to the university itself.

The University of Ulster's Magee campus plays an important role in the economic, social and cultural life of our second city. It provides employment to more than 600 staff and — at 2005 and 2006 levels — it contributes around £20 million a year to the economy of the region. The campus is home to the university's Department of International Business and boasts a business liaison office that works with local businesses to help them achieve their potential and to develop innovative products. It also boasts course provision as diverse as business studies, intelligence systems and dance.

The campus can also be credited with the development of the Step-Up programme; a unique partnership with industry and local schools that is designed to provide educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since its inception in 2000, the programme has been hugely successful in achieving its objectives of raising the aspirations, motivation and performance of students who might otherwise never have ventured near a university. The programme is now held as a model of best practice across the UK.

Equally, the role of the campus in the cultural life of the city should not be underestimated. It enhances culture through teaching and learning and through a wealth of events held throughout the year. It boasts the Tip O'Neill Chair in Peace Studies and has hosted a series of lectures by high-profile international figures, including the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Senator John Kerry, and the former EU President Romano Prodi.

In addition, in recent months, the university has facilitated a working party to explore the city's potential to become a city of culture, and I commend it for those endeavours.

I am confident that the university has an important role to play in the economic development of the north-west and of Northern Ireland as a whole, and any

expansion of the campus will certainly help to achieve that. However, we should not lose sight of the steps that have been taken, and continue to take place, in achieving that aim.

Equally, we must bear in mind that responsibility for economic development does not fall solely to the University of Ulster or, indeed, to my Department. It requires a collaborative approach from me and from my colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the development agencies, the city council and, of course, our partners in organisations such as the University of Ulster, further education colleges and employers.

In that context, the university has committed itself to providing courses that are deemed necessary for the region's economic development. For example, it intends to build on its current provision in computing and engineering, with a priority to expand into construction and building, creative technologies and business services. In engineering, the university also envisages an expansion of the development of medical devices, and that was mentioned by Mr McCartney.

The university is firmly of the view that it should focus its attention on creating graduate-level jobs for the people of the north-west, and not simply on graduate-level jobs in the north-west — that is an important distinction. I am sure that Members will join me in supporting the university's adoption of such an approach.

Examples of that approach in action include the establishment of the Intelligent Systems Research Centre. To house that centre, the university is in the process of taking over the building on the Strand Road that it previously leased to Northbrook Technology. In turn, that will be used to facilitate the expansion of research, particularly at doctorate level.

This year, following successful accreditation by the Law Society, the university introduced post-graduate professional legal education at the campus. Consequently, for the first time, students who wish to qualify as solicitors can undertake their training outside Belfast. That will complement the university's undergraduate law provision at Magee. Furthermore, a new undergraduate programme in creative technologies has been launched this year.

The university has a long-standing aspiration to create a graduate-entry medical school at the Magee campus. In partnership with healthcare bodies North and South, including the National University of Ireland, Galway, discussions to achieve that are ongoing, although it will be subject to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's workforce planning.

With regard to medicine, a proposal is being considered for a unique research facility in the area of biomedical

services at Altnagelvin Hospital. Later this year, when the centre is fully operational it will assist in the future recruitment and retention of research-active clinicians of the highest calibre.

As I am sure Members are aware, the university has, in partnership with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, commissioned a scoping study to assess future demand for higher-education, and any new, courses in the north-west. The report from that study should be available later this year, and it will have implications for any expansion of Magee.

As part of the Programme for Government, my Department is committed to providing additional PhD places over the next three years. I am pleased to announce that 34 of the additional 100 places this year have been allocated to the University of Ulster, and I am happy to advise Members of the subject areas in which they have been provided.

That brings me to an important point in the debate: although my Department can provide additional funding to the university for course provision targeted towards the economy's requirements, it cannot dictate to the university where those courses should be based. Of course, that brings advantages and disadvantages. Nowadays, universities are incorporated bodies with their own boards, and although Departments might have directed funding in the past, that is no longer policy. Nevertheless, I am conscious that when significant amounts of public funding are being expended, it is inevitable that Members will seek to ascertain how and where that money is spent. That is perfectly understandable and is part of the accountability process.

The impact of the physical landscape of the Magee campus on any proposed expansion must also be borne in mind. The university advises that any expansion is subject to the procurement of land owned by Foyle and Londonderry College and the redevelopment of the former Fort George army site. Discussions are continuing between the university and the school. When I visited the site earlier this year, the vice chancellor showed me the geography and pointed out where an education corridor might be developed along that part of the city. I see the advantages in that.

Parts of the site are relatively congested and, although there are new buildings there, one can immediately see the physical limitations to its significant expansion. It would be foolish not to recognise that.

I stress that the economic development of the north-west relates to more than just higher education, including the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. I am committed to the development of further education as a significant part of the infrastructure that is required to further develop the city.

My Department is determined to ensure that present and future workforces have the skills that employers

need. In that context, on 9 October 2008 the first all-island skills conference will be held in the north-west. I agreed that initiative in September last year with my then counterparts Micheál Martin and Mary Hanafin, both of whom have moved on. The conference will concentrate on issues in border areas. A key issue will be whether further and higher education institutes are providing people with skills that employers need.

Therefore, it was decided to gather labour-market intelligence over the past year. After the conference on 9 October, the aim is to share that information with the wider community. It is important that such a unique event — held in the north-west but covering all border areas — sends a signal: if we can produce the right people for local employers there is something for people to aim for and young people will not be driven away. Employers are going far afield to recruit the right people. Therefore, the mix is wrong, which is an issue that the conference will address.

A skills expert group with representatives from across the water, from the Republic and from the United States has been established in Northern Ireland. Those workforce development forums, including one based in the north-west, are being invited to come together with local employers and local education providers to ensure that we get accurate feedback about what businesses need.

While I was Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the previous Executive, the then Industrial Development Board and my Department arranged to share investment information with our equivalent authorities in the Republic of Ireland. At that time, Mary Harney was my counterpart in the Republic. If a potential investor was to come along, the objective was to work together in order to capture that investment.

The tax regime was mentioned by Pat Ramsey during the debate. Of course that is a major issue but we must understand that, if a project were to come along, there would be some squealing match over where the actual investment is located. Therefore, a mechanism is needed to deal with such matters.

The report on the Letterkenny arrangements will be released towards the end of this year, and I look forward to seeing what possibilities emerge from it.

I want to make several matters clear. The Department does not dictate what the university authorities do, but any suggestions or requests that they make will be received positively.

I have not received any such requests. If it is a matter of considering caps on student numbers, the maximum student number cap, as it is known, is purely a cost-control measure. If a university presented me with proposals and said that it cannot take on any more students in economically relevant subject areas because of its

cap, I will consider that; however, I must be approached. If a proposal is produced it will be assessed.

5.45 pm

Currently, there are approximately 3,700 students enrolled at the university campus. That ranges from full-time and part-time undergraduates to those studying at post-graduate level. The university's target is 10,000 students and, again, that will cover all categories. We are not yet aware of the possibilities presented by the co-operation with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, but we will have a clear idea of that after the next few months.

I accept entirely the point that a university can make a disproportionate contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of a city — that goes without saying. I acknowledge that most cities that have thriving universities tend to get spin-off advantages. As far as my Department is concerned, we are not constraining the university college, or the university, and we are not standing in the way of any proposals. I do not believe that we are holding back or refusing any proposals currently.

If the university comes to my Department with proposals, we will consider those and their cost implications closely. To me, the land deal seems to be critical to the issue, because the campus is on a relatively congested site — the future lies with concluding that deal. If that space is created, other opportunities will also exist. Otherwise, it will be like squeezing a quart into a pint pot, so to speak — the site is relatively congested, and that is one of the key issues.

However, the university's ultimate plans are also critical. The university shares its capital programme — as it must — with several public bodies from which it draws funding, including, but not exclusively, my Department. It was suggested that a follow-up meeting is held to consider the issue in more detail — I am very open to that; it is not a difficulty. I welcome any information pertaining to the land issue, information regarding whether the report on the co-operation with Letterkenny Institute of Technology could be beneficial to us, or any other suggestions that Members might have.

My Department will try to help the university in any way that we can, and if it does approach us with proposals I assure Members that all aspects of those will be considered very carefully, because we are in the business of ensuring that we have the most skilled workforce possible.

We are also interested in the spin-offs that can result from having a university in a city — that is where growth comes from. America, in particular, has been very successful in encouraging economic spin-offs from its universities by understanding the business mind and how the research and work that is done in universities can be channelled and turned into jobs and into money. We, in this country, are getting better at

that, but we still have some way to go. I assure Members that my Department will offer them an open door with regard to this issue, and if the university comes to us with any proposals we will certainly consider those carefully.

Adjourned at 5.49 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 29 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, these motions on Standing Committee and Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Fred Cobain replace Mr David McNarry as a member of the Business Committee. — *[Mr Cobain.]*

Statutory Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Armstrong replace Mr Fred Cobain as a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr David McNarry replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; and that Mr David McClarty replace Mr Billy Armstrong as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — *[Mr Cobain.]*

Standing Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Paul Maskey replace Mr John O'Dowd as a member of the Audit Committee. — *[Ms Ni Chuilín.]*

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Increase in Energy Prices

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. Three amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly deplores the 33·3% rise in electricity prices by Northern Ireland Electricity and the 19·2% increase in Phoenix Natural Gas prices; and calls on the Executive to set up an inquiry into (i) electricity and gas prices; (ii) their comparability with the rest of the United Kingdom; (iii) their impact on inflation and manufacturing costs here; (iv) their impact on households, and (v) the availability of oil and gas storage facilities.

I recognise that businesses in the global economy face price rises that will, at times, require an increase in the price of the product that they provide to the consumer. However, it would be a travesty if the Assembly did not reflect the widespread public outcry at the recent price increases announced by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) and Phoenix Natural Gas. Rises of 33% and 19% are not routine: they will have tremendous social and economic consequences. In the aftermath of a 33% rise in the price of electricity, the Assembly must be close to saying that our energy market is not functioning properly.

It is one thing to bail out banks, but to bail out those who are to blame for causing the markets to buckle is not acceptable. Who will bail out the ordinary people — the families, single parents and pensioners — who face hardship in paying for their gas and electricity? It appears, to the consumer, to be unfair, when, apparently, one can do as much as one likes here, if one has a monopoly. The regulator cannot force Northern Ireland Electricity or Phoenix Natural Gas to be competitive with a phantom supplier or a gas or electricity supplier across the water.

In Northern Ireland, a case must be made for the monopoly operators to pay back some of the profits that they enjoy from being in an exclusive monopoly position, when it is clear that they cannot lose and — what is more — will not suffer, when they inflict increases, at will, on their customers. The Assembly and the Executive, as the public's arbitrators, can be a second umpire — another referee — in the game of price hikes that is played behind closed doors. We are not even spectators at that game, and we receive the results only when the game is over.

Electricity and gas price increases of 33·3% and 19·2% are two of the most pressing issues that the Assembly has had to deal with. High energy costs impact on every business and household in the country. Questions, therefore, must be asked about our energy supply and the impact that supply issues have on underlying cost. The major structural weaknesses in our energy supply system that need to be addressed must be identified, and we must establish how the scale of the recent price rise can be justified. Is it due, in part, to the purchasing policies of NIE and its inability — and the inability of the United Kingdom — to store gas? Why, otherwise, are prices increasing in a falling energy market? How can price rises in excess of those elsewhere in the United Kingdom be explained satisfactorily to the consumer in Northern Ireland?

In the early 1990s, during the great North Sea gas boom, Britain had plenty of gas but failed to take the opportunity to build the necessary infrastructure to stockpile that gas. As a result, Britain has only enough storage capacity to stockpile gas for 13 days. After a 13-day gas-price crisis, we would be in trouble, and our energy prices would soar.

In contrast, France reacted to the earlier OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) crisis of the 1970s by systematically building up its gas storage capacity so that it has 99 days of gas in its storage facilities, and it was not alone: the Netherlands built up a storage capacity of 120 days; Germany has developed a storage capacity for 77 days; the United States maintains a storage capacity of 60 days; and Japan has a storage capacity of 50 days. Those countries can all more easily weather any short-term fluctuations in gas prices or crises in gas supplies, and they can buy when prices are at their lowest and store the gas. The United Kingdom cannot. Quite frankly, that is insane, and that is why the whole of the United Kingdom — not just Northern Ireland — is facing inflation-busting hikes in the price of gas this winter.

Northern Ireland remains almost exclusively dependent on natural-gas supplies from Great Britain and, as a result, is vulnerable in the event of market circumstances leading to a reduction in gas supplies. Gas dependency leaves the whole of the United Kingdom vulnerable, and Northern Ireland is particularly vulnerable because its main power stations are all gas turbine combined-cycle plants.

I commend the motion to the House. I have highlighted some of the key issues underlying the energy price rises in Northern Ireland, which go far beyond those in the rest of the United Kingdom. No doubt, colleagues will contribute to the other issues addressed in the motion and, no doubt, Members moving amendments will introduce their particular issues.

We are under the cosh of punitive price hikes for gas and electricity that are causing hardship. No one is saying that the days of such large price increases are over, and I fear that there are more heavy increases to come. This deserved call for an inquiry is addressed directly to an Executive who are currently failing in their duty. Members of the Executive cannot justify their three-month layoff, and far less can Sinn Féin justify what it has been up to in creating the filibuster behind that layoff.

If the Members diagonally opposite want to participate in a debate such as this, please do so, but catch yourselves on with what you are trying to do with the democracy in the House and your non-appearance at Executive meetings. Please catch yourselves on and realise what is happening out there, where few people really care about what has made Sinn Féin absentee members of the Executive. Get back to work this week and let us see business being done, and let us see issues such as energy addressed promptly this week.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after the second “prices” and insert

“; acknowledges the independent review of the electricity price rise commissioned by the Utility Regulator; and calls upon the Executive to bring forward a new energy strategy that focuses on ensuring secure and sustainable supplies of electricity and gas within a competitive market that drives down prices for all consumers.”

I welcome our having another debate on energy, although I wish that it was in more acceptable circumstances. I join with the previous Member, and, no doubt, every Member who will contribute to the debate, in expressing my deep regret at the price rises for electricity and natural gas that Northern Ireland consumers face. We all regret those price rises and are deeply concerned about the negative effect that those price rises will have on householders and businesses in Northern Ireland and on Northern Ireland's competitiveness in what are trying and difficult economic times.

As amendment No 3 will remind us, this is the second debate of this kind in the House in the past six months. However, unless we get to grips with our energy infrastructure and framework issues, debates of this nature, in which we express our concern, regret or revulsion at increases in energy costs, will become the norm in the House.

12.15 pm

We must address short- and long-term issues. In the short term, we must continue to encourage homeowners and businesses to make their properties as energy efficient as possible. I welcome the work that has been done by the task force on fuel poverty and the various agencies that have channelled their efforts into it. I echo Mr McNarry's hope that the Executive will meet this week, so that the task force's findings or

recommendations can be acted on for the betterment of everyone in Northern Ireland — homeowners and businesspeople alike.

I welcome the fact that the Utility Regulator has commissioned an independent review, which will be headed by Douglas McIlldoon, a man who has great expertise and experience in the field. People will never welcome energy price rises of the current magnitude. However, they need to see evidence that increases are unavoidable — if, indeed, that is the case. I hope that one of the main outcomes of the independent review will be that it will open up that fairly impenetrable process for everyone to see. The review will have to answer other obvious questions, including why there is such a gap between electricity price rises in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the United Kingdom. I hope that the review gets to grips with all those issues and makes positive recommendations.

Other longer-term issues must be addressed. The danger with debates of this nature is that we home in on one particular price rise, but the real solution to the problem lies in the Executive taking long-term, robust action, in concert with others. I would like to see several developments take place. First, I want to see competition in our existing market. That will not be easy to achieve. In an energy market as small as ours, it is difficult to encourage competition, particularly as the market is constrained by the fact that operators have monopolies in certain areas.

I acknowledge that an independent review has been called, but I urge caution in calling for ongoing reviews of our energy prices. We simply cannot afford to commission an independent review every time there is an energy price rise, whether it is big or small. An unsettled regulatory system in Northern Ireland will do nothing to encourage competition in the market. In fact, it will have the opposite effect: it will deter people from investing in it. As I said, because of the size of our market, it is already very difficult to encourage competitiveness.

Our current energy infrastructure should be expanded. Even though gas customers are being asked to pay a price increase of nearly 20%, I still believe that far too many parts of Northern Ireland do not have the opportunity to avail themselves of natural gas or to benefit from the competition that would exist with other energy suppliers were it available. I want the network that serves greater Belfast and the 10 towns on the North/South pipeline to expand into the south-east and west of Northern Ireland. I realise that such expansion will raise many infrastructural, economic and cost issues. However, it must be our clear goal, and we must work to achieve it.

Improvements can be made in the current gas network. In Firmus Energy's licence area, the company

has only 4,000 customers — largely business customers — compared to the 120,000 or so customers that Phoenix Natural Gas has. I want to see Firmus Energy's licence area opened up much more. At the moment, its business model seems to be to concentrate on business customers, but many domestic customers in that area are not being given the opportunity to avail of a natural-gas supply. Either the company should be encouraged to target those customers, or consideration should be given to opening up that licence to competition, so that the residents of the 10 towns in the centre and north-west of Northern Ireland can enjoy the advantages of being natural-gas customers.

We must work seriously towards capitalising on Northern Ireland's energy potential. The debate will concentrate mostly on electricity and gas, but we must consider Northern Ireland's other energy potential. We talk a lot about it, but the Government, the political parties and the general public need to grow up, wise up and engage in a mature debate on the whole subject. Although we talk a lot about capitalising on Northern Ireland's enormous energy potential, I do not often hear mature debate. There are difficult issues surrounding some of our energy potential, but we must engage in a positive and informed debate on the issues.

There is huge potential for generating energy from waste and animal waste. There is an obvious necessity to deal with the by-products of human life and to deal with animal waste. There is huge energy potential in those areas. Understandably, when there is talk of energy plants using waste, there is public outcry and concern, which is backed up by public representatives.

Wind farms also have huge potential. There is potential in the west of Northern Ireland to produce more energy than we need, which would allow us to export it. However, some people have strong views about the matter, and others are concerned about the impact that it would have on tourism. Cross-border interconnectors would allow us to capitalise on that renewable energy, but there is opposition to them.

There is also an argument about the impact of biofuels on food prices, even though we have some of the best conditions in the whole world for growing willow.

On the face of it, tidal power appears to be a straightforward proposition, but it has met with opposition over its impact on marine life. Nevertheless, ScottishPower announced today that it is considering building a massive tidal-powered energy farm off the coast of County Antrim.

I will be the first Member in the debate to introduce the issue of nuclear power. We must have a serious and informed discussion about it. Lest I be guillotined by Members, I am not suggesting that Northern Ireland build its own nuclear energy power station, but we must have an informed debate and make a contribution

to a UK-wide discussion about where safe and efficient nuclear energy fits in our overall energy framework. Those are issues that must be addressed in a serious way.

There is an opportunity to deal with many of the issues that are highlighted in the review of the strategic energy framework. We all need to encourage ideas and innovation, and we need to be ambitious, adventurous and innovative in how we come up with ideas and investment in respect of all the issues.

During direct rule, no political direction was given to Northern Ireland's energy industry. However, elected representatives and political parties must now give the Minister and her colleagues in the Executive the political backup to make serious decisions, and let the debates that we have been having over the last six months become a thing of the past, rather than the norm.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Executive" and insert

"to bring forward an Action Plan to counter the effects of rising electricity and gas prices on (i) private household budgets; (ii) manufacturing costs for businesses; (iii) inflation for consumers; and (iv) availability of oil and gas storage facilities."

I welcome the opportunity to debate this critical issue, which is, currently, being tackled seriously by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I welcome the Utility Regulator's decision to commission an independent review of the process. I also welcome the appointment of Douglas McIlldoon, who is highly respected by many Members. However, many issues about the process still need to be clarified. For a start, I deeply regret the fact that the Consumer Council has not been given its rightful place in this important process.

It is vital that the Consumer Council be given its full statutory and regulatory role in the process. Although I acknowledge the impact of the global market in the current crisis, we must ask whether the interests of consumers are being fully protected. Why are consumers in Northern Ireland paying substantially more for their energy compared to consumers in the UK and the Republic of Ireland?

The recent establishment of the single electricity market has helped to develop closer co-operation between the markets and the generators on both sides of the border. Why, therefore, are consumers here not already benefiting from the single electricity market? The biggest problem for energy consumers here is that there is not enough competition in the market, unlike other areas of the UK and even the Republic of Ireland. Commercial consumers can purchase electricity from Airtricity, which uses renewable energy sources, and that is to be welcomed. In the natural-gas market, Firmus Energy has capped prices, but its market is much smaller than that of Phoenix Natural Gas.

The recent price increases have created a major problem for consumers in Northern Ireland. It is predicted that up to 43% of consumers here will be thrust into fuel poverty, and that is a crisis that the Assembly cannot afford to ignore. The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, and her Department have already drawn up plans to deal with the crisis. Sadly, those plans cannot be enacted without the approval of the Executive. It is unforgivable that Sinn Féin is preventing that from happening. Sinn Féin has always tried to portray itself as a party of bread-and-butter politics; however, it is now portraying itself as a party of brood-and-bitter, not bread-and-butter, politics.

Heating and eating are the issues of the day, not the devolution of policing and justice. Is it any wonder that Ministers feel so frustrated at the present impasse? The Executive must meet this Thursday to deal with this crisis, as well as assisting the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Michael McGimpsey in dealing with free prescriptions for cancer sufferers in Northern Ireland.

All the amendments to the motion are worthy of merit, but the Alliance Party's amendment, which calls for an urgent action plan to address the crisis, is the one that should be adopted by the Assembly, as it recognises that not only are consumers across the board facing difficulties but that future planning is absolutely essential. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's review of the strategic energy framework must make the interests of consumers its paramount concern.

If devolution is to mean anything to society, it is our responsibility to tackle the issues that I have mentioned. That is an opportunity, not a threat. The Assembly must be fully operational in all its functions.

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move amendment No 3: At end insert

"and further calls for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls; asks the Regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explore ways of improving consumer access to the single energy market; and recalls the motion of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on Rising Energy Costs unanimously adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 2008."

I am pleased to move this amendment. It is clear to me and to others that there is very little public confidence in the regulatory system or that it is fully working to protect consumers. There is an urgent need to build public confidence in the system and for a clearly defined role for the very capable Consumer Council. That would go some way towards restoring public confidence and faith in the system.

12.30 pm

I thank the Members responsible for bringing the pressing issue of spiralling energy costs to the Floor of

the House. Perhaps no other issue so preoccupies the minds of ordinary people, as they struggle to keep a home warm; or to keep a business running; or as a principal tries to keep a school running; or a clergy man or woman tries to keep a church or youth club functioning.

The Assembly last debated rising energy costs in June, just a few short months ago. At that time, the motion proposed by the SDLP was unanimously adopted by the Assembly, against the background of a worrying 28% increase in the price of gas and a 14% increase in the price of electricity. At that time, we were told to expect a further increase of perhaps up to 15 % in the autumn. Today, we debate the issue against a much grimmer backdrop, because the suggested 15% increase has in fact turned out to be a 19·2% increase in the price of Phoenix gas, and a staggering 33·3% rise in the price of electricity. It mystifies me that that price hike is almost double that in the UK. People in Northern Ireland, despite earning lower wages, pay over the odds compared with what people in Southern Ireland, or across the water, pay for their electricity.

At the best of times, putting food on the table and heating the home is a very delicate balance for many people on low incomes, particularly the elderly and families with young children. People are faced with spiralling fuel and food costs as a bitterly cold, dark winter approaches. That means that many people on an already thinly stretched income will be pushed to financial and emotional breaking point. Pensioners in south Belfast have been stopping me in the street over the past month to voice their concerns about how they will manage to stretch a very thin pension to get through the winter. I hope that it is not the case, but, if the winter is cold enough and severe enough, there could be a huge spike in cold- and hypothermia-related deaths and in cold-related hospital admissions, as large numbers of elderly people face the choice between heating and eating. That illustrates how serious the situation is.

Parents with young children have told me that they are panicking about how to pay the heating and lighting bills that are falling through their letter boxes, especially given that food bills and other bills have already increased significantly. Over the summer months, the energy context here has changed dramatically, and for that reason, it is important that we debate fully the new and changing circumstances.

No doubt Members will hear today that there is little that we can do about the crisis; that energy prices are decided in far-away places; and that we do not have the power to regulate the failed market here fully. However, there is nothing to stop us speaking up for people who will be turning off their heating in the depths of winter so that they can afford a few shillings for food. There is nothing to stop us speaking against a

market in which oil is traded 15 times and gas six times before they reach the consumer. There is nothing to stop us working and lobbying harder for the imposition of a windfall tax on the massive energy profits that have been accrued by those who have done the trading. There is nothing to stop us demanding that the Chancellor of the Exchequer impose a windfall VAT on oil and direct it into a hardship fund. The Exchequer has raised considerable funds through VAT, and it would be very appropriate that that be used to fund some kind of hardship fund.

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

We should not abdicate our responsibility, although no doubt we will, regrettably but predictably, hear that from some. The energy crisis has not arrived out of the blue; we knew that energy price hikes were coming. While other Ministers have been playing hide-and-seek, I commend the Minister for Social Development for the efforts that she has made in the past few months, examining every possible way that she can help to protect those pensioners and others who are vulnerable. Although the energy crisis is only a very small part of her brief, she has worked very hard to draw up a response and ensure that she can do all in her power to help people.

I urge the Executive to do what they can to meet on Thursday. Each member of the Executive must fulfil his or her responsibilities, pull together and make things happen.

The Minister for Social Development is attempting to increase spending by some £36 million. The warm homes scheme and improving heating systems help the vulnerable, which is commendable. If the Executive meet and function, Ministers from various Departments can make a difference. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may be responsible for energy matters, but the Department of the Environment has a major role to play in increasing energy efficiency, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a role to play in the promotion of land use for renewable energy, and the Department of Finance and Personnel has wide-ranging involvement. Therefore, tackling the problem is a job for the entire Executive. The purpose of devolved institutions is to take responsibility and make a difference to lives. The energy crisis is a test of whether we have devolution that is working for people.

An immediate cross-departmental strategy is required, not only to encourage energy efficiency in homes, schools and hospitals but to ensure swift action on the proposed rate-relief scheme for households that are energy efficient. That means a quick reinstatement of grant aid for use of renewables and the introduction of legislation to promote environmentally friendly and sustainable buildings in the construction industry. People must be encouraged to make savings in their electricity

and gas bills where possible, which could mean paying bills by direct debit or using prepayment orders.

However, I reiterate my opening remarks — there is little public confidence in regulation. As the only protection that customers have, the regulatory system must fulfil its role. Public confidence in the system must be rebuilt, and the Consumer Council, which is the only body that can work for people on the issue, must have an improved, clearly defined role. Such a role for the Consumer Council in energy consultations would go a long way to restoring public confidence in regulation.

However, that alone would not be enough. In order to protect customers and restore faith, the Executive and the Assembly must think ahead and implement a long-term strategy that aims to secure energy sources at the lowest possible price. Open and competitive domestic electricity and gas markets are required, not only in theory but in practice. The regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must explore ways to improve consumer access to the single energy market. The Executive must take the necessary decisions to create an energy model that puts the needs of Northern Ireland customers first.

As Members, we must take control of our energy policy if we are to increase the security of our supply and stabilise prices. We must reduce our almost complete reliance on imported energy and harness locally produced renewables, be they wind, waste, tidal power or biomass. With proper planning, we could reduce our dependence on oil and gas by up to 80%. More initiatives like the tidal-energy farm off the north Antrim coast that was announced today would go a long way to helping us to achieve that.

The best way to protect Northern Ireland customers is through the local generation of as much heat and electricity from local resources as possible. That practice has been common in many European countries for decades. If we do not act urgently to meet the challenges, the picture is bleak, and we will lurch from one crisis to another —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr McDonnell: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support amendment No 3 and the motion. I thank the Members who had the initiative to table the motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposers of the motion for giving Members the opportunity to speak on a very important issue. I am disappointed that some Members have used a motion on such a serious issue to indulge in narrow party politics and to attack Sinn Féin.

It is clear that Sinn Féin is working hard to secure an Executive meeting. However, it must take place in

partnership and equality. My party is well aware of the crises that affect people. The constituencies that my party colleagues and I represent, and the areas in which we live, are where those price hikes will be felt worst.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

No one could fail to be shocked and angered by the level of recent rises in electricity and gas prices. As has been mentioned, they will have consequences for households and businesses.

Families in the North of Ireland generally pay more for their household-energy supply than families elsewhere, and their average wage is normally lower. More people here are in receipt of benefits. Couple that with the rise in the cost of other essential commodities and the credit crunch, and it is estimated that half of the population will spiral into fuel poverty during winter 2008.

It is important that the matter is considered in human terms. In 2007, 500 cold-related deaths were reported. That number could increase during the winter weather that is expected in 2008. Businesses, too, will be affected. They already pay higher electricity costs, and many will be unable to remain competitive. That, in turn, will lead to further unemployment and greater hardship for all.

Customers are expected to pay increases from 1 October 2008. The Consumer Council, which protects consumers, still does not feel confident that the issue has been dealt with in a transparent and clear way. It claims that its voice has been ignored. The price increases have exposed the lack of long-term sustainable-energy policy. There is, therefore, a strong case for the Government to reassess their options on offsetting fuel poverty and the development of a longer-term strategy to meet rising energy demands.

During the 1980s — and the 1990s in the North of Ireland's case — the Government disengaged from direct ownership of the production and delivery of major energy networks and providers of electricity, gas and coal. That was done in the belief that a combination of private-sector management, independent regulation of natural monopolies of wires and pipes, and competition in generation and retailing would produce a more efficient energy sector and would deliver low cost to the entire economy. However, that has not been the result. The outcome of the decision to privatise major utilities, such as electricity and gas, is still the subject of major debate, into which the Assembly must enter. There are many lessons to be learned from the decision to allow large monopolies a free run in areas such as energy provision.

The decision to reduce Government intervention and to promote free enterprise and market principles

without robust regulation in areas such as energy can lead large companies to exploit their monopoly in the market. Regulation must be thorough and robust, and take on board views of organisations, such as the Consumer Council, which protect consumers' interests. If views such as those of the Consumer Council are ignored, how will energy companies that have a monopoly in the market be stopped from exploiting customers and introducing price rises such as those that have been announced recently?

Sustainable economic growth is possible only when it is set in the context of an equitable system that provides equality of opportunity for all. Energy must be considered in the context of the creation of an all-island sustainable-energy market. Geographically, there is great potential to open up an all-island gas market and to develop an all-island interconnection. Often, wholesale gas prices determine wholesale electricity prices in the North, where gas accounts for almost two-thirds of generating capacity. Therefore, more storage for gas supplies must be created.

The fuel mix for electricity generation continues to change rapidly. Large-scale electricity generation from renewable electricity resources, such as onshore wind, wave and biomass, is in operation. However, there is still no large-scale generation that uses offshore wind, solar or waste resources. Ireland's substantial tidal resources could be tapped for the production of energy. The island also has huge potential for wind-generated energy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw her remarks to a close.

Ms J McCann: All Members have the responsibility to take up the challenge to create conditions that will lead to an effective strategy that will ensure forward-thinking sustainable-energy policy and will include the use of renewables.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time, please.

12.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): The Committee tabled a motion in the Assembly on 30 June, which was referred to by Simon Hamilton and Alasdair McDonnell. That motion enabled the Assembly to debate many of the issues. The price increases that have occurred since then have shocked many people, including Members. Although we talk about the credit crunch, with respect to devolution, we have been visited by a credibility crunch. People want to know whether the devolved Administration is on the case and what tools are available to it to shelter them from such price increases and to provide help and support.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have a view on the motion or the amendments. Each amendment has been proposed by a member of

the Committee, and all of them make valid points that were made in Committee discussions in recent weeks.

The Committee took evidence from the regulator and from representatives of the Consumer Council on 11 and 25 September. The exchange of correspondence shows that the views and questions of members on 11 September, and their stated intention of returning to the issue on 18 September to establish some sort of review, led the regulator — on the Minister's strong advice — to institute the independent review of which we have been notified. The Committee received the review's terms of reference at its meeting on 18 September, and members questioned the regulator and the independent reviewer about them at our meeting on 25 September.

It is not clear, to me or to the other members of the Committee, what the outcome of the review will be. I question the review's objectives, which appear to be set on a presentational basis. They are to establish whether the process and outcome were robust; identify where improvements could be made; explain the role of regulation in the context of wider energy policy; and ensure that the findings are widely understood by stakeholders.

Specific terms of reference are described as the "scope" of the review. One of them is to determine whether the outcome was justified. However, there is no indication of what might happen should the review determine that the outcome was unjustified. What will flow or follow from such a determination is not discussed. There seems to be a presumption that the review will state that the outcome was justified, and that seems to be the reason why the issues are not being considered. We have to await the work of Douglas McIlldoon's review, and he has assured the Committee that he will address the issues raised by the Consumer Council. I hope that that reassures other Members. We will have to wait and see.

Some of the amendments and the motion rightly address the long-term case for an improved approach to strategic energy policy. The Committee noted that the new Minister has already commissioned advance work on the strategic energy framework. The current framework started in 2004 and will run until 2009. No doubt, the Minister will discuss that with the Committee when she meets it later this week. She might also want to comment on that topic in her contribution to this debate.

Our energy platform needs to be improved. We must move away from being locked into dependency on fossil fuels and do much more on renewable energy. A number of Members have referred to the story in today's media about ScottishPower's interest in developing tidal energy off the north Antrim coast. A review of the renewable obligations regime, and renewable obligation certificates, is taking place. The proposal is that Northern Ireland will award a renewables obligation certificate

in respect of tidal energy that will be of lesser value than that which Scotland proposes to award. That could have major implications for the very project that is welcomed today.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin supports the motion and amendment Nos 2 and 3. We do not support the amendment proposed by Simon Hamilton, because it is a transparent attempt to camouflage the failure of the Minister to address the issue.

This autumn's price rises were predicated by an earlier rise in late spring, when it was clearly indicated that more pain was to follow. The question arises — what attention did the Minister pay to the issue and what steps did she take to alleviate the problem, particularly in the context of worsening economic circumstances?

The motion, to which amendment Nos 2 and 3 add value, calls on the Executive to address the present economic crisis by undertaking a number of specified actions. Members must remember that the Minister is already empowered by virtue of the Programme for Government commitments on eradicating poverty, for which a timetable is in place. That implies that, in fact, there should be an action programme before the Assembly. That cannot be constantly put on the long finger.

In light of those commitments, and the power that goes with holding ministerial office, the Minister is in a position to do more than review the process employed by the Utility Regulator, however independent and impressive the reviewer. The Minister performed a very neat trick; with one leap she distracted attention away from her failure to develop an action plan, such as that outlined in the motion.

This is not the first time that the issue of energy costs has been before the Assembly. Douglas McIlDoon was brought in to conduct an independent review, but, in 2000, he said that he did not have the necessary powers to influence tariffs, and that he hoped that Assembly Members would endorse a:

“ministerial boot up the backside for the industry”.

He continued:

“The industry is operated now in the interests of its owners, not in the interest of its customers. That has been the position since privatisation.”

Historically, the regulator has set out the limitations on his ability to affect the determination of the industry to maintain a significant level of profit, and to pass on increased costs directly to the consumer, irrespective of poverty indices.

Although not specified in today's motion, the Minister should consider the issue of payback calculation, which has been mentioned several times regarding renewables. People in the fossil-fuels industry constantly say that alternative or renewable-energy technology is under-

developed and underinvested, and that the payback period makes it unrealistic. That equation changes on a daily basis. Clearly, other Administrations already recognise the need to develop alternatives to fossil fuels, and to breakout of the stranglehold that they have on the abilities of economies to grow and of people to escape the poverty trap.

On several occasions, my colleague Martina Anderson has mentioned an initiative that is based on the availability of Venezuelan oil. That factor should be brought into play and explored by the Minister. Ken Livingstone has demonstrated that that is possible. There have been other experiences. For example, in 2005, officials from Venezuela and Massachusetts signed a deal to provide cheap heating oil to low-income families. The fuel was sold to thousands of homes at approximately 40% below the market price. The deal involved shipping some 45 million litres of heating oil from Venezuela to Massachusetts at a discounted rate.

A similar deal was struck in order to provide 25,000 families in Philadelphia with affordable oil. Other areas such as the Bronx and cities in Maine, Vermont and Rhode Island have used the scheme. We should look at all options, and the Assembly can be pathfinders in that regard.

I support the motion, and amendments No 2 and No 3. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Rising energy prices continue to be of great concern to us all and, indeed, to this House, and I am thankful to Members for again bringing this issue to the House in order to allow us to have our voices heard on the matter.

Simon Hamilton and others, including Mark Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pointed out that a motion on rising energy costs was debated before the summer recess. Since that time, wholesale energy costs have continued to drive up the prices of electricity, natural gas and oil. That has an impact on manufacturing companies, small businesses, rural and urban communities and individual households, with a disproportionate effect on those on lower incomes.

Those significant price rises are not unique to Northern Ireland, and they have been driven primarily by sharply rising global oil prices, regardless of what Mitchel McLaughlin might want to attribute to me for my impact on rising global oil prices. His distraction politics do not work in this House in relation to the need for an Executive meeting this Thursday. I very much hope that that meeting will take place in order that we can discuss these very important issues, including the energy crisis.

Since the start of the year, significant energy price increases have been announced in the rest of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. In Great Britain, most electricity companies have increased prices twice this year, by 29% on average. Gas prices in GB have also risen by an average of 29%, and there is speculation that further increases in Britain and the Irish Republic are likely in the new year.

The increases in wholesale fuel costs are driving up the cost of power generation and, therefore, the retail price of electricity to consumers. Generation costs amount to about 60% of the final cost of electricity, while the wholesale cost of gas equates to about 65% of the final gas price to consumers.

Phoenix Natural Gas and NIE Energy have advanced-purchased gas and power generation respectively for this winter in order to protect consumers. While that was a sensible and responsible strategy in a rising energy market in the early summer, the disadvantage is that consumers will not see the benefit of any fall in wholesale energy prices until well into next year.

Wholesale gas prices generally track movements in oil prices, but there has been much more volatility in gas prices in recent months, compounded by a leak in a pipeline connected to a gas field in Norway. Our natural gas comes to Northern Ireland from Great Britain. However, the UK gas reserves are declining — a fact to which, I believe, David McNarry referred — and the UK is now a gas importer.

My Department has no direct role in setting energy prices, but attempts continue, in co-operation with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry, to create market conditions that can have a downward pressure on prices. To that end, the Department has supported several initiatives in recent years. The first of those was the single electricity market, which was established in November 2007. That provides a single market for wholesale electricity, combining the markets in the North and the South into a much larger market, thus providing for economies of scale and improving security of supply, with potential for lower electricity prices for consumers.

Sean Neeson, I believe, asked why consumers were not seeing the benefits now. It has always been accepted that the single electricity market will deliver benefits in the medium to longer term, because it is a wholesale market as opposed to a purchasing market.

The Department has also been examining the issue of mutualisation of key energy assets, and the mutualisation of key energy infrastructure such as the Scotland-Northern Ireland pipeline (SNIP), the Moyle electricity interconnector with Great Britain, and the recently mutualised Belfast gas transmission pipeline has resulted in those assets being acquired by Northern Ireland Energy Holdings. That is a not-for-dividend

mutualised company, and the low rate of debt financing of those transactions allows for a possible return to energy consumers. Indeed, over recent years, Northern Ireland Energy Holdings has announced returns to customers for gas and electricity.

Work has also been done on the energy efficiency level, but I will not go into that in great detail because it was not mentioned in the debate.

1.00 pm

However, it is important to refer to the fact that the motion and the amendments call for an inquiry into electricity and gas prices. Members will be aware that, in light of public concern about the increase in electricity prices, the regulator has established an independent review of the electricity price-setting process. The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to the comments that were made to the regulator at the Committee meeting on 11 September. I have no doubt that he is correct in that those comments had an impact on the regulator's decision to set up that review, which will report by mid-November.

The review will consider the justification for the price increase, the consultation process on the price review, scrutiny of the hedging processes, and any regulatory policy areas that should be considered to improve effectiveness and fairness of risk management in the Northern Ireland energy industry. I am satisfied that the review will be conducted quickly and independently, and that the agreed terms of reference are sufficient to meet the concerns that have been expressed by the public and the Consumer Council.

It is important to be clear about the role of the Utility Regulator in relation to the setting of energy tariffs, given that there has been much confusion about the issue, not least from Members opposite. It is important to put on record that the regulator carries out his work in line with statutory duties that are set out in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Electricity (Single Wholesale Market) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. He is responsible for regulating the gas, electricity and water industries in Northern Ireland, and it is he, therefore, who has been entrusted by Government with the decision-making powers in such matters. He has knowledge of the facts, he is in possession of the necessary skills, and he has the independence to reach a decision on regulated energy issues, including energy prices.

The Utility Regulator is, therefore, deemed to be an expert body on the detailed consideration of price-review submissions from energy companies. The legislation confers the function of tariff setting on the regulator, taking into account his expertise in such matters.

Mr Neeson said that the Consumer Council had not been given its full place in the regulatory process. I am somewhat surprised by the reaction of the Consumer

Council because, when I asked the regulator to conduct a review in my initial letter, I was conscious of the Consumer Council's public concerns. The terms of reference that I agreed were designed explicitly to address the council's concern that it was not persuaded that an increase of 33·3% was justified.

Dr McDonnell talked about the need for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the energy crisis. The legislation confers a statutory obligation on the Consumer Council to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers, including specific responsibilities for energy. To my knowledge, the Consumer Council has not raised any concerns with my Department about the adequacies of those statutory arrangements.

Gas prices have risen significantly in GB, at an average of 29%. British Gas prices have risen by 35% this year, and Scottish and Southern Energy prices have risen by 29%. EDF Energy has received much attention recently, but I will leave the nuclear debate for another day.

NIE Energy advises that, after the October price rise, electricity prices for domestic consumers are broadly comparable with those in the Republic of Ireland. Phoenix Natural Gas advises that, based on average bills, prices in its licence area of greater Belfast and Larne are lower than those in the Republic of Ireland. Prices are £690 a year compared with an average in the Republic of Ireland of £717 a year. On a unit-rate-of-energy basis, Phoenix's prices are higher.

Ms Purvis: Will the Minister explain why £5 million was given to Invest NI to help businesses over the economic downturn? What help is being given to consumers? It sounds as though the policy is one of socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That is absolutely not the case. The Member must know that businesses are struggling, and it is within my remit, through Invest Northern Ireland, to help those businesses to get through the credit crunch. If she listens further, I will touch on the fuel poverty strategy, which has been mentioned and which, I hope, will come to the Executive table this Thursday to deal with the issues that affect consumers.

The Member referred to the fact that I have given Invest NI £5 million to address energy efficiency and other issues that affect small businesses. That money will be well spent, because in a period of poverty and fuel poverty, economic growth is not an option but a necessity. We must continue to grow our economy; that is outlined in the Programme for Government, and it is an Executive priority.

The effect of rising energy costs and fuel poverty on less well-off individuals — such as pensioners and people on benefits or low incomes — is a concern. The Fuel Poverty Task Force that Margaret Ritchie established

will, I hope, report to the Executive on Thursday 2 October 2008, and I know that she has a clear view of how that process should progress. Dr McDonnell mentioned the windfall tax. The Minister of Finance and Personnel confirmed that he supports the task force's efforts and is content to make appropriate representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on its findings. The Department for Social Development (DSD) warm homes scheme is still the main programme for tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. However, as Dr McDonnell indicated, all Departments have a responsibility. We should bear that in mind when the Executive meet on Thursday — please God.

The three power stations in Northern Ireland with oil- and gas-storage facilities are required to maintain oil stocks that can be used as emergency backup fuel in the event of a coal shortage or a curtailment in the gas supply from Great Britain. The oil industry in Northern Ireland maintains oil stocks for industrial, agricultural and domestic use, with frequent deliveries on a just-in-time basis. The bulk of oil stocks are held in greater Belfast.

Mr McNarry referred to the “structural weaknesses”. He is correct — there are no indigenous natural-gas supplies and no gas storage in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland benefits from recent significant investment in gas storage in Great Britain, and investigative work is under way to consider whether underground gas storage can be developed here. In particular, Portland Gas has announced positive geological findings in Larne Lough and hopes to conduct further investigations to confirm whether gas could be stored in solution-mined cavities in suitable salt strata approximately 1·5 km below the lough's surface. I welcome those moves to tackle storage gaps and hope that they can be accelerated.

Diversification of energy supplies is important in order to provide fuel choice and security of supply. In recent years, power generation in Northern Ireland has been provided by two gas-fired power stations and a coal-fired generator. The single electricity market has enhanced the security of Northern Ireland's electricity power supply, and the extension of the natural-gas network to 10 urban areas outside greater Belfast provides a choice of energy supply for business and domestic consumers.

Significant work is ongoing to establish how renewable energy can contribute further to power generation, improved diversity and security of supply, and shelter Northern Ireland from global oil-price fluctuations. Competition is important. The island of Ireland has a single electricity market, but we must consider larger markets, either on the British Isles or into France. We had some useful discussions on that issue during the British-Irish Council meeting in Edinburgh on Friday 26 September 2008.

Increasing competition in energy-supply markets elsewhere has, generally, resulted in lower prices and improved customer service. Although Members believe that the Northern Ireland energy market is hugely important, it is a small market that comprises approximately 790,000 electricity consumers and only 120,000 natural-gas consumers, who are mainly concentrated in greater Belfast. Although the electricity-supply market in Northern Ireland and gas-supply market in greater Belfast are open to competition, customer switching has been limited. The Department has discussed that matter with the Utility Regulator. Northern Ireland has little scope to be sheltered from the significant global rise in energy costs. Rising energy costs are a concern here, in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and further afield.

I am fully aware of the impact that the increases are having on consumers and businesses. The Executive really must meet on Thursday to deal with all the issues that have been mentioned.

The review of the 2004 strategic energy framework that took place earlier this year has been referred to. That is crucial in enabling us to develop a policy context. Simon Hamilton said that a mature and informed debate is needed. When Members contribute to a debate, it is crucial that they are fully informed so that they contribute in a meaningful way.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. People are justifiably very angry about gas and electricity price rises. It is quite proper that some of that anger has been reflected during the debate. People are angry because they are being landed with massive price hikes.

We are told that it is a done deal and that nothing can be done; that there is no point in complaining. We are told that we just have to pull out our wallets and get on with it. We are told that the price hikes are due to the rising price of oil. However, we hear that the price of oil is now falling, but nothing is happening at the retail end.

People are angry because there seems to be a one-way ratchet when it comes to prices. They are afraid because they feel absolutely powerless. That is always extremely frustrating. The price increase will conceivably tell its tale during the winter months when fuel poverty kicks in; when fuel-related illnesses have their impact; when our hospitals clog up; and when the death toll rises as a result of fuel poverty and poor health. That, in itself, is a massive issue.

The wholesale energy market appears to do what it wants. We are told that the price of gas is linked to the price of oil, but we are never told why. That link has absolutely nothing to do with the way in which oil and gas are extracted from the earth, and it has nothing to do with exploration or recovery. The link between the

two is a result of how they are traded. When we fill up our cars, or when a tanker of home-heating oil backs into our driveways, the fuel has already been traded at least 15 times before it came to the retailer. Fifteen people — or, more likely, 15 hedge funds — receive a slice of the action from the price that people pay for fuel.

Even the gas that fuels our cookers has been traded at least six times by people who have never seen a pipeline, never been near a refinery or never visited an oil field in the Persian Gulf. I note that Viridian, the owner of NIE, had a turnover of over £1 billion last year, and increased its dividend by 157% on the previous year. That is an example of what is going on.

During the course of the debate, I listened closely to informed comments from colleagues in the House. Mr Hamilton referred to capitalising on the North's energy potential. A positive, well-informed and impartial debate about available energy sources is needed, because there are various interests that advocate various causes. Mr Neeson referred to the single energy market and to my colleague Minister Margaret Ritchie's plans to alleviate some of the causes of fuel poverty, as did my party colleague Alasdair McDonnell.

As Jennifer McCann mentioned, there is merit in an all-island approach to energy. My colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to the review that will be carried out by Mr Douglas McIlDoon. It is unclear what the outcome of that review will be and what criteria might be used. Major issues exist, and the Minister touched on some of those.

I certainly do not envy the job of the Utility Regulator, which has to listen to the sob stories of the gas and electricity providers. I have no doubt that the providers could produce reams of figures and acres of spreadsheets to prove that they have absolutely no choice but to increase prices. The regulator can check their sums, cut their margins slightly and question the basis of their figures, but there are no competitors.

There is nowhere to get a second opinion. We have a regulator because there is no competition — there is no market. If NIE does a lousy deal, and buys oil futures at far too high a price, or if Phoenix Natural Gas gets things wildly wrong, and pays over the odds for next year's gas, what can the energy regulator do? Costs — so they say — must be passed on to the consumer, and we all know that mistakes can be costly. We need a better system that places the consumer — the person who pays everyone else's wages — at the forefront.

I support amendment No 3. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

1.15 pm

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports amendment No 2. Mr Sean Neeson welcomed the independent review

of electricity tariffs, and we heard other Members' support for the Consumer Council being given a stronger role in protecting customers' rights to fair prices.

My party understands that global markets have pushed up fuel prices all over the world, including in the UK. However, compared to other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland consumers continue to pay much more. The Minister mentioned some of the reasons for that, such as the fact that the market here is small; however, as other Members said, better and more competition in the Northern Ireland electricity and gas markets must be sought to ensure that local customers are not exploited and manipulated by monopolies.

Mr Neeson said that ever more people are being pushed towards fuel poverty. In the coming months, as many as 43% of customers will have difficulty meeting fuel bills. Moreover, the Alliance Party is concerned that the Department for Social Development's strategy to tackle fuel poverty is stuck in the Executive, and we call for progress to be made as soon as possible.

The Alliance Party's amendment recognises that we do not require further inquiries and research — we need action. The Executive must sit around the table and agree an action plan to help households, businesses and consumers, who struggle daily to pay their bills. We want short-term measures — similar to those introduced for flood victims — to alleviate hardship, and immediate assistance for businesses. Energy consumers should be given money to help over the next few months.

In common with other parties, the Alliance Party calls for long-term planning and investment in renewable energy sources, such as wave, wind and solar energy, which offer great potential for Northern Ireland. We must build a long-term renewable-energy strategy. The Minister said that no one mentioned sustainable households, so I state that new homes should be built more sustainably, and builders should be required to install better insulation in order to guard against future energy cost hikes.

Mr Newton: I understand fully the motivation of the Member who proposed the motion. Regardless of Members' feelings about how the issue of energy prices is addressed, they share a common sense of concern for the general householder, elderly people and parents with young children.

The motion must be amended because it has been overtaken by the events of the past few days. I praise the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's acknowledgement that a review is needed, even though she concedes that she has no obvious role in implementing any such review.

That is the reason that I take issue with Mr Mitchel McLaughlin. Forgive me if I do not quote him verbatim, but he stated that the DUP amendment was a transparent

attempt to protect the Minister over her failure to address the issue. Nobody can accuse the Minister of being remiss in her responsibilities on energy prices. However, that type of comment stands alongside remarks by another Member — Mr John O'Dowd — who accused the Minister of approving the rise in electricity charges. The world and its granny know that that is not the case and that the Utility Regulator's role is independent from the Minister's.

On the matter of recent events having overtaken the motion — it is difficult to understand comments made on the review by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mark Durkan. He questioned whether the review's remit was wide enough. Mr Durkan quoted from the review's terms of reference, but he omitted some points:

“The objectives of the review are: to establish where the process and outcome are robust; to identify where improvements could be made; to explain the role of regulation in the context of wider energy policy; and to ensure these findings are understood by a wide stakeholder group.”

Those terms address universal demands for transparency. I take some credit because I raised that issue with the Utility Regulator in at least two meetings of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I am glad that the Utility Regulator has at least responded positively in appointing Mr Douglas McIlldoon to undertake the review. No one questions Mr McIlldoon's credibility to head the inquiry. However, he has also been asked to consider how the short- and long-term interests of customers can be promoted in regard to the price of electricity. That is a wide brief.

I am sorry that Alasdair McDonnell is not in the Chamber. However, Dr McDonnell and Mr McGlone's amendment proposes that the public has no confidence in regulation. In the absence of any supporting evidence, that is a dreadful statement. I question whether Dr McDonnell can justify that as a valid opinion.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that Prime Minister Gordon Brown has a role and responsibility in relation to energy pricing? Much more than better insulation in lofts or cavity walls is required to address senior citizens' concerns. Does Mr Newton agree that Mr Brown must consider help that involves hard cash? Many elderly people already have insulation in their homes. They want hard cash.

Mr Newton: I agree with the Member. I hope that I get my extra minute because I want to say more about Dr McDonnell and Mr McGlone's amendment.

The amendment calls for:

“a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council”.

I believe that the Consumer Council is very clear about its role. Indeed, during meetings of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Consumer

Council paid tribute to the Minister for the support that he was offering to it in clarifying its role.

The amendment goes on to call for:

“a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls”.

I do not know anyone who lacks confidence in the work of the Consumer Council, so I do not understand where this suggestion is coming from. My understanding is that the Consumer Council is simply asking that its role be respected, that it is consulted with, and that it is given access to materials. It is not making any additional demands. I have not been lobbied by the Consumer Council to call for an extension of its powers, so I wonder what inspired that part of the amendment.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to this important debate. There has been remarkable consensus in what has been said about energy prices and the recent hikes in electricity and gas prices by the interest groups from the manufacturing, industry, commerce, and consumer sectors that have been lobbying the Assembly. For instance, the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group has said:

“These cost increases will put our manufacturing sector under huge pressure to remain competitive against foreign competitors who do business much more cheaply, whose power is less expensive, where wages are a fraction of what they cost here, and who have less distance to travel to market.”

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has told us:

“Independent retailers will have on one hand to try and remain competitive by absorbing this hike of 30% and on the other with consumers facing a 33% increase in electricity and 20% gas increase there is the very real prospect that they will be cutting back further on their grocery list.”

The Consumer Council has told us that 90% of respondents to a recent survey that it conducted are becoming increasingly alarmed about how to make ends meet. Public meetings across the Province have shown that 73% of those who attended are depriving themselves of home heating because of energy price increases, while 52% are depriving themselves of fuel and 46% are depriving themselves of food. Clearly, these are very serious times.

We would do well to remind ourselves that since January 2008, electricity prices have increased in Great Britain by 29% and in the Republic of Ireland by 17.5%. However, electricity prices have increased in Northern Ireland by a staggering 52%. On top of the existing disparity in prices between Northern Ireland and GB, those figures suggest clearly that our economy cannot sustain our energy policy and society cannot carry on as normal.

In his opening speech, my colleague Mr McNarry pinpointed a lack of gas storage facilities as a major underlying cause of the short-term fluctuations in local

gas prices and the potential for instability of supply. He linked those problems to our over-dependence on gas as our main source of electricity, and compared it with the better planning that exists in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and the United States, which has secured far greater reserves of supply for those countries.

I must also emphasise what Mr McNarry said about the urgent need to develop a gas-storage facility in the former salt mines under Larne Lough, and I welcome the Minister's comments about that. However, I am disappointed that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has so far failed to produce an energy policy, something that it had promised to do by the end of 2007.

The think tank Chatham House has said that the failure to prepare for the future has left Britain facing a severe energy shortfall and that there is now no option but to step up imports of expensive natural gas from an increasingly assertive Russia. Only last Friday, the National Grid suggested that the country could be crippled by energy shortages when the colder weather bites this winter, because there is so little spare capacity.

1.30 pm

We have had an interesting debate to which Members from all sides of the House contributed, particularly in the discussions on the three amendments.

Mr Hamilton suggested that we should take an innovative and inventive look at alternative forms of energy production. He even mentioned the “n” word — nuclear energy. However, he then retreated — probably sensibly — to leave that major debate for another day.

Mr Neeson and other Members rightly condemned the actions of Sinn Féin in blocking Executive meetings at which this issue, among others, could be dealt with.

Dr McDonnell reminded the House of the impact that rising energy costs have on the elderly and on single and low-income families. He also warned of the great — and likely — impact that such rises will have on our health services, and he warned that this winter, many people will have to choose between heating and eating. Dr McDonnell also praised his ministerial colleague, Margaret Ritchie. Given that he is her political colleague, I suppose that that was very commendable.

Jennifer McCann tried to uphold the needs of consumers. However, her argument and that of Mitchel McLaughlin have holes in them. That is because of Sinn Féin's failure to allow Executive meetings to take place. Mr McLaughlin criticised the Department for the lack of an action plan and called for a kick “up the backside” — I think that is what he said — for the industry. However, other parties in the House would call for exactly the same remedy to the problem of Sinn

Fein's non-attendance at Executive meetings. Indeed, it is now time that that party had the proverbial kick up the backside to ensure that such meetings occur.

I welcome the Minister's attendance in the Chamber and her contribution to the debate. She said that national and international issues to which we are subject are at play. However, she mentioned a range of issues that the review that is to be conducted by Mr McIlldoon will address. It is hoped that that review will result in the speedy production of an action plan that the House and the Executive can endorse.

The motion outlines the key ingredients of an energy review. Given the impact that such a review will have on overall economic policy, OFMDFM must take a lead role. The key elements that must be addressed are: electricity and gas prices; how prices compare with those in the rest of the United Kingdom; the impact that they have on inflation and manufacturing costs; the impact that they have on households; and the availability of oil and gas storage facilities. Only when those matters have been addressed will we be able to frame an intelligent energy policy that will help to secure our economy and address the very real issues that we face in our living standards.

The debate has therefore been useful. Members and parties have had a good opportunity, which they have all taken, to air various concerns. A consistent theme emerged from all sides of the House. Given that, I appeal to those Members who tabled the three amendments to withdraw them, thus allowing the Question on the motion to be agreed on the understanding that all views are now clearly on the record and have been expressed in the presence of the Minister and her officials. We can then look forward to the Minister and her Department taking action on the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is made, amendment No 2 will not be called. However, amendment No 3 may still be called.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I believe that the Ayes have it.

Mr McGlone: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is clear that there is a division on this matter, and I would like it on the record.

Lord Morrow: Mr Deputy Speaker, are you not supposed to make a decision?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My decision has been challenged, so I will put the Question in three minutes.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 57.

AYES

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

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

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr D Bradley.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Question put, That amendment No 3 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 60; Noes 30.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Burns.

2.00 pm

NOES

*Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan,
Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds,
Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson,
Mrs I Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Simpson and Mr Weir.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly deplores the 33·3% rise in electricity prices by Northern Ireland Electricity and the 19·2% increase in Phoenix Natural Gas prices; and calls on the Executive to bring forward an Action Plan to counter the effects of rising electricity and gas prices on (i) private household budgets; (ii) manufacturing costs for businesses; (iii) inflation for consumers; and (iv) availability of oil and gas storage facilities; and further calls for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls; asks the Regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explore ways of improving consumer access to the single energy market; and recalls the motion of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on Rising Energy Costs unanimously adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 2008.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Adequate Home-Help Provision

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, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it.

I thank my Assembly colleagues, particularly those on the Business Committee, for agreeing to bring this very important social issue to the Chamber. I also thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, for being present to hear our very real concerns. I hope that he will take action, where appropriate.

The term "home help" was, and is, very appropriate. The concept is simple; as the name suggests, the purpose of a home help is to provide suitable domestic help in the home to those people who need basic assistance to enjoy a reasonable and comfortable way of life in their homes, and who are unable to do certain chores for themselves. For the most part, but not exclusively, the basic home-help service is required for senior citizens. When we hear of someone in need, and being denied that need, we should be ashamed of ourselves. Were my elderly mother or father, or the only parent or relative of any Member in such need, we certainly would not be happy. Let us all commit ourselves to ensuring that no one in our society goes without that vital help.

The provision of adequate home-help services will, no doubt, involve more work for the new commissioner for older people, when that post is established; there may be two, three, or even four commissioners. The sooner that those commissioners are in place, the better.

The term "home help" is no longer used, but the same work must be done, regardless of what term is used. New names are now used for such services, and there are new levels of domestic work. That is where the problem stems from.

The problem was recently made public when 'The Stephen Nolan Show' discussed the experience of one of my constituents from Newtownards. Mr Stitt is over

80, lives on his own and is recovering from a triple heart bypass operation. Rather than reducing the help that he receives, those in charge of domiciliary care should be helping people in that situation. We were shocked to hear how Mr Stitt was treated — and his story is replicated across Northern Ireland.

On the morning that Mr Stitt's case was made public, I was contacted by relatives of a 93-year-old lady who lives alone in my constituency. That lady was told that the amount of help that she received would be slashed. That is not what I want for our society. If the Assembly is to mean anything, we must all work together to prove that we can make a difference, particularly for our senior citizens.

A further example of the problem with home-help provision is provided by another one of my constituents. The lady in question was informed that she would receive 15 minutes of help, in which her home help was expected to heat a pre-prepared meal, wait while the lady ate the meal and wash the dishes. Is that the level of dignity that anyone, let alone our senior citizens, should be asked to accept? Surely, people are entitled to some space in which to enjoy their meals. Further cutbacks will make the problem worse.

Our elderly and infirm neighbours across Northern Ireland have served the community extremely well through very difficult times — all Members know what I am taking about. The least that we can do is to ensure that those people are comfortable, get sufficient food and are safe and secure when they require help. One day, all of us will seek assistance.

On 31 October 2007, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published its report 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', which made interesting reading on the issues of needs assessment, prevention, quality of service, staff recruitment, and private and voluntary-sector provision. The report highlighted how home help had reduced by 15.5 % over a seven-year period, which is a trend that will, to our eternal shame, get worse.

Health and social care trusts are reassessing recipients of home-help provision. That has a negative effect on our senior citizens. They begin to worry when they are told of a reassessment visit, and the fear factor kicks in. Senior citizens know that the purpose of such a visit is to establish whether further cuts can be made. In any decent society, the basic tasks that need to be carried out to sustain a reasonable standard of living for the elderly — cleaning the home, preparing food, washing dishes, lighting a fire, making beds and ironing and washing — would be the job of a community care-worker.

I understand that during September, a report was issued to staff instructing them that, from October, all cleaning, laundry and domestic services must stop. That is scandalous — it is horrendous for senior citizens and it is totally unacceptable. It must be the last straw.

Can Members support that type of action? I am glad that the Minister is present in the Chamber. I hope that he can deny that that took place, certainly in my constituency. If it is true, we must all hang our heads in shame. If those cutbacks come to pass, care in the community, as we know it, will have gone — it will be a thing of the past. I appeal to Minister McGimpsey to ensure that that does not happen. Let us provide care for the elderly.

If those disastrous cutbacks take place, what will be the result? Elderly people will suffer more, both physically and mentally. They will probably end up in hospital or in residential and nursing homes — which is the opposite of Government policy. Most people support community care, in whatever form. It is, therefore, essential that the Government and the Assembly allocate the necessary funding to ensure that all elderly people benefit from a decent existence at a time when they cannot fend for themselves.

I ask Members to support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion. Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for the delivery of a plethora of healthcare services, one service in particular — home-help provision — has generated a growing number of letters to my constituency office.

As increasing financial pressure has been brought to bear on Departments and local healthcare trusts, people could be forgiven for thinking that the home-help service is an easy target for cuts in available resources.

I wish to use the predicament in which one of my constituents has found herself to illustrate the problems that are now prevalent. Recently, I was contacted by Mrs Eileen Clerici, who lives outside Saintfield. She was in a state of considerable distress, having been told that her home-help service was being reorganised. Although there is no question that the service will be withdrawn, for a 93-year-old lady who suffers from serious heart and blood-pressure problems, and who has poor sight and hearing, such a change is a big deal.

Mrs Clerici has been in receipt of home-help assistance for the past eight years. For the first six or seven of those years, her help was provided by a single carer. That provided a safe and constant environment in which Mrs Clerici built a positive relationship with her home help, who was able to become familiar with Mrs Clerici's needs and, most importantly, gain her trust.

A few years ago, the system was reviewed and the single home help was replaced by three different people who attended to Mrs Clerici's needs at different times of the day. That proved a considerable upheaval for her. However, it was mitigated by the fact that one of the three home helps was her regular and original carer.

We fast-forward to 2008, when Mrs Clerici was informed that, once again, the trust intends to alter the manner in which home-help services are delivered around the Saintfield area and that her three current home helps are to be removed to carry out duties in Saintfield town. Mrs Clerici will now be tended to by agency staff. The thought of the carers with whom she is familiar and has built up considerable trust during the past eight years being replaced by strangers has caused her considerable anxiety. At her stage in life, familiar faces are important.

Someone of Mrs Clerici's age and health should not have to endure the trauma of letting people who are, effectively, strangers into her home — nor the challenge of having to establish new relationships and trust.

2.15 pm

I contacted the chief executive of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, and was informed that although the trust sympathised with the problems facing Mrs Clerici, it did not have sufficient funds to maintain the service, and it was forced to change her care package.

I thought that the delivery of health care was to take place within the community. Although we sell that package, we do not deliver it because the funding is not available. We make a mockery of the promises that we make to the most vulnerable in society.

It has no relevance to the debate, but we have just heard that a trust is removing a small pay packet of approximately 50p or £1.50 from adults and young people with special needs and learning difficulties. That little pay packet makes those people feel that they have earned something from their week's work, and they feel important going home with it. When we think of the size of the budget given to health, to take that from the most vulnerable — as well as depriving our elderly — is a scandal.

That is merely one example of how the rationalisation and reduction of home-help services affects those involved. In each case, we have a situation whereby the nature of the beast, the health and well-being of the service user, is declining. Whereas an observer might assume that service provision is increasing, it is really decreasing to a point where those availing themselves of it begin to feel abandoned by the system. Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety guidelines state:

"The aim of the Home Help Service is to provide practical assistance and care in their own homes for the elderly, the handicapped and families where parents are absent or incapacitated".

They qualify that commitment by stating:

"As the resources available are limited it is important that the service is provided to those in the greatest need."

There is no greater need than that of the elderly and those with special needs and learning difficulties.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin supports the motion and commends the Members who have brought it before the House.

The work of care assistants and home helps is invaluable. Without the service, many would be unable to live independently in their homes and would be forced into nursing care.

Home-help provision varies widely across, and within, trusts. In my constituency of Mid Ulster, there seems to be a particular difficulty in getting adequate home-help provision in rural areas. On numerous occasions, I have been contacted by constituents in rural areas who are concerned about inadequate home-help provision. It is not the fault of home helps, or of social services; there is difficulty in recruiting home helps.

The issue of travel time has been brought to my attention. In a rural area, a home help might have to travel for up to an hour to his or her destination and back in order to work for 15 minutes. Surely, that system is not viable; it has serious resource implications.

There is a wide gap between the care plan recommended by social services and the care subsequently provided. That poses a risk to the health and well-being of those most vulnerable in our communities — the elderly and disabled. I am aware of several cases in which an elderly person, unable to get out of a chair unassisted, has been left for a couple of days without a visit from a home help. It seems to happen during holiday periods, when it is difficult to provide cover. I do not mean to detract from the good work that is provided by care workers in people's homes; they do a wonderful job, considering the conditions in which they have to work.

Home-help provision must be properly resourced, and home helps must have proper contracts that guarantee hours and conditions of work. The system is severely under-resourced, and, as a result, good home helps are leaving for the private sector. Their need for guaranteed hours means that they cannot continue to work for social services. Many home helps work longer hours than those stipulated by their contracts because it is impractical to care for someone in the time allocated. They receive no pay for that extra time, yet they work out of commitment to the people for whom they care. Given that home helps usually earn lower wages, it is ridiculous that they are put in that position.

We are all aware that we have an ageing population and of the issues that that raises. However, that is no excuse for treating the elderly as a burden. They have worked hard and paid their taxes. The elderly should, at least, be able to expect that they will be treated with humanity and dignity, and that they will be given the proper level of care required, so that they can have

some quality of life, and not just exist with the minimum level of care that can be provided.

Of course, I accept that efficiency savings are necessary, but we must not allow them to be targeted towards the most vulnerable in society.

I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I congratulate the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his announcement on prescription charges. I warmly welcome the decision, which will be beneficial to all the people of Northern Ireland who must rely on continuous prescriptions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: If there was an endless supply of money, we could do everything that we wanted on an endless wish list. However, as Members of the Assembly, we must stop making wish lists and start behaving responsibly and acting like adults who have finite resources at their disposal, and who are accountable for how those resources are spent.

"Resources" is a fashionable word. Let us call it what it is — it is public money that comes from every taxpayer in the Province. Let us get real.

Of the 25,000 to 30,000 home helps across Northern Ireland, it is my understanding that very few of them will provide the minimum level of services. Home helps are to be allocated 15 minutes to undertake a number of tasks; very few undertake just one task.

We have an ageing population, which means that there will have to be major shifts in spending within the National Health Service.

In my constituency, I met a woman whose home-help provision was reduced to 15 minutes. The Department said that her provision was reduced because her home help was expected to peel potatoes and to prepare evening meals for other family members. In that case, the Department was right to reduce the provision. Home help is not provided for that purpose, it is provided to give care and support to an individual.

I appreciate the work that home helps in the Health Service do for people who deserve and need care. Patients appreciate that help. However, we must ensure that we do not overstretch that provision, and that we do not spoil it for other people. From the figures that I quoted, it is clear that we do not have enough carers to undertake additional duties. I support the Health Service and the carers' system, but we must be careful about how money is spent.

I have gone on record many times calling for a far greater emphasis in public life on the needs of older people. Only recently, I asked the First Minister to take steps to introduce an age-proofing stage to all new legislation that comes before the Assembly. Therefore, I strongly support the rights of older people. I know

that my colleague Mr McGimpsey, the Minister of Health Social Services and Public Safety, is also a strong advocate of the rights and needs of our older citizens.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, because the time in which I have to speak is almost up. However, I appreciate the Member's request.

Making major shifts in expenditure in as large and as complex an organisation as the National Health Service is not something that can be done overnight or, for that matter, on the whim of Mr McCarthy's motion. It is a major undertaking, because with every pound more that we spend in one area of the Health Service, we have to spend a pound less in another part.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you; my time is almost up.

Therefore, although I broadly support the sentiments of the motion, specific matters could have been resolved locally and administratively. The public expects the Assembly to be about hard work, not hot air. If cases are followed through individually, they could be resolved locally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Mrs Carmel Hanna.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Child Poverty Strategy

1. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that full consideration is being given to the “credit crunch” in relation to the implementation of the child poverty strategy; and that targets set in this strategy will be met. (AQO 282/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) remains committed to reducing child poverty, and it is, of course, particularly concerned about the impact that recent cost increases will have. In light of the credit crunch that we all face, the First Minister and I are engaging in a series of meetings with key stakeholders in the sectors that are most particularly affected. Our commitment to tackling child poverty is outlined in the Programme for Government, which commits the Executive to work towards the elimination of child poverty here by 2020, to reduce it by 50% by 2010, and to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

To advance that work, the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people, which is chaired by the junior Ministers, has established a cross-departmental group to ensure that there is a comprehensive and cohesive focus on child poverty. That subgroup’s work will include consideration of the social and economic policies that are needed to reduce child poverty, taking account of the current economic climate.

The subgroup will also give careful consideration to the recommendations that emerged from the inquiry into child poverty that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister carried out. Officials will report the conclusions of the subgroup to the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people. That work will be part of a wider strategy, which will be agreed by the Executive, to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are concerned about

the level of deprivation and child poverty in their constituencies and across the Province in areas that are perceived to be affluent but that are far from it.

In the process of the Committee’s inquiry, over 40 recommendations were made, and we want to be assured that they will be implemented as soon as possible. Co-operation between Departments must also be initiated quickly so that child poverty issues can be addressed today. Will the Minister ensure that the inquiry’s recommendations are implemented as soon as possible and that child poverty will be addressed in order to help people who are now under more pressure than ever?

The deputy First Minister: As junior Minister Kelly said when responding to the debate on the Committee’s report on 17 June 2008, OFMDFM welcomes the publication of the report. The work in which the Committee engaged provided a tremendous service. Along with our ministerial colleagues, we have considered the report’s contents and its 47 associated recommendations. We are currently finalising a formal response to the report, and we hope to have that with the Committee imminently.

We are conscious of the Member’s initial point that child poverty relates not only to a few specific parts of the North, but is an issue that can affect the whole community. Therefore, it is important to take the time to get it right. That is why the Committee’s input into the debate is of particular value. We hope to act on the issue imminently, and we also hope to make rapid progress.

Mr Beggs: As I am an MLA who represents a constituency in which many children suffer from child poverty, can the Minister state whether the credit crunch will have an adverse impact, in that more children are likely to suffer as a result of child poverty? What effect does he believe that the failure of the Executive to meet over the summer will have on the issue? Does he accept that more children will suffer because of his party’s refusal to allow the Executive to meet and deal with those pressing issues, which could be raised either by the junior Ministers or by other Ministers, in a practical way?

The deputy First Minister: We acknowledge the real difficulties that the credit crunch will bring to the most vulnerable in society.

We must help those individuals to manage during the peaks and outgoings. Financial inclusion will remain an important element of the wider strategy to tackle poverty and social inclusion, and an emphasis will be placed on affordable credit, financial education and debt advice services. Much of that work has been conducted by the NI financial capability partnership, which comprises the Consumer Council and other key partner organisations such as Government Departments.

I am committed to Executive meetings, and I want those meetings to take place. It is the responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to agree an

agenda for those meetings. We are currently striving to agree that agenda.

Mr Durkan: Does the deputy First Minister concur with the First Minister's comments in the Assembly two weeks ago that it is logically impossible to meet the Programme for Government's child poverty targets? In order to advance the child poverty strategy, will he and his colleagues consider reinstating the children's fund as a means of providing cross-departmental support to the community and voluntary sector? Does he agree with Gordon Brown that child poverty targets should be written into statutory legislation? Will he recommend such a measure in this House or through a legislative consent motion in Westminster?

The deputy First Minister: We must consider deeply all proposals and suggestions. As I indicated in my initial response, the Executive agreed the Programme for Government and, in particular, the commitment to tackle child poverty. That commitment includes an agreement to work towards the elimination of child poverty here by 2020, a 50% reduction in child poverty by 2010 and the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012. Any changes to those targets must be agreed by all parties in the Executive. It is important to recognise that child poverty is a clear Executive priority.

However, we are conscious of how the worsening international fiscal situation is impacting on world Governments and, in particular, those in western Europe. We must face those challenges and ensure that our targets are achievable. Some people think that the targets are unachievable, and some individuals believe that it is impossible to rid society of child poverty completely. The Executive have a duty and responsibility to explore all the possibilities in order — as far as possible — to achieve our targets. To date, no party in the Executive has proposed changes to the targets, and, therefore, we will continue with those aims. However, in the future, the worsening worldwide fiscal situation could force us to review that matter.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. (AQO 353/09)

The deputy First Minister: The development of detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration for a shared and better future is at an advanced stage. That programme will tackle sectarianism and racism, which were, previously, separate but associated policies. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive, through the Programme for Government, are committed to building an integrated and cohesive society that is at

ease with itself and where everyone is regarded and treated equally.

The programme's emphasis will be to support local people to deal with local issues through local solutions. The refreshed policy will not compromise ongoing work but will support, facilitate and resource that good practice more efficiently. The draft strategy will be submitted to the Committee before the Halloween recess and will be subject to a full consultation and equality impact assessment.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. There was a long gap between the shelving of the two previous policies and the publication of the new cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Furthermore, there were no departmental actions to promote community and race relations for almost two years. Given that, how serious is OFMDFM about tackling divisions in our society?

The deputy First Minister: OFMDFM — and, indeed, the entire Executive — is very focused on the need to end divisions in society. The new programme will tackle the very complex and long-standing issue of sectarianism and the more recent issue of racism, which affects established communities as well as new arrivals.

It is important that the proposals are given the fullest consideration. They will build on the excellent work that district councils and community organisations in particular have done already to address the challenges that local communities face. Actions to tackle sectarianism, racism and intolerance will be at the core of those proposals, given that the policy is pivotal to achieving a peaceful, fair and prosperous society with respect for the rule of law. We will ensure that the programme proposals will contribute to that aim.

In early April 2008, OFMDFM officials briefed the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the development of the proposed programme. The consultation document will be issued to that Committee before the Halloween recess. After that, I hope that much more rapid progress will be made.

Mr Kennedy: In April 2008, the deputy First Minister told the House that the Northern Ireland Executive allocated £29 million to the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. In the light of the Executive meetings over the past three months being blocked by Sinn Féin, will any of that money be spent on a re-education programme for Sinn Féin that will apprise its members of their responsibilities to act in the public interest and to deliver a cohesive, joined-up Government through the Executive?

The deputy First Minister: It is very hard to take that question seriously, except to say that the work of ensuring that Executive meetings take place should continue. Nobody is blocking Executive meetings; the

duty and responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is to agree an agenda that reflects the widest possible representation of people in society. We are working to try and make that happen as we speak, and I hope that we will succeed.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the update on the strategy; we need to develop a shared and better future and better community relations in Northern Ireland.

In that context, does the deputy First Minister accept that the recent television programme about the 1983 IRA Maze Prison breakout — and the contribution of his colleague Gerry Kelly in particular — has damaged community relations in Northern Ireland and has set them back by several years? I refer to Gerry Kelly's description of the way in which he shot one of the prison officers during the escape and the fact that he treated that in such an offhand manner — almost as a matter of amusement — with no sense of remorse at all.

The deputy First Minister: I hope that people will view the programme in its historical context: the event that it described happened 25 years ago, and the BBC decided that it would produce a programme on it. Various views were proffered as to the value of that programme — some thought that it was very interesting historically — but others, as the Member said, took umbrage at its content.

All of us must recognise that our past was very troubled. The past should not be forgotten, but this Assembly should try to build peace and new relationships by charting a course towards the type of new society that we all want. It is a matter of historical fact that people who were part of conflicts have also been very much part of trying to find solutions to them.

As we proceed, I hope that we will all be very careful in how we address one another and how we deal with issues such as the past. That is a big subject for debate at the moment, and there is a great deal of hurt on all sides. There is a responsibility on us all to recognise that and to contribute in a way that heals, rather than exacerbates, the divisions of the past.

Mr Speaker: Mrs Dolores Kelly is not in her place for Question 3. Question 4 has been withdrawn.

2.45 pm

Proceeds of Former Military Sites

5. **Mr Cobain** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the impact of the refusal by the United Kingdom Government to transfer the proceeds of former military sites to the Executive. (AQO 278/09)

The deputy First Minister: First, I must stress that the British Government have not refused to transfer military sites. As Members know, at every opportunity,

the First Minister and I have pressed the Prime Minister to have the sites gifted. To date, we have not received an official response; however, we remain hopeful of a positive outcome.

The failure to gift further former security installations for the benefit of the community would constitute the British Government's reneging on previous agreements. The first step in the process, therefore, is to obtain a decision on gifting from the British Government. At this stage, to conduct an assessment of the impact of any refusal would be premature.

Mr Cobain: It would be interesting to know when those agreements were made and with whom.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): David Trimble.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Cobain: The First Minister has enough time to speak; he should allow Members to ask their questions.

Mr S Wilson: The First Minister gave you an answer.

Mr Cobain: Pardon?

The First Minister: I was answering.

Mr Cobain: Can the deputy First Minister not answer for himself?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Cobain: Can the deputy First Minister give Members some idea about when the British Government are likely to make a decision?

The deputy First Minister: I realise that someone other than me made a contribution; however, I shall deal with the first part of the Member's question. That contribution was accurate; the negotiations that dealt with that matter took place during your former party leader David Trimble's time. Obviously, there is —

Mr Cobain: With your leader.

Mr Speaker: Order. The deputy First Minister has the Floor.

The deputy First Minister: Many party leaders were involved in those negotiations, including mine. However, that does not undermine the argument that those sites are valuable and could be put to good use for the entire community.

My party colleague the MP for West Tyrone Pat Doherty — supported by Barry McElduff and by other Members elected to this Chamber — has been championing the cause of a former military site in Omagh to provide an educational establishment that would facilitate six schools in the area. That idea has caught the imagination of many here, of the Irish Government in Dublin, and, because they have responsibility for the site, of the British Government in London. I hope that that work can be expedited.

Some people might argue that that matter will not be resolved until the transfer of policing and justice powers has been resolved. It remains to be seen whether the British Government are holding back on gifting former military sites in order to see a resolution to that matter; however, it is important for the Assembly and the Executive to recognise the value of those sites and the fact that their proper use and development could bring enormous benefits to our people, at a time when there is a serious economic situation worldwide.

Mr O'Loan: How can the deputy First Minister credibly argue for the benefits from former military sites when his Department, for deeply opposing ideological reasons, is spurning a huge sporting, social and economic opportunity at the Maze?

The deputy First Minister: Undoubtedly, the failure to make progress with the development at the Maze/Long Kesh site has weakened our hand. I concede that. All Departments must work together to expedite the matter and to release the maximum economic potential that is locked up at that site. However, having had conversations with the British Prime Minister, I do not feel that that matter has been used against us. Our argument — with which we won comprehensively during previous negotiations — stands the test of time. Rather than renegeing on the commitments made by — and the word of — a previous Prime Minister, the British Government must live up to them.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Trevor Lunn for a supplementary.

Mr Lunn: Mr O'Loan has effectively asked my question.

Rising Cost of Living

6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to redress the rising cost of living. (AQO 362/09)

The deputy First Minister: The economic turmoil that is driving up the local cost of living is a global phenomenon. We have a small, open economy and cannot remain immune from global economic events. Short-term business and consumer confidence are undermined by a combination of restricted access to credit, falling property prices, increasing inflation and rising food and energy prices. Those factors seriously impact on the well-being of local people.

The First Minister and I are keen to get the direct views of local stakeholders on the impacts of the economic slowdown. We plan to meet local interest groups in order to discuss the scale and types of problems that are faced, as well as what steps might be taken to mitigate the economic impact.

To date, we have met representatives from the banking and construction sectors, the Institute of Directors, the Utility Regulator and the energy companies. We also plan to meet representatives of the voluntary and community sector, the trade unions, and champions for the consumer and for business. Those meetings have helped us to identify core problems and potentially mitigating actions.

Recent expert analyses have suggested that the local economy is well placed to weather the economic storm, which is good news, although the First Minister and I are acutely conscious that in many local households with severely stretched budgets it is difficult to recognise that. Cost of living pressures threaten people's well-being, and there must be an appropriate social welfare response. I have set out in correspondence with the First Minister a series of measures that might be considered. There will also be detailed discussion on the option of deferring water charges.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When he met the British Prime Minister on his recent visit, did the deputy First Minister raise the issue of fuel poverty?

The deputy First Minister: At that meeting, I suggested several initiatives that would offset the hardship faced by many in our communities. Those proposals included the indefinite deferral of domestic contributions towards water and sewerage services and the establishment of an emergency fund to address fuel poverty, paid for by increased VAT returns as a result of fuel-cost increases. That initiative would involve giving every fuel-poor household a one-off payment of at least £200 at a minimum cost of £45 million.

Ways of paying for such an emergency fund might include redirecting the British Treasury windfall of £15 million on home heating oil and £25 million on petrol and diesel revenues from here over the past 12 months. Contributions might also be negotiated from the energy industry's non-regulated finances, which include the electricity generators and supply companies. I also raised again with the Prime Minister the issue of gifting of former military sites.

Mr Poots: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the matter under discussion is cross-cutting and requires the agreement of various Ministers? Therefore, an Executive meeting must be held in order to move the issue forward. Will he confirm that an Executive meeting will take place on Thursday at which the cost of living issue will be dealt with?

The deputy First Minister: I am working in order to ensure that a meeting of the Executive takes place on Thursday. It is also important to note that the Executive have the power, through urgent written procedures, to make decisions that may alleviate the difficulties that people are facing.

Because there has been a bit of verbal sniping, I remind the Ulster Unionist Party that a previous Executive failed to meet for 15 months — from June 1998 until the winter of 1999.

Mr K Robinson: Will the deputy First Minister outline which Northern Ireland Executive programmes are likely to be axed or curtailed in order to provide funds to reduce the impact of the credit crunch? Is there a prioritised list of Executive programmes, and, if there is, what programmes are at the bottom of it?

The deputy First Minister: As we advance, we will give serious consideration to the economic situation that we face and will be cautious about progressing in a way that could place further burdens on people, particularly those on low incomes. The Executive as a whole must decide their strategy for combating the worsening global economic situation.

Civic Forum

7. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on its comprehensive review of the Civic Forum. (AQO 370/09)

The deputy First Minister: The review of the Civic Forum has sought to canvass as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the structure, operation, composition and membership of the Civic Forum. It has also sought to determine the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

The consultation phase of the review was launched on 29 May and more than 50 written submissions had been received by 29 August, the closing date for responses. During the period of May to August, meetings were held with a wide range of stakeholders, including the former chair and members of the forum, as well as civic society organisations and academics. During that period, members of the review team conducted visits to examine mechanisms for engagement with civic society in other jurisdictions, and details of existing arrangements for engagement with civic society by Departments have been collated. The review team is analysing the information that was assembled, including consultation responses, with a view to presenting recommendations and options to the Assembly in the very near future.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. In his view, what are the achievements of the Civic Forum during its — albeit very short — period of operation?

The deputy First Minister: Between October 2000 and October 2002, the Civic Forum met in plenary

session 12 times. In addition to those sessions, the forum established several standing committees and working groups to proceed with distinct aspects of its work programme.

Although operational for only a short time, the Civic Forum contributed to draft programmes for Government, engaged in several research projects into long-term issues affecting society and, by the time of suspension, had published reports on educational disadvantage and a regional strategy for social inclusion. The Civic Forum made submissions to Departments on investing for health, the review of post-primary education, priorities for social inclusion and the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. It also commented on an OFMDFM review of community relations policy.

Mr Moutray: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that, when the Civic Forum was in action, it had very few, if any, achievements and was a total waste of taxpayers' money?

The deputy First Minister: No; I do not agree with that at all.

Mr Gallagher: The deputy First Minister has acknowledged some of the good work that was done by the Civic Forum, which, as we all know, was a vehicle for building social partnership and promoting trust and reconciliation. That body is part of the Good Friday Agreement, as is the wider all-Ireland consultative forum, which, once established, could have an important role in dealing with issues such as double taxation for cross-border workers or the concerns of the Protestant community in border areas, as reported on last week. Will the Minister state whether work is being done on the establishment of that body, which is also part of the Good Friday Agreement?

The deputy First Minister: Consideration of the North/South consultative forum is linked to the completion of the review of the Civic Forum in the North. At its plenary meeting in February 2008, the North/South Ministerial Council noted the position on the review and the Irish Government's consultation with its social partners on the North/South consultative forum.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Flood Risk Assessment Provisions

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's flood risk assessment provisions. (AQO 254/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Policy FLD 1 of Planning Policy Statement 15: Planning and Flood Risk, sets out the circumstances in which a flood-risk assessment will be required to accompany a planning application. Annex D of PPS 15 sets out in detail the information that should be provided in such an assessment.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his rather brief answer. I am sure that he will acknowledge that although global climate change plays a significant part in the ever-increasing instances of flooding in Northern Ireland, there are matters for which his Department has responsibility. Perhaps the Minister recalls that his colleague the First Minister — in response to my question on 15 September 2008 on the availability of a flood map for Northern Ireland — acknowledged that Ministers knew their individual responsibilities and were in a position to ensure that their Departments carry out the necessary work.

There is an ever-expanding number of apartments in my constituency — many built in what I believe are inappropriate locations, close to urban streams or crammed onto sites where, formerly, one dwelling stood. Given that, will the Minister take urgent steps to ensure that the practice of building in areas where the flood risk is very high, or will be exacerbated by such development, will cease forthwith?

The Minister of the Environment: If my answer was brief, the Member's supplementary question was quite long. I will try to make my answer as brief as possible, as I want to answer as many questions as possible.

During the debate last week on draft PPS 7, I gave an undertaking that my Department would review draft PPS 7 and seek to bring some addendum to it. That addendum will include some of the issues that the Member has raised today, and will examine how the Planning Service ensures that developments have permeable surfaces. Furthermore, it will ensure that there is as much on-site catchment of water as possible, and that that water is released in a way that does not exacerbate flooding tendencies in times of heavy rain.

Some good practices are taking place in developments across Northern Ireland, and I have witnessed some of those during visits to sites. However, those good practices must be encapsulated and put into policy, and I hope that that will be done in the very near future.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell the House to what extent his Department attributes to climate change the increased intense levels of rain, and the ensuing floods, in Northern Ireland during this and previous summers?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member seems to have a kind of paranoia in relation to climate change. I have received several questions from him on the issue, and I will seek to answer them. The rains that

we have experienced over the past years are localised. If the Member understood the definition of climate change, he would know that it refers to changes that are widespread across the globe.

However, the Department has accepted that as a consequence of climate change, there will be periods of heavy rain. Had the Member been listening to my previous answer to Mr Robinson, he would be aware that PPS 15 includes a precautionary approach that where there is a risk of flooding, there will be a presumption against development. Furthermore, the Department will ensure that where a flood-risk assessment has been undertaken, that development will be allowed to proceed only if mitigating measures are taken. Moreover, the Department asks for changes in development designs to reduce the threat of localised flooding. The Department recognises that there is a change in rainfall patterns and has adopted policies to deal with those.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his comments. I noticed, in particular, that he referred to good practice in some areas. However, given the serious flooding of the Six Mile Water in the month of August and its effects in Antrim town and Muckamore, will he accept that his Department's Planning Service has continued to allow totally inappropriate developments under existing planning policies and guidance? Furthermore, what can be done to redress that problem so that the once-in-500-year event does not continue to recur approximately every 20 years?

The Minister of the Environment: Given the Member's knowledge of the situation in Antrim, I would have thought that he would have known that most of the houses that were badly affected in that flooding were built some 50 years ago. Therefore, their location could hardly be attributed to the planning policies under which my Department currently operates.

Flood-risk assessments are carried out, and I have made clear what those assessments require. Anyone who applies for planning permission to build at a location that carries a flood risk will have to include, in the plans, the site's physical features, identify the sources of potential flooding, the consequences of the flooding and mitigation for any increase in anticipated flood risks. Such measures are required under the current policy.

David Ford's example of the incident in his South Antrim constituency illustrates how, in the past, permission was granted for building on flood plains. However, one must recognise that many of our towns and cities are built on flood plains, and the anticipated flood-mapping exercise will illustrate that. There will, therefore, always be a risk of flooding.

Northern Ireland Water: Prosecutions

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has instigated against Northern Ireland Water since 1 April 2007. (AQO 390/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since Northern Ireland Water was established on 1 April 2007, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has instigated prosecution proceedings on seven occasions. To date, four have resulted in successful prosecutions, and three are being considered by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS).

Those prosecutions will lay the lie to the claim made by Friends of the Earth on the BBC recently that the Department did not have any officials on its staff who were capable of seeing prosecutions through. On four out of four occasions on which the Department has brought Northern Ireland Water to court, there have been successful prosecutions. Friends of the Earth should check its facts before making any further outlandish claims.

Mr Moutray: Will Northern Ireland Water be prosecuted for the continuing pollution of lands by spillages from a combined sewer overflow at Ballynacor waste water treatment works at Craigavon?

The Minister of the Environment: All sewerage systems that receive surface drainage, in addition to fowl sewage, require overflows, which operate at times of heavy rainfall. The discharges at Ballynacor are consented under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, but they occur only in extreme circumstances, and that will continue to be the case. Northern Ireland Water is required to clean up the area around the plant when such overflows occur.

I have informed the Department that I want Northern Ireland Water to raise its game in a range of places. It is hoped that, by the end of this year, when the new works are finished at that site, those discharges will become rare events rather than the current frequent occurrences.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that in other parts of the United Kingdom, pollution in an area of special scientific interest would usually result in prosecution? I am interested in the Minister's previous comments. Will he explain why his Department has granted consent to discharge virtually untreated sewage into the Ballystrudder area of Larne Lough, which is an area of special scientific interest? Does the Minister believe that an independent environmental protection agency would have granted such consent? When will the proper sewage secondary treatment be provided to remove that pollution from the sensitive Larne Lough area?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member knows about Northern Ireland Water's considerable investment in the Larne area, because he heard about it at an event that he attended last week — an event at which I was also present. At that event, he said, in fact, that the standard that Northern Ireland Water had adopted in that sensitive area around Larne Lough was the highest that one could possibly expect. The treatment of the water and the water that leaves the plant has been designed to ensure that the shellfish beds in Larne Lough are not disturbed by the discharges.

However, Northern Ireland Water accepts that there is considerable investment still to be undertaken, and my Department will ensure that prosecutions will be made in instances where the implementation of that investment is slow.

The Department has prosecuted on a number of occasions. Every high-risk, high-pollution incident from Northern Ireland Water has resulted in prosecution or in a case being sent to the PPS.

Mr O'Loan: There have been a considerable number of fish kills in our rivers recently. Does that fact not raise doubts about the ability of the non-independent Northern Ireland Environment Agency to control pollution? Does the low level of prosecutions of Northern Ireland Water and private firms, combined with low penalties, not create a lack of confidence in the ability of the Department and the Minister to deal with the situation?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member had carried out his research a little better, he would realise that although we have a non-independent environment agency in Northern Ireland, we prosecute 16 times more than the Environment Agency in England, which is independent, and 20 times more than the independent environment agencies in Scotland and Wales. Having an independent agency is no guarantee that there will be no pollution — given the opportunities available to pollute. Indeed, there have been many infraction proceedings against the Irish Republic, England and Scotland by the EU as a result of the discharges into rivers and on to beaches, etc.

It is not the case that the independent environment agency that the Member keeps prattling on about is a panacea. The Department must ensure that it prosecutes when it can do so. I have said time and again that the Department can prosecute only if it has evidence. Those who complain about pollution should give the relevant information to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to ensure that a prosecution can take place. Some of those who complain about the agency and its practices are the very people who do not give the information needed — and the River Quoile incident was a case in point.

I have just checked with my officials. Members of the Green Party took photographs of pollution and dead fish, but did not pass on one piece of information to my Department. Maybe some people would rather have environmental catastrophe than see effective action.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of the Environment to comment on any discussions he has had with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

(AQO 325/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any discussions with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I suspect that, given the way in which that organisation filters out views that it does not agree with, it would not wish to have any discussions with me either.

Dr Farry: I suspected as much. International governmental consensus, involving all Governments in these islands, the Government of the United States and George Bush — and even Sarah Palin — accepts that humans are contributing to climate change. Will the Minister clarify whether the recent article in the 'News Letter' is his personal view or the official view of his Department, and did he take advice from his senior officials before he made those statements?

The Minister of the Environment: I challenge the Member's assertion that there is consensus on the subject. Indeed, 44% of climate scientists disagree with the statement that climate change is mostly the result of man-made causes. There are many surveys in which scientists agree or disagree on this issue. For instance, some of the scientists who had signed one of the most recent surveys included gynaecologists, people who had been trained in Chinese alternative medicine and psychologists — those were the scientists who had informed that great consensus. The Member should check his facts before he starts making wide-sweeping statements about degrees of consensus.

3.15 pm

Mr McClarty: Did the Minister get an opportunity to watch the very convincing BBC2 programme, 'The Climate Wars', which sought to show that those who do not believe that man is largely responsible for climate change are members of the Flat Earth Society? If he has not seen it, can he give an undertaking that he will watch it — in between watching 'Coronation Street' — and convince himself of the arguments that it presents, so that he does not leave himself open to ridicule from the rest of the UK and, indeed, the world?

The Minister of the Environment: I am surprised that the Member, being a busy MLA, has time to watch television. I am afraid that I do not have time to watch whatever that programme was that he mentioned or 'Coronation Street'. Indeed, even if I had time to watch television, I do not think that I would watch such a programme.

I remind the Member that Al Gore once made a film about the horrors of climate change. Of course, within a number of months, all the arguments that he made were dispelled. One of the problems with much of the hysteria that has been stirred up is that the entire matter has been sensationalised. Without that sensationalism, I doubt that many people would be prepared to accept the tax increases, the impingements on personal freedom or the ways in which Government dictate how people live their lives. It is only because the effects of climate change have been sensationalised that people are scared into accepting some measures when, normally, they would tell politicians to get lost.

Mrs Hanna: Does the Minister intend to share his views on climate change with Minister Hilary Benn before he reports back, on behalf of all the UK, to a major international conference on climate change in Poland in December 2008?

The Minister of the Environment: I have had several pieces of correspondence with Hilary Benn, most of which have been to discuss what might be done to reduce CO2 emissions. If some of the measures discussed had been implemented — and Mr Benn has admitted this to me in two letters — it would have led to electricity prices going up by 20% and 25.9%. I have made it quite clear to him that I do not believe that that kind of burden should be imposed on people, especially since many of them are already suffering from fuel poverty.

Many of those who jump up and down about climate change are less than willing to share with their constituents the impact that some of their proposals would have on people's personal living standards and on their pockets.

Toll Bridges/Roads

5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what information is provided by the Driver and Vehicle Agency to private companies operating toll bridges/roads in the Republic of Ireland in the event of an infraction there by drivers from Northern Ireland.

(AQO 242/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an excepted matter, and the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) acts on behalf of the Secretary of State for Transport, who has policy responsibility for the matter. However, I can inform the Member that

no information is being provided by the Driver and Vehicle Agency to private companies that operate toll bridges or toll roads in the Republic of Ireland, although UK legislation does allow for the release of such information to anyone who is able to show reasonable cause for needing it.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his response. What information does the Irish Republic's Government devolve to his Department or any other Department on the subject? Is there not the potential for severe abuse to occur? What steps does his Department intend to take to ensure that such abuse is eradicated or at least minimised?

The Minister of the Environment: Disappointingly, the Irish Republic does not share data with Northern Ireland; it uses some constitutional argument to explain why that cannot be done. However, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, supported by the Driver and Vehicle Agency, has led preliminary discussions at official level with the appropriate officials in the Republic.

It is my desire to have reciprocation from the Republic. It is wrong for people who live in Northern Ireland and commit offences in the Republic to escape their responsibilities; equally, it is wrong for people who live in the Republic to escape sanctions for infractions incurred here.

Departmental Advisory Body: Irish Government Representation

6. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of the Environment if a replacement has been appointed for the individual from the Republic of Ireland who has been excluded from the Department's advisory body.
(AQO 396/09)

7. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representatives of the Irish Government onto the advisory committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside will have on the pollution of the streams and rivers that flow in both jurisdictions.
(AQO 380/09)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 6 and 7 together.

The present membership of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) completes its term of office on 17 February 2009. It includes a representative who was nominated by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

When the council is reconstituted on 18 February 2009, it will comprise new members, as well as members who have already served a three-year term of office.

All members of CNCC must compete in a publicly advertised, rigorous selection process, in line with guidance issued by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland in order to demonstrate their suitability for the role.

CNCC is an advisory body, not an operational one, and my decision will have no impact, negative or positive, on the pollution of streams and rivers that flow in both jurisdictions.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister accept that environmental pollution does not recognise the border? Water pollution, air pollution, recycling and waste management are among a host of issues that must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis. Does the Minister accept that there is a growing number of people who care about the environment and who want the Minister to provide leadership? They do not want a Minister who engages in small-minded party-political tactics or stunts. Does the Minister accept that it is time that we had a Minister who put the environment first?

The Minister of the Environment: I made clear my commitment in previous answers on river pollution and flooding, but perhaps the Member did not hear me. CNCC is an advisory body, not an operational one. When it comes to flooding between Northern Ireland and the Republic, the real work will be carried out by departmental officials.

The Member is anxious because I did not automatically appoint someone from the Irish Republic. The Member and his party are in favour of discrimination — they believe that there should be discrimination in the appointment of officers to the Police Service, but is he now saying that there should also be special treatment — *[Interruption.]*

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

The Minister of the Environment: Is the Member now saying that there should also be special treatment for candidates from the Irish Republic who apply to become members of the advisory body? Everyone from Northern Ireland who applies for the post must go through a public competition, but the Member is suggesting that someone from the Republic should have an automatic right to a post on the advisory body, without going through a public competition. They got there in the first place as a result of direct rule Ministers showing favouritism, but I am not prepared to engage in that kind of discrimination.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Contrary to what the Minister says, there are concerns in my area that CNCC is a powerful environmental group, and not merely an advisory group. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: CNCC is an advisory group; that is what its constitution states. It advises the Department on a range of issues, and its advice will continue to be received. The contentious issue appears to be whether it should be an automatic right for someone from the Irish Republic to sit on the advisory body, without going through public competition.

My answer is no. The Member should have checked with the members of her party who sit on the Public Accounts Committee; and the SDLP Member should have checked with his colleague. I do not know whether the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment saw the job through. However, when the Public Accounts Committee reported on those bodies, it said:

“A significant number of...appointments...are held by people domiciled outside the province.”

The Public Accounts Committee went on to say that it would like to see more people from diverse backgrounds within Northern Ireland applying.

So, I was taking my lead from members of the SDLP and members of the Public Accounts Committee who wished to see people from Northern Ireland being appointed. These are Northern Ireland advisory bodies; why should people from Northern Ireland not serve on them? No one will stand up in the House and say that I should treat people from the Irish Republic who apply for such posts differently than I would treat people from Northern Ireland. People from anywhere can apply, but everybody will be judged on the same basis and not on the preferential basis that was in operation before I made this decision.

Mr Weir: What is the position for anyone applying from the Irish Republic or anywhere else outside Northern Ireland for positions in the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside or any other advisory body that is sponsored by the Department of the Environment?

The Minister of the Environment: Since I am a champion of equality, those people will be judged on the same basis as anyone from Northern Ireland. People from England, Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic will be entitled to apply, but no special places will be reserved for them as happened under the direct rule Administration. People will be invited to take part in the public appointment competition. They will be judged on their performance, and, if on that basis they qualify for membership, they will be members.

Mr Elliott: I am glad that there is a champion for equality in the House today. Does the Minister accept that representatives of such bodies would be more in tune with the bodies' roles and responsibilities if they came from this jurisdiction?

The Minister of the Environment: They will be capable of carrying out the job if they have the qualifications to do the job. Obviously, if they are

advising on Northern Ireland, local knowledge will be important. However, if they have particular abilities and demonstrate those abilities in the public competition, they should, of course, be considered for the posts that are available.

Review of Public Administration

8. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his Department's proposals for the Review of Public Administration, with special regard to councillors who have expressed their plans not to contest seats in any new council format being created or “shadowed” before implementation. (AQO 341/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are preparing options for a possible severance scheme, using the recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group as a starting point. I intend to start a public consultation on those proposals before the end of the year. The necessary legislative power to establish a severance scheme will be included in the forthcoming local government Bill, which I hope to introduce in the Assembly in early 2009.

Mr Boylan: I am glad that the Minister did not have to shout his answer to me. Following on from his answer, will the Minister assure the Assembly that his Department will secure sufficient funding to ensure a smooth transition, in all aspects, from the present council arrangements to the proposed future council structures?

The Minister of the Environment: The issue of funding the transition work has been raised at meetings of the strategic leadership board. An undertaking has been given to examine whether money might be available to the Department. There is nothing in the budget for this year, but we will make a bid for that money: I know that my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel is listening intently to me at the moment.

There are considerable advantages for councils in the review of public administration process, and, in the long run, councils will benefit from it. It is important that the councils recognise that there are resources that they can put in, especially as they will feel the benefits in the long term.

3.30 pm

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Relocation of Public-Sector Jobs

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in investigating the relocation of public-sector jobs. (AQO 315/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): An independent team was established at the end of December 2007 to review the policy on the location of public-sector jobs. The review team has now completed its work, and the chairman, Professor George Bain, will publish his report tomorrow. I understand that all Executive Ministers and MLAs will receive copies of the report tomorrow.

The review was independent, and the recommendations of the review team will have to be considered carefully before decisions can be made on the way forward. I plan to refer the report to an early meeting of the Executive, to gather the initial views of ministerial colleagues.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. In light of the financial pressures facing the Executive, is the Minister satisfied that the relocation of public-sector jobs would represent value for money?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obviously, we look forward to the publication of the report tomorrow. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt its conclusions, but I know that the terms of reference for the professor's work included the requirement to consider costs and benefits. I expect a rigorous assessment of those in the report. Of course, affordability and value for money will be key considerations for the Executive and for the Assembly in moving forward. It would be simply nonsensical if that were not an issue for the Executive and Ministers to take on board, in the context of all the other issues, particularly at this time. I look forward to the publication of the report; I believe that the work has been very detailed and thorough, and I think that it will offer a valuable guide to the way forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that civil servants who work in Omagh or Strabane, for example, and who apply for promotion to a post that transpires to be located in Belfast, are very often forced to refuse such an offer, and are put to the back of the queue for future promotion opportunities? I hope that, in his assessment of George Bain's report, he will consider the possibility of creating promotion opportunities in towns such as Omagh and Strabane.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issue that the Member has highlighted is no doubt one on which the report will comment. It is a fair point to make; people are being forced to consider their place of employment in order to apply for promotion, and sometimes the necessity of a move can be a barrier to their accepting that promotion. However, I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the report. The Member mentions Omagh and other places, and obviously all those issues will have been addressed in the report, but, at this stage, it is not possible for me to give a commitment. We must first receive the report, and it

will then be for the Executive as a whole to take a view on the best way forward.

I am sure that the Member looks forward to an early Executive meeting at which those issues will be discussed, since they are so important to all our constituents.

Mr Beggs: The last Member has advocated the transfer of jobs to the west. Will the Minister acknowledge that areas such as Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownards have the lowest proportion of Civil Service jobs of any of the district councils in Northern Ireland? Will he ensure that there will be an equitable distribution of any relocation of Civil Service jobs?

Finally, the Scottish Executive's experience of the relocation of jobs varied greatly, from relocations that cost considerable amounts of money, to others that actually saved the public money. How will the Minister ensure that any changes will actually result in savings, so that the budget is available to be spent on improving services?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises a couple of very salient points. First, with regard to equality and distribution, I think that the report, when it is published, will undoubtedly address the issue of sustainable development and economic benefits for the entire Province, and it is right that it should do that. I note in passing that Omagh, for instance, probably has the highest proportion per head of public-sector jobs of all towns in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, there may still be an argument based on wider economic benefits that may accrue — we await the report. As for the wider issues raised in Mr Beggs's question, and others, it is right to study the report. MLAs will get sight of it tomorrow, and then we will have a discussion.

However, I emphasise the independence of the review. The Executive will receive the review report and examine the way forward. Undoubtedly, the varying cost of relocating jobs, which depends on the areas concerned, will be taken into account. For example, the location of new bodies may be cost neutral, but there will be a cost attached to moving jobs. All those issues must be considered, particularly in the current economic climate when resources of the Executive are stretched.

2011 Census

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there will be questions on the 2011 census on the use of British and Irish sign language. (AQO 311/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Consideration has been given to the inclusion of a question on the main language of respondents, which would allow them to indicate, as appropriate, that sign language is their main language. Final proposals for the 2011 census will be produced later this year and will

be followed by a census Order and census regulations during the 2009-10 session, which will provide the opportunity for full legislative scrutiny in the House.

Ms Lo: I missed part of the Minister's answer. Will that question be included in the 2011 census?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes, it will.

Ms Lo: I welcome that, because I thought that sign language might be excluded.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for tabling her question, because it addresses an important issue for those affected. I will present proposals on the content of the questions for the 2011 census but, bearing in mind that there was previously a question about language, the census will provide an opportunity for people to indicate that sign language is their preferred method of communication.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister agree that the pre-devolution situation wherein sign language received nothing from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's languages strategy was ludicrous?

Will he consider how the Irish language is identified in the census because, before the last census, a certain newspaper stated that if people could read and understand the phrase "tiocfaidh ár lá", they could read and understand the Irish language. That test does not provide empirical evidence that people can understand, read or speak the Irish language.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obviously, funding during direct rule falls outside my ministerial remit. However, I accept what the Member said. There will be full consultation on the proposals for the contents of questions in the 2011 census. By the time of the census, the content of questions will have been subject to detailed analysis.

The Member highlights the fact that if the census is to be meaningful and robust, everyone who holds a position of responsibility must exercise responsibility in how they advise people to fill in the form. However, the nonsensical approach that was advocated by a certain newspaper is accounted for when the results are analysed. I thank the Member for drawing attention to that point.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his previous answers. Does he agree that one question of relevance to deaf people is not adequate to address issues of concern to that community, which have been neglected? Does he agree further that we do not have to wait until 2011 to establish how to address the many forms of discrimination that deaf people experience?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The treatment of deaf people is not primarily an issue for the census. There are many measures that can be taken to help that community — we do not have to wait for the outcome of the census. The availability of so much

digital data means that much information is already available, which was not the case in previous years. Nevertheless, there is still value in proceeding with the 2011 census.

However, the issues that Mr Dallat raises do not require a wait until the 2011 census is carried out; nor do they depend on one questionnaire. He asked whether people would be allowed to indicate that sign language is their main language. The answer to that is a positive yes.

Peace III Funds

3. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the allocation and delivery of Peace III funds to organisations from the community and voluntary sector. (AQO 324/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Community- and voluntary-sector organisations are expected to be the main beneficiaries of the Peace III programme. Letters of offer will begin to issue to successful projects soon. Approved applications include all the local-authority action plans that local authorities developed in partnership with local stakeholders, including the community and voluntary sector, and will be implemented on the same basis. Additionally, the majority of regional applications that have been approved and victims' projects that have applied come from community and voluntary organisations.

Mr Molloy: Is it envisaged that gap funding will be available for voluntary groups that are in difficulty, in order to ensure that they do not collapse before they acquire Peace III funding?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issue of gap funding has been raised on several occasions. It should be clear by now that there is no gap between Peace II's closing and Peace III's opening. Peace III first opened for project applications in November 2007. All four Peace III themes have been open since March 2008. It is well known that no Peace II project can expect an automatic share of Peace III funding. Peace III was never intended to be an extension of Peace II. It is a distinct programme with its own objectives and selection criteria. Of course, Peace II projects can apply for a share of Peace III funding. However, they must compete with other applications and satisfy the relevant selection criteria.

The Peace II programme concludes this year. Most of the remaining projects are scheduled to close by 30 September. EU peace funding has always been special, time-limited support. Peace II projects were aware of that at the time of application. As a precondition of assistance, all projects had to specify an end date and, if appropriate, a strategy for sustaining themselves post-Peace II. Therefore, no Peace II project should be

uncertain of its post-Peace II future. None should expect an automatic share of mainstream or further EU funds.

Mr Elliott: My question follows on from the previous supplementary question and concerns victims' groups. I am aware that some victims' groups hope to obtain Peace III funding. Is the Minister aware of any redundancies being made in victims' groups because of the delay in Peace III funding?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is absolutely essential that Peace III make an important contribution to tackling victims' and survivors' needs. In that respect, Peace III will build on the work that has already been undertaken through Peace I and Peace II. Victims are a named beneficiary group of the Peace III programme. Therefore, they can apply to any of the programme's themes. Specific provision is made under theme 2 of priority 1, which is on acknowledging and dealing with the past. That theme is worth around €50 million. The first allocations from that theme are expected to be made in October 2008. Peace III takes full account of the Executive's strategy for victims and the work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors. I hope that that answer goes a long way towards reassuring the honourable Member of Peace III's prioritisation of funding for victims.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his responses to previous questions. He has already answered the question that I had in mind.

Tax-Varying Powers

4. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to seeking tax-varying powers for the Executive in light of the current economic crisis and the burdens facing households. (AQO 332/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The current economic environment is of deep concern to me, as it is to all Members. However, as we are aware, rising commodity and fuel prices, as well as the credit crunch, are driven by events in global markets. As we have seen, the Executive or, indeed, any Government, have limited influence over global economic market forces. Tax-varying powers for a small region such as Northern Ireland would, therefore, do little to influence those globally driven economic trends.

The Executive must not, and will not, let current difficulties obscure our strategic long-term vision. The current economic climate makes it more important than ever before that we focus attention on delivery of the Programme for Government's main objective, which is to create a dynamic and innovative local economy.

3.45pm

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I agree with his opening comments about

global economic conditions. Does he agree with me that, notwithstanding those international difficulties, the Assembly and Executive could benefit from greater fiscal autonomy in addressing targets for economic growth and anti-poverty measures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Under current funding arrangements, there is no direct link between public expenditure and revenue receipts in Northern Ireland. However, if the Executive obtained tax-varying powers that would undoubtedly change; that needs to be borne in mind when we talk of the potential benefits of obtaining tax-varying powers.

Over the past year and more, the Executive have taken action within their remit and the scope available to them. Today, I heard that at the Tory party conference, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that if the Tories took power, they would freeze council tax for two years. I have news for him: Northern Ireland is far ahead of him; our Administration has already taken steps to freeze the regional rates for three years. When people ask what Northern Ireland is getting, that is part of the response. The Executive have taken action in other areas; we have deferred the introduction of water charges. Those measures mean that local households will be £1,000 better off than under direct rule; those bills would otherwise have had to be paid during the period 2007-08 to 2010-2011. That takes no account of other measures, such as the 20% discount in rates for pensioners; the possibility of a further delay in water charges; rate rebates for green measures; and the emphasis on fuel poverty, insulation, and so on.

Recently, I met the Minister for Social Development and other Executive Ministers. I met her again, together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 25 September when we discussed the development of an action plan to tackle issues associated with the rising cost of energy. We hope to advance that plan in the context of the next monitoring round.

Mr Hamilton: I acknowledge what the Minister has said about the limited scope available to the Executive in tackling problems associated with current economic conditions. Will he elaborate on his discussions with ministerial colleagues, giving a full rundown of who he has spoken to and what might be forthcoming from the discussions?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question.

I deeply regret that the Executive have not been able to discuss this important issue. Although the issue of rising energy prices was debated in the House this morning, it is only right and proper that the Executive should sit round a table to discuss it. That should have happened before now, and I hope that it will happen on Thursday.

Even in the absence of that meeting, several Ministers met on Thursday 18 September to discuss the issue. As I said, on 25 September, the Minister for Social Develop-

ment, the Health Minister and I met to agree and develop an action plan for consideration in the context of a future monitoring round.

There is important work to be done in tackling fuel poverty — we must approach energy companies on relevant matters, and there is work for all Departments to do. The Executive need to consider short- and medium-term measures. However, the critical issue is that the Executive meet to discuss those matters, and I hope that people will realise the seriousness of the issue and get down to business soon and stop blocking the Executive meetings at which those issues may be tackled.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that in the current economic crisis — with rising food and energy costs and other burdens placed upon households — the introduction of water charges will result in more children growing up in poverty?

The Minister might have already touched on that matter.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of my anticipation of his question.

As I said, the Executive have agreed to defer the introduction of water charges until 2009-10, with an offset against the regional rates bill. However, as the Member said, since the Budget was agreed in the Assembly last January, the position for households has become more serious and difficult.

That is why the First Minister and others have indicated that the Executive will consider whether further steps should be taken on that matter.

Again, if we are to address the issue, the Executive must meet to discuss it. It is important that we, as individual Ministers, do what we can to progress issues. However, there comes a point when Executive action is required. Therefore, the Member will agree, with some, if not every other Member here, that it is absolutely essential that we get down to business, and that the Executive address this and other issues of concern to people in the real world.

Rates Arrears

5. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his Department is taking to recover rate arrears. (AQO 280/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services (LPS) robustly pursues all ratepayers who have not discharged their rate liability, with some 80 staff now working on a full-time basis on the recovery process.

Recovery is made through a number of steps, the first of which is to issue final payment notices, followed by, if necessary, court proceedings. If the debt remains

unpaid following the award of a decree in a Magistrate's Court, further legal action is taken. That may mean referral to the Enforcement of Judgments Office to secure payment through, for example, an attachment of earnings order or an order charging land, or it may mean consideration of bankruptcy or liquidation proceedings.

So far, during this financial year, Land and Property Services has issued 85,473 final payment notices and started 21,122 court proceedings, and the Magistrates' Courts have awarded 1,657 decrees for rating debt.

Work will continue to reduce the level of debt.

Lord Browne: I am pleased that the Minister is taking positive and robust steps to deal with rate arrears, which are totally unacceptable. However, does the Minister accept that in today's economic climate, with high energy prices and job losses, vulnerable people in Northern Ireland face genuine difficulties in making payments? Will the Minister outline whether he will take any steps to assist them in these difficult times?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that individuals, households and businesses may face difficulties in paying bills. Given the escalating costs that householders face, one can understand that.

Nevertheless, rates must be paid. Ratepayers in difficulties are actively encouraged to contact Land and Property Services, with a view to making an extended arrangement, and to check their entitlement to housing benefit or any other form of rating relief.

Such arrangements will help individuals to spread payments over the full financial year. LPS will work with individuals to do that. The worst thing that people can do is to bury their heads in the sand and hope that the problem will go away. I am sure that all of us have seen examples of that in our constituency advice centres.

If people who are in genuine difficulty contact LPS, it will work with them to spread the burden and to extend the repayment period, even into the next financial year, and — in exceptional circumstances, where warranted — into the next two financial years.

Of course, one should also bear in mind that the Executive have taken action to reduce rating liability under a number of schemes, including rate relief, the lone pensioner allowance, and the disabled person's allowance.

This is a particularly serious issue, given the present context. I encourage people to speak to LPS if they are in difficulties.

Mr McFarland: Can the Minister account for the significant increase in rate arrears since his predecessor took up the post in May 2007? Will the Minister confirm that with the increase in aged debt, additional resources will be required to recover it? Does he have a plan to deal with increased bad debt and loss to the public purse?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If the Member has been following the issue at all, he will know that some problems have been encountered with the new IT system. Some post-implementation difficulties have occurred with a function on the delivery of rating reform, and, as a result, recovery functionality was put on hold. However, I am pleased to report — as we did at the Committee for Finance and Personnel where the Member's colleague raised the matter — that a recovery plan has been instituted. We have not been waiting to do that.

In 2008-09, recovery started in June, four months earlier than in the previous year, and by 30 August, 100,000 final payment notices had been issued. Land and Property Services had a target to issue 11,000 court proceedings by 31 August 2008. The actual performance was 17,000. Land and Property Services is on target to issue 40,000 court proceedings by 31 March 2009.

A considerable amount of work is, therefore, going on. LPS has increased the size of its recovery team, and 80 staff are involved full time in the recovery of rating debt. I am determined that we should bear down on that debt, because that revenue must come in to the Assembly and Executive, especially given the current state of finances. The Member will not, I hope, have to wait much longer before the Department announces further action to build on the success that is being made this year in bearing down on the level of rating debt.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister agree that there is a crisis in Land and Property Services? The latest examples of that are incorrect calculation of the rate revenue due to district councils, which has caused councils serious distress, and very poor processing of the lone pensioner allowance. Does he agree with my sincerely held belief that every problem that arises is symptomatic of a deeper problem in Land and Property Services, and will he set up an independent review of that agency?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I read the Member's call for that review earlier, before he announced it here. There is an exceptional demand for the lone pensioner allowance, which was introduced this year. It is an example of an initiative that has struck a chord with many senior citizens. Some 11,000 applications have been processed, and applications are outstanding. I have asked officials to ensure that those are resolved as quickly as possible, and I am confident that the matter will be addressed.

The Member also referred to the difference between estimated penny product and actual penny product. His claim that that was entirely attributable to inaccuracies in LPS does not square with the facts. I leave him to reflect on that point, given that those estimates are made some 18 months in advance of the rate collection. Just as there are times when councils collect less in rates than was estimated, there are many times when they collect more. Of course, there is never any complaint when more money is raised than was estimated. Complaints arise

only when less is raised. Nevertheless, that is an issue for some councils, and I am considering it, particularly with regard to those councils that have suffered.

I am determined to drive forward rate recovery and the delivery of the benefits that have been introduced. A lot of change has taken place in rates; many new reliefs and benefits have been introduced. It is right that those should work through as quickly as possible, but there have been many changes, and the delivery and the benefits of those changes will be seen strongly in the communities that we all represent.

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Executive-Owned Sites

8. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cumulative value of sites owned by the Executive in Belfast which are presently unused or unoccupied. (AQO 321/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cumulative value is approximately £145 million across numerous properties. There is no recent valuation available for a few Department of Education and Department for Regional Development sites. The total value figure given, therefore, excludes those sites.

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

The bulk of the sites are held by the Department for Social Development, accounting for approximately £105 million spread across a wide range of land holdings, which are, generally, held by the Housing Executive for social-housing development schemes, or are awaiting comprehensive redevelopment or sale under specific development-brief conditions in order to promote regeneration in deprived areas of the city.

4.00 pm

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Police Searches: Parliament Buildings

2. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the procedures of the Northern Ireland Assembly in regard to police officers carrying out searches on elected Members, their property and offices; and to outline how this compares with procedures applied in the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and at Westminster. (AQO 308/09)

Mr Neeson: Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and their offices are not subject to search by

police officers on a routine basis while in the confines of Parliament Buildings or Annex C. Therefore, no procedures are required in that regard.

The advice of the PSNI is followed in relation to VVIP (very, very important person) visits to the Northern Ireland Assembly. A comparison exercise has been undertaken with the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and Westminster in relation to searches on elected Members and their offices. That comparison exercise shows that Members of the above legislatures are treated exactly the same as Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly on a routine basis in that they, or their offices, are not searched by police officers.

However, the exercise did identify one slight difference with Westminster in that all vehicles, including vehicles belonging to Members of Parliament and ministerial cars, are searched when they enter the grounds of Westminster each day. The other legislatures follow the advice of the local police on VVIP visits.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his answer. Will the Member agree that the searching by police of elected Members' offices and cars on a regular basis is totally unacceptable? Furthermore, will he agree that such events undermine the foundations of democracy itself?

Mr Neeson: The Member is asking whether the measures that were taken were over the top. Before it was known that a VVIP visit was to take place, arrangements had already been made to conduct a police search of the Assembly Chamber, above it, below it and its surrounding area, following an extensive refurbishment of the Chamber during the summer months. Shortly after that had been agreed, it was announced that a VVIP visit was to take place.

A further threat assessment was conducted by the PSNI, which seemingly concluded that a full building search was required. Unfortunately, that additional search was not completed on the night of Sunday 14 September 2008, which resulted in police officers returning the following morning to complete the full building search shortly before the beginning of proceedings and before the visit of the VVIP. On the Sunday night, Assembly officials were not informed by the police that the search had not been completed.

In response to the Member's suggestion that such events undermine the foundations of democracy, the Assembly looks after the interests and those who work in the Building. On all occasions, we follow police advice, which is reviewed on a constant basis.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Adequate Home-Help Provision

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it. — [*Mr McCarthy.*]

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the motion, and I thank the proposers for bringing it to the Floor of the House. I pay tribute to the many home helps who work hard, perform their tasks professionally and go the extra mile for their clients.

Health policy is to support people, especially older people, to stay in their own homes for as long as possible and to allow them to remain part of the community with family, neighbours and friends around them. Most older people are independent for as long as possible, but they recognise that a time may come when they need to rely on some help and assistance, whether from family, friends or home help. That is often only a small amount of help, for instance to light a fire in the morning, to bring in a bucket of coal to keep the fire going or to collect their pension and a few items of shopping. It may include help to heat a main meal to ensure adequate levels of nutrition, and many older people now get meals-on-wheels provision, which can be helpful.

It would be useful to consider more creative ways of involving older citizens proactively. Fires are being removed from many houses in order to make heating easier and to eliminate the bother of maintaining a coal fire. The Assembly could do more on that level.

A person with a more serious level of immobility may require personal support such as help getting into bed and help with toileting. It is preferable that people remain at home, and, as the Minister knows, it is more cost-effective. Of course, relatives who live within a reasonable distance should be expected to help, especially with practical chores; however, society is changing, and there are no longer so many close-knit communities. Even though sons, daughters, nieces and nephews must juggle their own family lives, many relatives offer that support and go the extra mile. They are carers in every sense of the word, and they fulfil those duties with a heart and a half. Before I went into politics full time, I worked for social services and assessed domiciliary care for older people; through that work, I met several home helps and relatives.

We must eradicate abuse of the system to ensure that money goes where it is most needed. Home helps build a rapport with their clients and are often the client's main contact with the outside world. Furthermore, the

connectivity between the home help and the client's relatives is important because it increases the home help's sense of job satisfaction, makes them feel trusted and gives them a sense that they are making a difference to people's lives. Health Service personnel must monitor home-help activity because, although most people are honest, industrious and well-meaning, older people are vulnerable.

Life expectancy has risen, and the percentage of older people in the population is increasing. Many of those people are out and about using their free bus passes and their grey power. However, there will come a time when older people need help, and the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are aware of the growth in demand for such services. Resources must be used efficiently, but older people must be able to live in dignity, warmth and security. If Members are serious about helping senior citizens, that provision must be available. Cutbacks have been mentioned — that would be short-sighted.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. Over the years, home-help provision in Northern Ireland has proven to be extremely valuable to the elderly, sick and handicapped and to families who want their loved ones to remain as independent as possible and continue living in their own homes. Without the provision of the home-help service, many elderly and disabled people would, undoubtedly, have no alternative but to go to hospital or into a residential nursing home. For many elderly people — especially in rural areas — the home help provides a sense of security and normality and, in some instances, is their only communication with the outside world.

Research in Great Britain has shown that domiciliary care packages that are provided to keep people in their own homes amount to between one quarter and one third of the cost of putting those people into residential home placements. Therefore, is it not common sense and good practice to provide such domiciliary care packages for our ageing population? It is a downright shame to cut back that service from one of the most vulnerable sections of society. Furthermore, it shows blatant disregard for our elderly and ageing population, who, for years, have worked hard and paid taxes. It is insulting to the dependant and the care worker to allocate 15 minutes a day to complete the necessary care provision, especially as the care worker has, perhaps, driven 20 minutes to arrive at the home.

Such a system is grossly unfair and financially unviable for the carer, who has but time to say “hello” in one breath and “goodbye” in the next.

In my own constituency of West Tyrone, which is in a large rural area, it is impossible to describe the value of the work and commitment of home-help carers, who provide a much-needed service to the elderly and disabled

population. The Minister's soundings about severe cutbacks and job losses that have resulted from privatised agency work have caused much anxiety and concern among that vulnerable group in our society.

Although the Minister may attribute such cutbacks to savings in the health budget, I remind Members that the previous comprehensive spending review revealed that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety underspent grossly by some £53 million. In light of that, perhaps the Minister will do the honourable thing and resource that invaluable service for elderly and disabled constituents properly — they are the people who need it so much.

I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I also welcome the opportunity to speak to this important motion, and I thank Kieran and Anna for proposing it. I know that the debate was suspended for Question Time, but it is a pity that the Minister is not here to hear other Members' contributions. Had he been, I would have welcomed him to the debate and commended him for his earlier announcement. I know that a speaker from his party already said this, but his earlier announcement about introducing proposals to abolish prescription charges shows that —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I will, but be quick.

Mr McCarthy: Sometimes the workings of this Assembly are criticised. However, does the Member recall that last year the Alliance Party — supported by the Assembly — called for prescription charges to be abolished? Here we have proof that this Assembly is working and can work when a Minister listens.

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. I hope that the Member does not claim credit for abolishing prescription charges, because that proposal was in the manifesto of every party in the Assembly. However, I agree that if we work collectively, we can deal with some of the issues that affect our communities.

The point that I was making is that I hope that the Minister brings additional good news. As a member of the Health Committee, I am not prone to criticising the Minister unless it is required. I am also quite happy to commend him when I see positive work coming from the Department. Today's announcement on prescription charges is a step in the right direction.

I was shocked to hear an earlier contribution from a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. We must ask ourselves the purpose of the home-help service. It is there to provide practical assistance and care for the elderly, the sick, the disabled and families in their own homes where parents are absent and there is no one else who can help. That removes the argument that home help is only for elderly people. That is not the

case, but the focus of the debate earlier suggested that it was. We all support the announcement of a commissioner and of legislation that will help the elderly. However, the home-help service is not just for that group.

One of the principles of the Programme for Government is the delivery of fair outcomes and social improvements. Today's announcement about prescription charges shows that we are heading in the right direction.

The Department of Health's mission statements says that the Department's aim:

"is to improve the health and social well-being of the people".

It endeavours to do so by ensuring the provision of appropriate health and social-care services in clinical settings such as hospitals and GPs' surgeries and in the community through nursing, social work and other professional services. That can be balanced out, both in community and hospital settings. However, does that mission statement make any difference?

I do not know whether anybody in this Chamber has ever helped to care for a loved one or has benefited from home-help services. Many of our mothers and fathers, husbands, wives, partners and children would probably have to go into a residential home or a hospital without the added support of care in the community, of which home help is a fundamental part.

It would be useful if the Minister would inform us of exactly how many people would be put into a residential or hospital-care setting if home care were not provided and tell us how much that would cost.

There are many statistics out there; however, if the Minister were to give us the appropriate statistics, we could begin to compare.

4.15 pm

As I said, we must consider the human cost of caring for a loved one and how much society currently saves due to families' input. Families require support. No matter who is being cared for, every carer deserves, and needs, a break, and home help provides that time out.

Mr Deputy Speaker, will I be given additional time to account for the intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Ms S Ramsey: In October 2007, the Audit Office produced its report, 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', in which it stated that there is a high dependence on institutional forms of care. In 2005-06, 60% of the £394 million spent by trusts on personal services for older people went to residential and nursing home care; however, the amount spent on people receiving less complex help, such as home help, decreased. I want the Minister to state whether there has been any change since the report was published in 2007.

In 2005, the Appleby Report stated that the number of delayed discharges from acute hospitals had remained at approximately 350 to 400 patients in any one month. There seems to be a knock-on effect throughout the Health Service, and community services are downgraded, downplayed and do not receive funding.

I am glad that the Minister is now in the Chamber, because, although he would probably have read about it in the Official Report tomorrow, I wish to commend him on his announcement about prescription charges. Moreover, I commend the people who work in the home-help service for their dedication and commitment to patients. We all know that they give up free time because of their loyalty to, and the relationships they have built up with, patients. Vulnerable people require help, and home helps are the only link that some of those people have with the outside world — the only human contact that they have — and Members would not be fulfilling their duty if such help were to be taken away. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I too wish to thank the Minister for his announcement on prescription charges. It is greatly welcomed.

As we debate and discuss this resolution, it is important to put our appreciation for those who provide such a superb home-help service for the elderly and infirm in Northern Ireland on the record.

Meals on wheels, day centres and the home-help system should all be vital components of any strategy that seeks to enable people to stay in their homes for as long as possible. People really do want to be cared for at home. Such care is not just a valid lifestyle choice for the elderly; it is an important right that we must protect. Receiving care at home is less traumatic for patients and, indeed, much less expensive for the community than admission to hospital or residential care.

Over the years, the number of people over 75 has increased dramatically, and the size of our dependent, elderly population will continue to increase. Those increases must be central to considerations when planning and apportioning scarce health and personal safety resources.

We are talking about people who have contributed their time, talents and taxes to the community over many years. Such people have worked hard for decades, and when we plan for their sunset years we have a responsibility to be generous in the provision of public services. We should want for every elderly person the kind of treatment and provision that we would wish for our own parents and grandparents.

In the community, home helps are on the front line in ensuring the health and well-being of elderly people, and we must ensure that the burdens that we place on them do not cause them to become disillusioned or demoralised.

I have had frequent opportunities to talk to home helps, and they all make the same points about the way in which the service has been affected by reduced time with patients. They can recall when visits might have lasted two hours, during which the helper had time to make beds, do washing, set fires, prepare meals and do shopping. They repeatedly point out that longer visits led to developing close relationships between those serving and those being served. Helpers regard the offering of companionship as a vital component of caring, and their visits gave the elderly person something special to look forward to every day.

Their message is also unanimous — a home help is someone who can help in the home. What can anyone do to help someone else in 15 minutes? In cases involving a bedridden elderly person, that is scarcely enough time to get them out of bed and dressed. It becomes a race against time to get a client washed and down the stairs, and to make them comfortable. It is a challenge to ensure that they are warm and fed. Shopping or making a cup of tea may be out of the question. The relationship is changed dramatically. The time available in which to offer companionship and support is whittled away.

I support the home-help system and strongly oppose any reduction in the length of time allowed for home visits. I urge the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that there is adequate home-care provision for every person who needs it in Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: I support the motion and thank the Members who proposed it.

The home-help service is invaluable in Northern Ireland society. Home helps provide priceless, practical assistance to the elderly and other people who live alone; to people with mobility problems; to single-parent families; and to people who suffer from prolonged illnesses. As well as practical assistance, home helps provide a degree of independence, dignity and companionship.

The service means that thousands of elderly and other people do not have to enter nursing homes, and that children from struggling families are spared being taken into care. Home helps, therefore, save the Health Service an invaluable amount of money and provide independence and dignity to thousands of people. As a society, we ought to highly value home helps and their work.

I note that Sue Ramsey said that, in the context of home helps, the Ulster Unionist Party referred only to the elderly. I assure Members that it is not just about the elderly. It is about a much larger sphere in society. I can speak from personal experience, as someone who — perhaps like other Members — has had relatives who relied on home-help care. My father suffered for years from advanced Parkinson's disease before he died. My mother-in-law, who passed away in the

summer, had Alzheimer's disease for many years. If not for the home-help system, the families would not have coped. They could not have kept their loved ones out of the care system. I do not denigrate the care system. However, it does not offer the benefits of home care.

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad that the Member clarified that point. A Member of the Ulster Unionist Party who spoke earlier in this debate seemed to state that home helps worked exclusively for the elderly. Mr Elliott can check the Official Report, but that was what was said — if people are old they get a home help. The argument was put forward that the commissioner for older people, therefore, would deal with this issue.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that intervention. However, that is not the Ulster Unionist Party's concept of the home-help or -care system. I like to call it the home-care system, because that is what it is. It is caring for people at home.

One major problem, and one that I find in my constituency, is the lack of people who can work as a home help. It is not a job that everyone can do. Bluntly, a lot of the work is farmed out to agencies, some of which fail to pay an appropriate rate. That is where a difficulty sometimes arises. Potential recruits can find an easier way to earn a living. Instead of working for an hour each at six different houses, they can do six hours of something else with as much pay.

Home helps have a huge specialist expertise and a dedication to their role. I must say, again from personal experience, that I do not know how home helps can cope with going into homes other than their own in order to care for people. The level of dedication and the personal help that they render to their clients is second to none.

Although I recognise that there serious concerns about the reduction of home help-provision in individual cases, I understand that all clients are assessed and reassessed according to need, and that care is provided according to the level of that assessed need. Guidelines are in place to determine the length of time per required service.

In some instances, a changed assessment of need can alter the amount of time for which a person receives home help. A reduction in help can be traumatic for families and for the people who receive the help; that is why a consistent and robust evaluation process and system must be put in place. That is particularly important given the indications that a group-care system may be introduced in some areas, meaning that some of the people who need care will not be getting help from the same individual every day. That should only be done in extreme cases in which it is not possible for the same individual to help every day.

Some 24,000 people avail themselves of the home-help provision in Northern Ireland, and the vast majority is

provided with an outstanding service with which they are happy. Unfortunately, in a small amount of cases, it appears that provision has been reduced. However, when examining such cases individually and objectively, the Assembly must be cautious and not tarnish the overall wonderful service that we have.

I will conclude by saying that I am aware that, in a press release last week, Mr McCarthy admitted that the cuts in the health budget are a result of cuts in the overall Budget.

Mrs M Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on the announcement that he made today. It is a super announcement — one that will be of great benefit to the people and that the community will welcome.

Members have heard many stories today about cases of people who use the home-help system. I will not bore Members with many more such stories — I have a list of them that is a mile long, but I will give just two examples.

One case involves an older lady suffering from cancer who had major surgery, was discharged from hospital and was given home help for between two and three hours a day. That meant that the lady's home help visited in the morning and in the evening, which ensured that the lady got, at least, two warm meals each day. However, after six weeks, that help was taken away from her, even though the lady's health had not improved. That is one of the most unfair stories that I have heard in a long time.

The other case involved a man who had five children and whose wife was ill. Again, his home help's hours were cut greatly, and he got no benefit from the service after that. Those are only two cases, but if the Minister wants further information on them, I will give that to him.

We are discussing the fact that the home-help service is being restricted to 15-minute visits. Often, many of the people who receive the service are seriously ill and may not see another face for the duration of the day or the week, depending on the status of their health. What will happen to the hundreds of older people who are discharged early from hospital owing to bed shortages who still need care, are unable to make themselves a meal and have no one to help them? A 15-minute visit will be no good to any home help. However, that is not the fault of the home helps, who do a super job.

What can anyone do in 15 minutes? Not much, I dare to say — it would take 15 minutes to make tea and toast and bring it to someone, never mind clean the person's home. It is important that people who are ill have a clean home, because the lack of a clean home environment will not help to improve someone's health.

It is deplorable that it is deemed necessary to cut back on a service that is a lifeline for many people, many of whom are ill. Those people's need for the service is

constantly under review, and they can, as the result of a very small change in their circumstances, lose their meagre time slot.

I ask the Minister how such a decision can be made in all good conscience, because it will leave the people in our communities without their much-needed assistance. It is a disgrace that home-help assistants are being asked — in some cases instructed — to call into a home and see how the person is, leaving them no time to perform any household duties. I find the entire situation to be degrading to both the person who needs help and to those who give help.

I have met the Minister in both formal and informal settings and have found him to be an extremely fair man who wants the best for the people of Northern Ireland. That is made obvious by the fact that, at the weekend, he accompanied paramedics in order to see at first hand what they encounter in their job and witness the problems that drinking causes for our young people — fair play to him for doing that.

4.30 pm

I accept that there are many demands on the Minister's time and resources. However, in the current economic climate, when many households dread the winter months and are terrified of the implications of constant increases in energy prices, I hope that the Minister can give this issue due consideration. I also hope that he will approach the task with renewed vigour and make sensitive and sensible decisions.

Vital services such as home-help provision must be constructed and moulded around the person and their needs. The diminishing of that service is a huge worry, particularly to our older people, as their lifelines to dignity and to society in general erode before their eyes.

Although I represent Foyle, I know that this problem is widespread in all constituencies. Indeed, I speak for all my party colleagues who have grave concerns regarding the reduction of those services in their respective constituencies. I support the motion and thank Mr McCarthy and Ms Lo for tabling it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The provision of an adequate home-help service for many older and disabled people is an absolute necessity as many are almost totally dependent on it. Any reduction in that service is of particular concern to many of our frail and disabled older people who do not have immediate or extended family help and who cannot self-care.

In their statutory capacity, social services have a duty of care to those people. Indeed, their home help may be the only contact that many older people have with the outside world. They depend on their home help to get their shopping, their pensions and to do the things that they cannot do themselves.

A survey conducted in 2007 found that some older people left their homes for only 24 hours in a year. In many cases, that is due to a lack of support to enable them to lead as normal a life as possible. Those elderly people have contributed greatly to our society through their work and, in many cases, by their contribution to the voluntary sector.

As is stated in the motion, home-help provision for some people is being reduced to 15 minutes a week. That is totally inadequate and unacceptable and must be urgently addressed by the Minister. Those who are deemed to be in need of such provision should be an absolute priority and should not be party to a system that only provides lip-service to what is an essential service.

In its criteria for home-help provision the Southern Health and Social Care Trust issued guidelines that contain a definition of the needs of older people, ranging from low through moderate to critical. Low means that in many cases people simply do not qualify for home-help provision and must do without that service. Moderate means that if people do not have an adequate service they will inevitably end up in hospital, thereby adding further pressure to the Health Service budget. Critical means that if those people do not have proper adequate home-help provision, they will die. That is the reality.

Our old and disabled people deserve better, and we should be ashamed that we have allowed such a situation to develop. Some people who require home help receive care monitoring up to four times daily and at night; however, to qualify for such services, the criteria are stringently applied.

Some years ago, a document called 'People First' was published by the Department of Health in relation to the provision of adequate care for the elderly. It was full of platitudes, and it soon became abundantly clear on reading it that it was mainly concerned with money and how it could be saved. That trend unfortunately has continued; the mantra being best care, best value.

The Southern Trust has been tasked with making efficiency savings of £8 million over the next three years and has lost £3 million of its budget this year. In the light of such cutbacks, providing an adequate home-help service has become impossible.

In the vast majority of cases, families do their best to cope with elderly relatives who require care. Indeed, 43% of the population are looked after in their own homes and in their own communities.

Care for the elderly and disabled should be one of our main priorities and should not come down to the amount of money available. Our older population needs to be appreciated and treated with the dignity that it has earned and deserved. As my colleague, Sue Ramsey, said, a home help for those who need one is for life not just for Christmas. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion and congratulate the Members who brought it before the Assembly.

Many elderly people in my constituency depend on their home help, and the home-help service ensures that senior citizens can remain in their own community.

It is regrettable that some health trusts are in the process of penny-pinching, and the home-help service is a soft target for the administrators.

In my constituency of West Tyrone, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has cut home-help services to a number of constituents — some of whom suffer from cancer and one of whom has, for 15 years, been registered as blind. In most cases, those who provide the home-help service work beyond the times set by the trusts, but some of the prescribed times are being cut to a ridiculous 15 minutes. We have an army of social workers and administrators; however, those who provide front-line support to those in our communities who are worst in need face stringent cuts. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I am contacted repeatedly by my constituents to express concern over the reduction of home-help provision. Therefore I am pleased that the motion is being debated, and I congratulate Anna Lo and my constituency colleague Kieran McCarthy for tabling it.

As Members know, the population of Northern Ireland is living longer. That is good news for those of us who are advancing in years, but it places a greater demand on the care service. Domiciliary care packages are needed more today than ever. The 2007 report on older people and domiciliary care found that there were 266,000 older people living in Northern Ireland, of whom 6,500 people in Northern Ireland received a domiciliary care package that was tailored to their needs, and of whom 24,000 received what are called "simple elements of support" to help them live independently. More care provision is required for those people who fall into that bracket.

I have spoken to carers on many occasions, and they are aggrieved and annoyed that there is not enough time to do all the work that has to be done. My wife assures me that 15 minutes is not enough time to do the dishes and wipe the kitchen surfaces, never mind vacuum, polish and do other jobs, and she is right.

If those jobs are not carried out by home helps, elderly gentlemen will be living in dirty rooms and some lady will trip over herself and break a hip while trying to vacuum. As a result, she will lose what is most important to her — her independence and her health. It is worse for those who were granted help with washing, dressing and shopping, for instance. All of that is being taken away from them.

In my office, I hear regularly from carers who are frustrated because they cannot provide as much help as is required. Mary Bradley provided an example of a home-help situation; I will do so too. I know of one lady who gets paid for performing home-help duties for three hours each morning; she starts work at 8:00 am, but does return home until 2:00 pm. She works for five hours — two hours more than she should. She does that because she refuses to leave men and women in dirty homes. That same home help returns to one of the homes at night to put a lady to bed, because although the lady cannot cope alone, she does not want to go into a nursing home.

That home help should be congratulated for those unpaid hours; but it must be acknowledged that it is simply unfair. Not everyone can put in those unpaid hours; however, they should not have to do so.

Recently, I met Andy Mayhew and Heather Finlay from my local trust area, and I informed them of those issues, amongst others. I received the good news that an extra £800,000 was to be given to domiciliary care, which will mean that an additional 75 to 80 people on the list will be looked after.

In conclusion, the figures show that there is a 38% growth in the 65- to 75-year age bracket in my trust area, and I am sure that it is the same in other areas. There is the even higher figure of 48% growth in the 75-plus age bracket. Therefore the need for domiciliary care will grow, and that demand must be met by a budget that can keep on top of the situation.

As demands on the trusts' domiciliary care provision grows, and, as the number of people to be cared for rises by 75 to 80 each year, something must change for the better — not for the worse.

I urge the Minister to consider the issues raised in the Chamber today. It is important that people are not put into nursing or residential homes if they do not want to go there. It will be a hard winter, financially, for many people. I ask the Minister, respectfully, to ensure that a support network is in place for proper care and practice, and not just a time schedule on paper.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mr McCarthy for proposing the motion on what is an important issue. One of my key priorities is to ensure that, wherever possible, people are helped to maintain their independence at home, and that is important. Everyone should have a choice about how their care needs will be met. The message that my Department has received loud and clear is that people want to continue to live independent lives in their own homes for as long as possible and for as long as it is safe to do so.

Our population of people who are over 65 years of age is set to more than double over the next 50 years. My Department is firmly committed to continue to

transform the way in which services are delivered in our communities to ensure access to high-quality services that will enable older people to live in their own homes with safety and dignity.

A key element of that has been the expansion of flexible and responsive domiciliary care services, which include a range of services such as food and diet; simple treatments, including assistance with medication and dressings; personal assistance, including assistance with dressing and getting in and out of bed; personal hygiene and so on. In working closely with the independent and voluntary sectors, we are now helping more people than ever — almost 10,000 — to stay at home and avoid admission to hospital or residential care. I have set challenging targets for health and social care services to ensure that we continue to build on the good work being carried out already.

My Department is working to achieve the new public service agreement target, which is that 45% of people with assessed community-care needs are supported at home by 2010. The latest statistics show that by working with our partners in the independent sector we are already well on our way to achieving that goal. I pay tribute to the tireless work of the many thousands of unpaid carers who help support loved ones in their own homes. I do not take such support for granted, nor should it go unrecognised.

Although the primary responsibility must be to those at greatest risk, I recognise that preventative low-level support can avoid deterioration in an individual's situation. Therefore, I expect the health and social care service to develop methods of risk assessment to help it identify those people whose risk to independence appears relatively low, but who are likely to become more serious over time.

More than 23,000 people in Northern Ireland receive a home-help service, which includes more than 4,000 in the Northern Trust area, 7,000 in the Belfast Trust area, 4,000 in the South Eastern Trust area, and more than 4,000 in the Southern and Western Trusts. Home-help services include a range of basic domestic tasks such as routine household cleaning, preparing and cooking food, washing-up, lighting fires, making beds, laundry, ironing and shopping. As with all services, frequency of home-help support depends on a comprehensive assessment of need and can range from daily to weekly intervention. I have no doubt that the service is a vital element in promoting and maintaining independence for vulnerable people in our communities.

Home help is one of a range of services that play a vital role in maintaining independent living. Others include intermediate care, which is designed to bridge the gap between hospital care and health and social care in the community, and it provides time-bound intensive support to prevent inappropriate admission to

institutional care and ensures patients recover from illnesses more quickly. A study in 2005 showed that the cumulative impact of intermediate care services in 2004-05 avoided 3,000 accident-and-emergency admissions, saved 150,000 hospital-bed days, avoided 811 planned intensive community-care packages and reduced 223 existing community-care packages.

I am keenly aware that we must strike a balance between the necessity to respond to urgent and intensive needs and, at the same time, ensuring that people with lesser needs do not slide into dependency unnecessarily for want of early intervention.

4.45 pm

Everyone is aware of my considerable efforts — which were well supported by a number of Members and those further afield — throughout the CSR period to achieve a better Budget settlement for my Department. The Department's expenditure on support for elderly people was £628 million in 2006-07, which represents the Department's second-largest area of expenditure after acute services. Furthermore, as part of the CSR, I will invest an additional £60 million so that more of our elderly population can be supported in the community.

Although my budget was increased, it fell some way short of the Department's bid, and, as a consequence, the Department is not in a position to provide all the services that it might like to provide and that people deserve. It is in that context that I am working hard with staff in the field of health and social care to realise the best possible outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. That clearly means that some tough decisions must be made to ensure that we can meet the needs of those in our community who are most at risk of inappropriate admission to a hospital or care home.

Some of those decisions have featured prominently in the media, and I understand that they may, at times, appear to lack sense. However, I assure Members that such decisions are not taken lightly, and that, in each case, proper consideration is given to individuals' needs and circumstances, after a comprehensive assessment or review of need. Those assessments and reviews cover strengths, preferences, risks, carer contribution, carer need and other areas of disagreement. It is also crucial to take into account the perceptions and wishes of individuals and their carers about how they wish to live their lives.

I also assure Members that there has not been a wholesale reduction in home-help services. It is normal practice for the trusts to review periodically the individual needs of a service user. Those reviews are designed to ensure that the service provided to an individual is still appropriate to their level of need. They are not, as has been suggested today, designed solely to achieve efficiencies. A review can lead to an increase or a reduction in services, the key factor being any changes

in the individual's assessed need. Regular reviews will not only ensure that each person receives the appropriate level of service but that trusts target resources on those clients who are most in need of support.

In 2006-07, the Department spent over £157 million on domiciliary care, and I want to make clear that budgets for domiciliary care, which include the home-help service, have increased by £10.2 million this year. In addition, trusts have indicated that, although some packages have ceased or have been reduced, a greater number have either been introduced or increased. For example, this year, in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers the area that Kieran McCarthy represents, 644 people are receiving a new or increased service. In the Western Health and Social Care Trust, that number is 836, and, in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, 1,397 people are receiving a new or increased service. That level of provision far outweighs any reductions that have occurred as a result of reassessment of need, an assessment of lesser need or the service being withdrawn.

Mr McCarthy: I acknowledge what the Minister has said about new packages, but I want him to answer the simple question that I asked him earlier: will he confirm that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has issued instructions that, come October — that is, in a few days' time — all domestic services, including shopping, cleaning and laundry, are to be discontinued? That information was brought to my attention at the weekend, and it would spell disaster for the individuals concerned. I ask the Minister to confirm or deny that that is the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of any such proposal. I am interested to know who gave him that information. One of the problems that the Department faces is negative gossip, which does us no good at all. I am not aware of any such plan, which would represent a radical departure from the policy that the Department has laid down for home helps and services and domiciliary care.

In fact, 4,000 clients in the South Eastern Trust area receive home-help services. I am not aware of any reduction in the services that those clients receive.

Changes to care packages can cause considerable distress, but there are channels for people who are affected by a reduction in services to appeal such decisions. There is also a complaints process if the appeal fails to address people's concerns, and, in April 2009, my Department will introduce a revised complaints process.

I have listened carefully to what Members said, and I also listened carefully to the press coverage, which, quite frankly, is nearly all inaccurate, to put it mildly. However, there is concern about the issue in the House and further afield, so I will review the issue of people

who are affected by reductions in services. I will also review the appeals process and the complaints process, which sound good on paper, but may not be straightforward for people in their 80s or 90s.

As I said, services for elderly people make up the second-largest part of the Budget after acute services. That is due to the clear need, which will increase, as the number of elderly people aged over 65 is going to double over the next 50 years. Therefore, we must get it right. One way of addressing the need is to help people who are on the edge of being institutionalised or hospitalised if they do not get the necessary support. They will be given support in their homes, so that they can live independent lives. That will make them happier, their quality of life will improve, and they will live longer, which is what we all want. Therefore, I will review the issue.

I am not entirely clear about the steps that I will take, but I will come back to the House and inform Members of them. If people are unhappy with the care that they receive, they should not run straight to the media. They can go straight to their MLAs or councillors, but a process must be put in place to allow people to complain and appeal. People must have confidence in it, it must be easy to use, and it must be easily accessible for people in their 80s or 90s.

I will examine that issue, as we must provide the appropriate support and also maximise the resources available. The number of people being supported by these services is growing every year, and I want to ensure that that is addressed appropriately, so that people get the support that they need.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for being here and also thank all the Members who supported the motion. Most Members expressed concerns about the reported reduction in the time offered for home help. Mary Bradley cited examples, and she questioned how 15 minutes can really help elderly folks. Most Members paid tribute to the contribution that elderly people make to society, yet they are not receiving the home-help services that they need as they approach their later years. Almost all colleagues paid tribute to home helps who go the extra mile. As Carmel Hanna and Jim Shannon said, some home helps willingly return to homes in the evenings to help out, without being paid to do so.

Several Members cited figures produced by the Northern Ireland Audit Office in its October 2007 report, which showed a high dependence on institutional care. Although health and social care trusts spent 60% of their budgets on the care of elderly people in 2005-06, most of that money was spent on residential and nursing homes; not enough money is allocated to community-care provision.

Several Members mentioned community-care policy. Mickey Brady said that notwithstanding the

People First policy, we must shift the balance from residential care to community care, with the delivery of care packages at home. Many policies seem to be about reducing costs rather than providing practical help for elderly people.

Tom Buchanan and Michelle O'Neill mentioned the rural provision of community care and the difficulties that people in rural communities face in obtaining home help. They also pointed out the difficulty in recruiting home help, and asked whether it was realistic to ask people to travel long distances to help people in their homes for only 15 minutes a day.

Many themes reoccurred; everyone said more or less the same thing. Iris Robinson supported the motion and said that home help was an easy target for cuts. Although she understood that there were underlying financial constraints, Mrs Robinson said that it was unfair to make cuts in services to vulnerable people and that we were making a mockery of the community-care policy.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware of the guidelines that are given to home helps about the time that they should spend on each activity? Those guidelines advise that home helps should spend 30 minutes on cleaning; 60 minutes on cooking; 20 minutes to light a fire; 20 minutes to carry water; five minutes making a bed; 20 minutes on washing and ironing; 10 minutes on shopping; 30 minutes on dressing; 15 minutes on undressing; 30 minutes on help with washing; and 15 minutes on social support. Yet they are supposed to do all that in no more than 15 minutes. If ever we needed an example of where things have gone wrong, that is it.

Ms Lo: I absolutely agree. I do my own washing and ironing and wash my own dishes, and I know that I cannot do that in 15 minutes.

Michelle O'Neill mentioned the difficulties in rural areas and the gap between social services packages and community-care services, and she praised the good work of care workers. Other Members reinforced the point that home-help provision must be adequately resourced. Michelle O'Neill told us that she knew of many home helps who did more work than they were expected to or were paid for.

Several Members spoke about the need to make efficiency savings, but that we should not target the most vulnerable in society. Sam Gardiner said that we should stop making wish lists and that we should be accountable for how taxpayers' money is spent.

He said that care must be given to those who need it, and that home helps should not, for example, peel potatoes for the rest of the family. Although he supports the motion, he said that we must be careful about how money is spent, and that, if there is change in the system, such a change to the NHS cannot take place overnight.

He said that he broadly supports the sentiment of the motion, but cautioned against spending money unwisely.

5.00 pm

Carmel Hanna paid tribute to home helps for the work that they do, and said that they often go the extra mile. She also said that a small amount of help can make a difference, but that perhaps we need to think of more creative ways to help elderly people to stay active in their homes and in society. Most people prefer to be at home, and it is much more cost-effective to use the home-help service than to send people to residential or nursing homes. She acknowledged that there is a need to cut out abuses from the system, but said that it is important that elderly people can avail of the home-help service, as often it constitutes their main contact with the outside world. She acknowledged that the home help also gets a lot of satisfaction from doing their very difficult job and making a difference in people's lives. However, monitoring and the provision of sufficient resources are important.

Tom Buchanan spoke about rural areas, and said that the home-help service costs around one third to one quarter of the cost of residential care, and also that we cannot show disregard for contributions from the elderly population. He also said that it is impossible to carry out the tasks of a home help in 15 minutes, and that it is impossible to place a value on the work of home helps. The changes to the services are causing anxiety and concern to elderly folk, and he called again for proper provision of resources.

Sue Ramsey commended the Minister — even though he was not here at the time — for the proposed introduction of free prescriptions, but cautioned that the home-help service is not just for the elderly, but also for other sections of the community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his contribution, and I welcome his promise to look at the appeal system, and to promote access for people who are unhappy about the assessment to —

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 30 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Lunn: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the start of Question Time last Monday, Basil McCrea made a point of order about the selection of questions for Question Time. Correctly, you said that that issue was not the business of the Speaker's Office. In his comments, Mr Basil McCrea queried the integrity of Assembly staff. He said:

"We have been assured that the selection of questions is a random process. Clearly, it cannot be". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p108, col 2*].

He also said:

"four, five or six of the first six questions are regularly asked by the party to which the responding Minister belongs. There is something not right. I am not saying that something is wrong, but something is not right." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p108, col 2*].

Assembly staff will be concerned about those comments. Did Mr Basil McCrea breach any of the rules of the House when he made those comments? Would it be appropriate to give him the opportunity in the House to retract his comments? If he was not accusing Assembly staff, who was he accusing?

Mr Speaker: I accept the Member's comments, and there are several issues to address. First, Mr Basil McCrea has already visited the Business Office and looked at the procedure that is used for selecting questions for Question Time. Secondly, I have examined his comments in the Hansard report, and Mr Basil McCrea has not broken any rules. However, I remind all Members to be careful about the language that they use in the House and not to identify officials from the Assembly or elsewhere.

I repeat that the Speaker's Office has no hand whatsoever in the random ballot for the selection of questions to the House.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I assume that the Business Office's invitation to Whips to witness the selection process for questions, which was open to every party, still stands.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for her point of order. I not only encourage Whips, but all Members, to visit the Business Office to see the procedure for selection of questions to the House. I hope that more Members will do so and will, therefore, have a better understanding of how questions to Ministers are selected.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pneumoconiosis, etc., Regulations 2008

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

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, be affirmed.

The regulations are made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, which provides lump-sum compensation payments to be made to sufferers of certain dust-related diseases or to the dependants of sufferers.

The diseases that are covered by the Order can take a long time to develop and may not be diagnosed until 20 or 40 years, or even longer, after exposure. By that time, the employer who is responsible may no longer be in business, and sufferers and their dependants can experience great difficulty in obtaining civil compensation. The 1979 scheme was designed to assist employees who had little realistic chance of pursuing civil compensation through the courts because, for example, the former employer had ceased doing business.

Mesothelioma, which is a fatal disease that is caused by exposure to asbestos, is one of several diseases that are covered by the 1979 scheme. It is a particularly unpleasant disease for which there is no known cure; a person's life expectancy from the time that the disease is diagnosed can be short.

In Northern Ireland, mesothelioma causes up to 50 deaths each year. Although the 1979 scheme has been beneficial, it covers only employees who are in receipt of industrial-injuries disablement benefit. Therefore, it cannot assist self-employed workers or people who have contracted mesothelioma from contact with the work clothes of a relative who worked with asbestos. That is one reason why I brought the Mesothelioma, etc., Bill before the Assembly in May 2007. I was pleased by the support for the Bill from all sides of the House.

From 1 October 2008, the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 breaks the link to workplace exposure to asbestos. The mesothelioma scheme provides for a lump-sum payment to be made to sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma within a matter of weeks of diagnosis. In effect, that means that sufferers of mesothelioma will be eligible for payment, whether they are employees, self-employed or, indeed, have never worked, provided that they have not already received a compensation payment from another source — for example, through a civil claim under the 1979 scheme.

In line with the 1979 scheme, the amount of money that is paid in a lump sum under the mesothelioma scheme is based on the person's age at diagnosis. Those diagnosed with mesothelioma earlier in life will receive more.

During the passage of the Mesothelioma, etc., Bill, it was estimated that the average payment under the scheme to sufferers, many of whom do not currently qualify for any compensation payments, would be in the region of £6,000. The introduction of a compensation-recovery process will meet the cost of the scheme.

All mesothelioma and 1979-scheme payments are to be recovered from subsequent successful civil-compensation claims. Any moneys recovered will be ploughed back into the scheme, with the aim of funding higher payments in future. The scheme's payment levels are set so that the overall expenditure matches the recoveries from civil compensation.

My Department has worked closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to secure a pooling of funds. People in Northern Ireland will receive the same rate of payment as people in Great Britain, even though we are unable to recover sufficient money here to fund that higher rate. I am pleased to advise the House that sufferers in Northern Ireland will now receive, on average, a higher than originally estimated payment of £10,000. That is yet another example of the benefits of the parity arrangements. It is important that the Assembly affirm this piece of compassionate legislation.

The mesothelioma scheme is to be self-financing; therefore, the level of payments will be determined by what can be afforded out of the recoveries from civil damages. The intention is that payments under the scheme will be increased over time, up to the same level as those payments made under the 1979 scheme, which currently average around £18,000. When that happens, a person with mesothelioma will receive the same amount, whether that is under the mesothelioma scheme or the 1979 scheme.

The Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 provides that a person is not entitled to a payment under the mesothelioma scheme if he or she has received a payment under the 1979 scheme. However, until payments under both schemes reach the same levels, if a lump-sum payment has been made under the mesothelioma scheme, and it is subsequently discovered that a higher payment under the 1979 scheme is appropriate, the regulations provide for a balancing payment to be made. That ensures that no one who is entitled to a payment under the 1979 scheme is worse off because he or she has already received a payment under the mesothelioma scheme.

The regulations will ensure that people will receive cash in the remaining months of their lives, and they will remove sufferers' concern for their dependants' future. It is a compassionate piece of legislation.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): The Committee considered the Department's proposal to make the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland)

2008 at its meeting on 26 June 2008 and considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 11 September 2008. As Members are aware, the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 introduced a new compensation scheme for the sufferers, or the dependants of sufferers, of certain serious dust-related diseases.

The Committee reviewed carefully the regulations that provide compensation for the tragic sufferers of those life-threatening diseases. Members will agree that although no amount of money can compensate for the misery and suffering that conditions such as pneumoconiosis cause, the amounts payable must offer some assistance to sufferers and their dependants.

The regulations recognise that payments under the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 are appropriate and allow for the reduction of certain other payments made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979.

I assure Members that the Committee for Social Development considered the statutory rule fully and recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

10.45 am

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I reiterate what other Members said. Given the nature of pneumoconiosis and mesothelioma, it is essential that proper and adequate legislation is introduced to help people who, unfortunately, suffer from those conditions. The legislation will adequately provide some help for those people. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. I have great sympathy for people who suffer from any asbestos-related disease, such as mesothelioma. People who contract that disease, through no fault of their own, suffer so much, and that causes distress to their families. I also have sympathy for the wives and mothers of men who worked with asbestos and brought it home on their clothing; some of those people suffered as much from mesothelioma as the workers themselves.

I am delighted that the regulations are being introduced. They afford sufferers a way in which to seek compensation quickly before they die, given that the time between diagnosis and death can be very short.

Mr Armstrong: As a new member of the Committee for Social Development, I confess that I have not been privy to any of the Committee's deliberations on the matter.

It is my understanding that the measure is relatively uncontentious and reasonable and that it enjoys cross-party support. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: Like other Members, I support the motion, and I thank the Minister for tabling it. Mesothelioma and other such diseases are horrible, and they cause a great deal of pain and suffering, not just for the employees who contract them, but for their families. This is a

humane and compassionate piece of legislation that I am sure all Members will support fully.

We want to provide some comfort to mesothelioma sufferers — and their families — during their last days. I am pleased to hear the Minister announce that compensation will increase from the initial estimate of £6,000 to £10,000. I hope that, in a few years' time when the compensation scheme has grown, sufferers will receive the promised £18,000. In some way, that will help sufferers and their families.

The Minister for Social Development: I am pleased with the consensus of support for the regulations from across the Chamber. I thank Mr Simpson and the Committee for Social Development for the positive way in which they have dealt with the regulations. In fact, all Members who spoke during the debate are members of the Committee for Social Development — Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Armstrong, whom I welcome as a new member, and Ms Lo.

All those Members made the principle point that it is important that we provide not only for the tragic people who suffered from mesothelioma as a result of their direct contact with asbestos, but for their wives and children.

It is important that we provide for those people. Like Mr Simpson, I agree that nothing can account for the suffering and misery that are caused by that terrible disease. However, we should show, in some small measure, our compassion.

I trust that I have dealt with all the issues that have been raised, but I think that we are all in agreement — we all want to ensure that if a payment is made under the new mesothelioma scheme, and it is subsequently discovered that a higher payment was appropriate under the 1979 scheme, a further payment can be made so that, overall, the claimant would receive the higher amount of money. The regulations make provision for a balancing payment to be made until such time as payments are equalised under both schemes.

Although no amount of money will ever compensate individuals and families for the suffering, loss, bereavement and misery caused by mesothelioma, I believe that the new scheme will provide real and meaningful financial help at a time when it is needed most. I assure Members that I will urge my officials to expedite payments, because urgency and expedition is the order of the day when one is dealing with the suffering of so many people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, be affirmed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Accounts Committee Committee Reports

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes in which to speak.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr P Maskey): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Public Accounts Committee First Composite Report (03/08/09R) and of the following Committee Reports:

Report on the Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line (1/07R)

Report on Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics (01/07/08R)

Report on Springvale Educational Village Project (04/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy (05/07/08R)

Report on the Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects (11/07/08R)

Report on Tackling Public Sector Fraud (13/07/08R)

Report on Use of Consultants (16/07/08R)

Report on Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards (18/07/08R)

Report on Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) (20/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland Resource Accounts — Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Client Funds 2003-04 - 2006-07 (21/07/08R)

Report into Older People and Domiciliary Care (24/07/08R)

Further Report on the Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services (25/07/08R)

Report on Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error (26/07/08R)

Report on Good Governance — Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (28/07/08R)

Report on National Fraud Initiative (33/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland Tourist Board — Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited (35/07/08R)

Report on Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland: A Case Study in financial management and the public appointments process (36/07/08R)

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

The Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line (NIA 20/07-08)

Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics (NIA 63/07-08)

Springvale Educational Village Project (NIA 67/07-08)

Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy (NIA 71/07-08)

The Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects (NIA 99/07-08)

Tackling Public Sector Fraud (NIA 112/07-08)

Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards (NIA 125/07-08)

Use of Consultants (NIA 127/07-08)

Northern Ireland Resource Accounts — Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Client Funds 2003-04 — 2006-07 (NIA 136/07-08)

Older People and Domiciliary Care (NIA 176/08-09)

The Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services (NIA 187/07-08)

Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error (NIA 187/07-08)

Good Governance — Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (NIA 209/07-08)

Northern Ireland Tourist Board — Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited (NIA 16/07-08)

Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland: A Case Study in the financial management and the public appointments process.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On 15 January 2002, Mr Billy Bell, the former Chairperson of the then Public Accounts Committee, moved the very first motion that asked the Assembly to take note of the works of the Public Accounts Committee. Today, I am pleased to do likewise. Members may be concerned that this is possibly the longest motion ever brought to the House, and will also be delighted to learn that I have insufficient time in which to speak on every report or memoranda of reply. I must leave that pleasure to other members of the Committee and other Members of the Chamber.

However, it is important for me, as Chairperson of the Committee, to explain the role of the Public Accounts Committee and the contribution that it makes to a better and more efficient delivery of public services.

The Public Accounts Committee is a standing Committee of the Assembly, established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, with a relatively straightforward remit:

“to consider accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.”

Those accounts are laid by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the head of the NI Audit Office. The Comptroller and Auditor General is an officer of the Assembly and is responsible to the Assembly for the audit of central Government Departments and most of their sponsored bodies.

In my short time as the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, having taken over from my party colleague John O'Dowd earlier this year, I have come to recognise, not only the excellent work that the Audit Office does, but the quality of support that the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff provide to the Public Accounts Committee — I thank him and his staff for that help. I also thank the Committee Clerk

and his staff who work very hard in the background, week after week, making the deliberations of the members much easier, so go raibh maith agat to them.

In his speech to the Confederation of British Industry on 13 September 2007, Peter Robinson, then Minister of Finance and Personnel, said:

“We must also liberate those in the public sector who are being asked to play a role in assisting economic growth. There is an important scrutiny role for the Public Accounts Committee to play, but this must not stifle innovation or on occasion risk-taking.”

I want to make it clear that the Committee welcomes innovation in the interests of efficiency. Departments must innovate if they are to deliver the improvements in services and efficiencies that we all want to see. The Committee, therefore, fully supports risk-taking in the public sector, provided — and this is an important qualification — that it is well thought through and well managed.

I would now like to move on to talk briefly about some of the achievements of the Public Accounts Committee.

Just last week, the Committee issued its first composite report on matters dealt with by correspondence. The matters related to reports produced by the Audit Office during the suspension of the Assembly and not reported on by the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster. The Committee covered such issues as incorrect claims for prescription charges and electronic libraries. I understand that copies of the Committee’s report were made available to all Members.

We are fortunate that standards in the public sector here are high. Occasionally, issues have emerged that show that we cannot take our high standards for granted. The Committee has made it clear to the Audit Office that it will continue to give a high priority to dealing with cases of fraud or impropriety. We have already dealt with, and reported on, a number of such cases and incidents, which will always be on top of the Committee’s agenda as and when they arise.

One such case, which happened to be in my constituency, was the Springvale Educational Village Project, which was promoted by the University of Ulster and the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, now Belfast Metropolitan College. The Department for Employment and Learning was the main provider of funding, and the project was to build a main campus, an applied research centre and a community outreach centre at a cost of £71 million. However, only the community outreach centre, costing £4 million, was delivered.

The Committee’s overall conclusion was that that project failed to deliver because the Department and the University of Ulster simply lost the goodwill to succeed, despite the enormous political goodwill shown towards the project. When the university’s concerns

about governance and affordability emerged, it could have called on that goodwill, but chose not to.

The Committee found it particularly disturbing that effectively the Department did nothing to try to save the project. The Committee had serious concerns about the quality of financial planning, management and control exercised by the project’s promoters. The project appraisal process was also inadequate. The Committee found that the university behaved deplorably in its relationships with the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and the local communities. The Department appears to have acquiesced in that.

There have been only limited tangible benefits from the project, and the current levels of deprivation in west and north Belfast are as high as when the project ceased in 2002. Some £3·6 million of direct funding was wasted, and a further substantial, but unquantifiable, sum was lost in respect of the enormous amount of time and effort that was devoted to the project by local communities and various Departments and agencies.

In its memorandum of response in December 2007, the Department for Employment and Learning accepted the Committee’s recommendations and undertook to consider any potentially viable and sustainable development in order to provide new educational facilities on the Springvale site.

That particular case and report typifies what has been the bread-and-butter work of the Public Accounts Committee. However, there is also an important balance to work yet to be done by the Committee. Alongside our investigations, which have highlighted weaknesses, failings and poor practice in the delivery of public services, the Committee has undertaken work that aims to identify and promote good practice. Where possible, that type of work will play a more significant role in the Committee’s workload.

This is not a Committee that is deliberately seeking out errors and weaknesses. Instead, we believe that if the foundation for spending the public pound is based on sound governance, we will see fewer Springvale-type reports.

It was with the goal of better governance in mind that the Committee produced its report on the governance of Departments’ arm’s-length bodies. There have been well-documented failings in governance of such bodies, failings that have had a substantial negative impact on public confidence as well as on the delivery of public services and value for money.

In this context, I will mention the NI Events Company. I will not dwell too much on that matter today, but I want to assure the House that the Public Accounts Committee will return to the issue when investigations are completed.

In that report, the Committee empathises with the need for Departments to ensure that there is a strong culture of accountability in their relationships with arm's-length bodies. It is not sufficient simply to have the right structures of governance in place. Though important and necessary, good governance must be delivered in practice.

The Committee's recommendations were clear and practical, for Departments and for arm's-length bodies. They covered issues such as the work of membership of audit committees, the scope for departmental representation on the boards of arm's-length bodies, and the important role played by independent, non-executive board members. The Committee also highlighted the need for appropriate training of staff in Departments and in the arm's-length bodies, and the need for robust internal audit and risk-management processes.

I am pleased to inform Members that the response to the recommendations in the report was very positive, with all 17 being accepted.

11.00 am

In recent years, progress has been made on the provision of guidance on good governance, but it is clear that the Department of Finance of Personnel (DFP) must play a more significant role in ensuring that such guidance is not only issued but implemented and that good practice is highlighted for others to follow. The message from the report is clear: to avoid the reoccurrence of costly failures that have resulted from poor governance, it is vital that good practice and lessons from failures are shared and adopted across the public sector. The Committee looks to DFP to demonstrate its commitment through its actions.

I draw Members' attention to the Committee's innovative report on the fraud initiative — the NFI. The initiative is innovative in that it is the first time that the Committee produced a report that is not based on an Audit Office report. We produced that report because we felt that we had to show our support for and recommend participation in the fraud initiative.

The NFI is based on data matching, which compares the extent to which computer records that are held by one body match those that are held by that or another body. Computerised data-matching techniques are then used to narrow the search for duplicate or fraudulent claims that are made to those bodies. A body that supplies data receives a report identifying instances of matching data in that body's own records and in those of relevant organisations.

Some 1,500 bodies participated in the most recent exercise. Overall, NFI has helped participants to detect fraud and overpayments in excess of £400 million. The result of the 2004-05 exercise identified over £111 million of fraud and error, and the indications are that the results

of the most recent exercise will show a substantially higher amount.

To date, participation of the Northern bodies has not been as extensive as that of those in Britain, but that is changing. The Serious Crime Act 2007 came into force on 6 April 2008, and under that Act, the Comptroller and Auditor General has been given powers to conduct data-matching exercises for the purposes of assisting in the prevention and detection of fraud. Anyone whose accounts are required for auditing by the Comptroller and Auditor General or by a local government auditor will be subject to mandatory participation in the data-matching exercise. The Act also includes provision for voluntary participation.

Given that the Audit Office is required to comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, a code of practice sets out the responsibilities of the Comptroller and Auditor General and participating bodies, addressing such issues as governance arrangements, fair processing, quality of data, security arrangements and disclosure of data.

The Audit Office plans to begin its first data-matching exercise, which, in practice, will be undertaken by the Audit Commission on behalf of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I should inform Members that in October 2008, the Assembly will take part in that exercise, and details of the Assembly secretariat and Members will be used in a national data-matching exercise. If anyone is doing anything that may be questionable, now is the time to do something about it.

The Committee welcomes the close working relationship between DFP and the Audit Office in addressing fraud issues. DFP has highlighted to Departments that resources will have to be allocated to checking out matches that arise in that exercise. DFP has held conferences for public-sector bodies and has raised those issues at regular meetings with accounting officers and board members.

The Committee views NFI as a key tool in the armoury against fraud and error. The potential savings are considerable, and added to those must be the potential savings that will be attained through discouragement of those who would want to defraud the system, knowing that they would be more likely than ever to be caught.

The NFI is not only about fraud and error; it will identify incidences in which underpayments of benefits or other entitlements may have been made. That aspect of NFI is to be welcomed as much as its other elements, and it is equally important.

I thank Members, and I look forward to hearing their contributions to the debate. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I should point out that I am conscious that several Members have approached the Table to say that

the five minutes that have been allocated are not enough for them to speak to the motion.

All sides of the House should be aware that the Business Committee discusses motions and decides, on occasion, to allocate more time for particular debates. Despite that, Members normally have only five minutes in which to speak.

The Business Committee unanimously agrees the timing of each motion. If Members feel strongly about a particular motion and need more time to speak, it is vital that they channel those issues through their Whips for discussion at future Business Committee meetings.

Mr Shannon: Aa'd laek tae turn tae tha fraud in tha publick sector. Fraud isnae á victimless wrang as is sae aftin painted.

Tha monies stolen fae tha publick sector purs in Norlin Airlan er á waest ó publick resources. This means poorer public services an heigher than whuts needed taxes. Sae eech an invy yin ó us suffer at tha hans ó fraudsters.

Although fraud in the public sector is often portrayed as a victimless crime, it is not. Money stolen from the public-sector purse in Northern Ireland is a massive waste of public resources and leads to poor public services and higher taxes. Therefore, we all suffer at the hands of fraudsters. Those reasons underline why public-sector fraud cannot be tolerated.

Departments and the bodies that they support must demonstrate a zero-tolerance policy and tackle all forms of fraud aggressively. The Public Accounts Committee held several meetings on the issue of fraud, the first of which related to internal fraud in the accounts branch of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI), which, at that time, was an executive agency in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. OSNI is now part of the newly formed Land and Property Services; that may warrant a two-hour debate at a later date.

The fraudster stole £70,690 in a five-year period between 1998 and 2003. The Committee discovered that the nature of the fraud was not particularly sophisticated and was, mainly, due to serious shortcomings in the control environment that included inadequate segregation of duties and supervision failures. The Public Accounts Committee submitted several recommendations that were accepted by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

First, the Committee recommended that Departments establish mechanisms to ensure that the fraud forum's advice and guidance are systematically circulated to all subsidiary bodies. Secondly, the Committee highlighted the need for the Department of Finance and Personnel to undertake a stocktaking exercise across the wider public sector to assess the availability of trained, front-line investigation staff and to devise a strategy to fill any skills gaps that are identified. Thirdly, the

Committee recommended the need for greater emphasis on whistle-blowing in order to identify potential fraudulent activity, and the Department has initiated further work in that area.

The review's most significant impact will be the introduction of new data-sharing and data-matching powers provided under the Serious Crime Act 2007. The Committee asked to be consulted on the protocols for data matching and held a meeting in April 2008 that heard evidence from the Comptroller and Auditor General and Mr Peter Yetzes of the Audit Commission. In May 2008, the Committee published its report, and members understand that a data-matching exercise is under way. Incidentally, as a result of that report, the stolen £70,690 was returned to the Department.

Given that our predecessors had examined road safety in 2000, the Public Accounts Committee was keen to continue that work. Poor driver behaviour is the main cause of collisions, and, therefore, the Committee focused on a range of measures to tackle that issue. During that session, a precedent was set; the PSNI accepted our invitation and explained its strategy to deter and detect those who endanger their own safety and that of other road users. The Committee highlighted the need to tighten existing regulations for motorcycle instructors and motorcyclist training, which were much less stringent than systems applied to learner drivers and driving instructors.

The Committee underlined the need for urgent implementation of improvements because we discovered a 200% increase in motorcyclist numbers and a 50% increase in motorcyclist casualties in the past decade. That is a shocking statistic.

In addition, with drivers in the 17- to 24-year-old age group accounting for a disproportionately high percentage of road casualties, we concluded that the review of the restricted-driver scheme and its speed limit of 45 mph — which was scheduled for 2003 — was long overdue. In tandem with that review, we urged the Department of the Environment to evaluate a range of initiatives that are used in other parts of the world — such as logbooks for learners and graduated driving licences for novice drivers — and assess their suitability as a means of reducing Northern Ireland's unacceptably high casualty rates.

The Committee was pleased to note the Department's assurances that we will be kept abreast of relevant developments worldwide, with a view to introducing new initiatives in Northern Ireland where appropriate. The Committee also considered that it was imperative for the PSNI to improve its performance in the detection and processing of speeding offences.

In conclusion, the Committee believes that it has made a number of important recommendations to encourage responsible Departments and agencies to be

more ambitious and more innovative in their efforts to improve road safety in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: If that happens, we can take heart that the Committee played a direct and tangible role in making things better.

Mr Beggs: At the outset, I stress that five minutes is not adequate time in which to deal with this issue. The Public Accounts Committee reports once a year to the Assembly on its work, so more than five minutes each should have been allocated to those Members who wish to speak.

I pay tribute to the work of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee staff, who provide us with support and enable us to carry out our work. The Public Accounts Committee is different from other Assembly Committees because we are assisted by the multimillion pound Northern Ireland Audit Office and the expertise of its staff. Its reports provide a starting point for our work, and we are guided by it as we enter our deliberations.

Another way in which the Committee is slightly different is that ordinary citizens are provided with a great deal of clarity when they listen to the outcomes of our work. That is because the Committee frequently investigates how money has been squandered and how lessons must be learned for the future so that better use is made of taxpayers' money. As MLAs, we all receive stick about what we do up on the hill. When I refer to some of the issues that I have contributed to in the Public Accounts Committee, I feel that I have helped to make a difference by making better use of taxpayers' money, rather than being a burden on taxpayers.

Without devolution, we would not have the same degree of scrutiny. Past failings must be learned from so that they are not repeated. It has been a busy period as the Public Accounts Committee has met on a weekly basis, rather than on a fortnightly basis, as was previously the case. Some 18 reports have been scrutinised and completed during the period in question; it has been quite a busy time for Committee members and staff.

It must be remembered that there was not the same level of scrutiny during direct rule. In Northern Ireland, there were no directly elected representatives who would be accountable to their electorate, and there was only a limited role for local government. A void existed because the Westminster Public Accounts Committee considered only one or two reports from Northern Ireland annually, because it also has to deal with the other parts of the United Kingdom. It is important that the work of the Public Accounts Committee is recognised, good practice is continued and lessons are learned.

Given the limited speaking time that is available, I will comment briefly on two reports — 'Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics'; and 'Older People and Domiciliary Care'. Missed appointments cost the public purse a significant amount of money, as all the staff are present and the patient does not turn up. Alternatively, it is stressful for a patient to be invited to a clinic and to turn up, only for the appointment to be cancelled due to issues regarding the administration of the Health Service. In recent years, £259 million has been spent on secondary medical care and outpatient clinics. It is important that that money is well spent.

During the course of our deliberations, the Committee noted that a significant number of those outpatient clinics were not being monitored as they were non-consultant-led and accurate data were not being compiled.

Therefore, we recommended that trusts produce annual reports to analyse the root causes of cancellations and the demographics of non-attendance in order that further lessons might be learned and built on, and that was taken up in a memorandum of response.

11.15 am

Given the difficulties that MLAs witness among their constituents, the subject of older people and domiciliary care is dear to us all. Recently, the matter became personal to me when my grandfather entered a period of ill health. It is important that we ensure that the best possible service is available.

In the course of reviewing 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', the matter arose of the non-implementation of the fourth capitation formula review, which has adversely affected my constituents in East Antrim.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dallat: It falls to me to deal with two types of consultants: those who manage our operating theatres, and the people who are sometimes accused of picking the brains of our best civil servants, putting that information in glossy folders, and sending us the bill. I will talk about the second group later.

A key factor in the overall use of hospital resources in Northern Ireland is the extent to which hospital operating theatres are used and managed efficiently and effectively. Decisions about the use of operating theatres are directly related to the availability of hospital staff and beds and to the volume and nature of emergency cases.

In July 2007, the Public Accounts Committee wrote to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety asking for an update on its progress in responding to the Committee's previous inquiries. Subsequently, the Committee's report focused on four main points: waiting lists and waiting times; spare

capacity in operating theatres; the cancellation of operations; and computerised theatre-management information systems.

Although we found that high waiting lists for operating theatres had been significantly reduced since the original report was published in 2005, planned theatre sessions still only account for two thirds of theatre capacity. Therefore, we called for further action to reduce theatre-usage downtime.

We commended the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for using consultants to act privately to help to clear backlogs among those waiting for operations. In addition, we welcomed the Department's assurance that appropriate costing methods would be used to ensure that the full cost of that activity would be recovered.

Although we recognise that cancellations are sometimes unavoidable, we believe that the current 5% cancellation rate is far too high, a direct result of which is that £6.4 million of resources have been wasted or not used to best effect. I am sure that Members will agree that that is unacceptable.

Finally, concerning hospital theatres, the computerised theatre-management information system was originally planned to come into operation in 2006. We are still waiting for it. Indeed, it will not be fully implemented until March 2009. That system will be crucial to the programme's management.

Turning to my second type of consultant, the Committee met on 16 November 2007 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the use of external consultants by Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments. Given the increasing level of consultancy spending by Departments — over £40 million annually — we were disappointed to discover that such expenditure has not always been well managed and that best practice has not been adhered to throughout the public sector. That is extremely annoying.

Our report focused on the need to control and manage future consultancy expenditure through improved collaboration between Departments and through the increased use of collective purchasing power. In addition, we produced proposals to identify and meet skills gaps throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Those approaches should contribute to reducing future consultancy expenditure.

I believe that there are a lot of untapped skills in the Civil Service. The Committee is pleased that DFP will improve how it keeps records and monitors contracts. We also welcome DFP's commitment to produce an annual report on the extent to which Departments comply with requirements to undertake business cases, to put contracts out to competitive tender, and to conduct post-project evaluations.

The award of consultancy contracts must be open and transparent. The Committee welcomes the Department of Finance and Personnel's agreement — given in response to our report — that perceptions of conflicts of interest must be eliminated. That is an area in which the Committee strongly endorses transparency. It is further welcomed that DFP will use databases to record assessments of consultants' performances. Doing so will help to identify poorly performing consultants and, where appropriate, exclude them from future public-sector contracts. DFP's overall response to the Public Accounts Committee's report was very encouraging.

I congratulate myself for finishing my contribution in five minutes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: I endorse the comments on the five-minute rule made by Members earlier in the debate. I have been asked to speak about 'Report on Northern Ireland Tourist Board: Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited'.

Although the relevant Committee session was good, it illustrated what could go wrong when a conflict of interest was not declared or properly managed. Good governance in public-sector bodies has been an important theme of the Committee's work. The Public Accounts Committee and the public expect Government bodies to apply high standards to the administration of expenditure. Therefore, a failure to declare conflicts of interests undermines public confidence in the standards of public administration. The report states that achieving such standards should not be difficult; it is a basic principle of good public administration.

The Rural Cottage Holidays case was one of a string of conflicts of interest with which the Committee has dealt; it proved an important case study, and provided valuable lessons in how to deal with such conflicts. Our report makes clear that it is fundamentally important that chief executives of public bodies provide clear leadership on ethical issues. Those chief executives must recognise the dangers of conflicts of interest and get to grips with them when they come to light.

The Committee was often astounded by the failure of Departments or their sponsored bodies to properly deal with conflicts of interest. It appears that even such simple procedures can be made complicated. The Committee Chairperson and Mr Dallat have said that the debate will return to that issue.

The Committee's work on Rural Cottage Holidays showed the value of probing officials. It brought to light what can go wrong when the public sector dabbles in commercial activities. Onerous financial commitments remain because a small number of cottage owners secured a very good deal from the Tourist Board. The inquiry highlighted the dangers of being overly optimistic in assessing projects, and the

importance of preparing an exit strategy for when things go wrong. The Committee has requested that it be kept advised by the Department on its progress towards ending this drain on taxpayers' money. The Public Accounts Committee's continued interest may help to secure a long-overdue conclusion to what turned out to be a bad use of public funds.

I turn now to 'Report on Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards'. The Public Accounts Committee decided to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the subject because it was a long-running scheme involving significant public funding, and which had a potential impact on front-line education services.

The programme started in January 1995 and is still running. Originally introduced for all non-manual staff in the education and library boards, it was later extended to include all manual posts. At the time of the Public Accounts Committee's report, it had cost at least £124 million, and it was estimated that a further £5 million would be needed to complete the exercise. By then, it will probably be time to start again.

Among the main lessons identified in the Public Accounts Committee review was the need for strong project management from the outset, which should include clarity about the timescale of the process, the setting of target dates, ongoing monitoring, and regular reporting and feedback

In its reply to the Committee, the Department of Education stated that it recognised fully that the effective management of projects was an essential element of resource control, and it confirmed that it has in place robust, proactive systems for project management, which include the establishment of agreed time frames and clear lines of responsibility. The Department also undertook to write to bodies that it sponsors to stress the need to have effective project-management structures in place, and it confirmed that the new education and skills authority will apply similar project-management disciplines.

The Committee felt that there was no excuse for the Department of Education's failure to put in place proper financial management measures at the start of the scheme. We sought assurances from the Department that, in future, the financial impact of major schemes will be properly assessed and planned. In response, the Department stated that it continues to apply and follow relevant DFP guidance and that that will ensure that, should any schemes be undertaken by either the Department or one of its sponsored bodies, the financial impact will be assessed and planned for right from the start. We regard that as a very satisfactory response.

Given the scale of the job-evaluation exercise and the level of funding involved, the Committee was disappointed to find that the scheme was not linked to

a proper efficiency process, as was originally intended. In response, the Department —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to an end.

Mr Lunn: I will stop there.

Mr Craig: I wish to speak about the 'Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error' report. Members will be aware that the Committee has a particular interest in ensuring that fraud and financial error in public funds is tackled robustly and reduced. This year, the Committee probed those important issues during its investigation of the social security system.

It was satisfying to hear from the heads of the Department for Social Development and the Social Security Agency that a strategy for tackling benefit fraud and error had been in place for some time and, more importantly, was having some success. However, the Committee was unable to accept the agency's assertion that it will struggle to maintain, let alone improve on, the level of benefit fraud and error detection.

I am sure that Members will agree that although the agency faces some major challenges, the overpayment of £60 million and the underpayment of £22 million to customers in the 2006-07 financial year showed a disappointingly high level of fraud and error in the system. The agency requires meaningful information about the levels of benefit fraud and error that exist. Indeed, the Committee, the House and the taxpayers expect it. The agency accepted a range of recommendations aimed at producing fuller analysis and reporting of information on fraud and error.

Although the Committee recognises the complexity of the benefit system and the good work that is carried out by agency staff, it has sought further initiatives to strengthen training and support for front line staff to improve the accuracy and the standards of benefit processing. It is unacceptable that approximately £28 million — almost half the total sum lost as a result of fraud and error — is lost due to internal staff error. Customer error accounts for approximately £14 million of the total. That means that £18 million is lost as a result of fraud, and that amounts to just under 0.5% of the entire social security budget.

Therefore, it is clear that serious issues must be dealt with, particularly in relation to staff awareness about how to deal with such problems. In response to that situation, the agency will target areas for improvement at both individual and organisational level. It will monitor the outcome of those initiatives in order to measure the effectiveness of its efforts.

The Committee also made a wide range of recommendations aimed at maximising the use of scarce resources in fraud investigation. For example, targets and the performance measurement of investigation

activity must be reviewed, and the number of sanctions for benefit fraud must be maximised.

The type of fraud being committed must also be reviewed and analysed, and action plans drawn up to address those issues. Indeed, the agency has accepted the need for those improvements.

11.30 am

The Committee's report included 22 recommendations, and the response was largely positive with all recommendations except one being adopted. That exception related to addressing and publishing levels of fraud and error in each of the agency's six districts. The Committee felt that that should form the basis for enabling better targeting of its counter-fraud and error-reduction activities. In the agency's view, that would require a significant increase in resources and it felt that it would be better to develop its existing risk assessments to address the issue.

That response was disappointing to say the least. The Committee remains of the view that information on the types of fraud, and where they occur, would help the agency to deploy its resources more effectively and enable it to demonstrate that it is doing so.

The Committee expects tackling benefit fraud and error to remain a priority for the Department and the agency. Such a strategy is vital in ensuring that taxpayer's money is not wasted and that those who are entitled to benefits get that to which they are entitled.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have the same difficulty as other members of the Committee with respect to the five-minute time limit for the debate today. Therefore, I will move on quickly.

My focus is the Committee's investigation and subsequent 'Report on the Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line'; the first report to be completed by the Committee following restoration. It was an important first for the Committee as it enabled the Assembly — through the members of the Committee — to hold senior officials to account for what was, by any standard, a poorly delivered project.

It was a local project that would have, in all likelihood, fallen beneath the radar of the Westminster Public Accounts Committee. Therefore, from the outset, we were sending out a message that devolution was going to make Departments more accountable to its elected representatives.

The Committee's report highlighted a number of key failures in the management of the project by the Department for Regional Development and its arm's-length body Translink. For example, we highlighted the lack of appropriate control and oversight by the Department. There was an overspend of almost £20 million on the project. In fact, the final spend was almost £34 million from an initial budget of £14.7

million. That overspend was caused by an inadequate initial economic appraisal that seriously underestimated the cost of delivery and specifications of the work that needed to be done. It was amplified by the Department's failure to insist on a reappraisal when it became apparent that the budget would be exceeded.

The project concerned the upgrading of a railway track that was approximately 11.5 miles long and which had 11 stations on it. The original specification expected trains to be able to travel at speeds of up to 90 mph, and that travelling time for commuters would be reduced by up to two minutes. That led one to ask whether it could ever have been achieved, and one can see that there were issues that the Assembly could bear down upon on behalf of the public purse and the public interest.

In taking evidence, the Committee was very critical of Translink as it was clear that its governance arrangements operated way beyond normal public-sector controls. Furthermore, the Committee's report identified an appalling lack of control by Translink of contract variations — that is, amendments to the scheme as it progressed — which was tantamount to giving the contractors a blank cheque.

As a result of Translink's poor management procedures, the public purse was made to bear excessive extra costs while the lead consultant on the project was allowed to walk away without any liability. More generally, accepted standards of corporate governance were not embedded or operating in Translink. The Committee also noted instances of excessive generosity following the retirement of a senior executive and raised concerns that board members had failed to exercise their function and responsibility in relation to the project.

The Committee made a series of recommendations aimed at improving departmental control and oversight. Recommendations were also suggested to improve Translink's ability to undertake and manage major capital investment projects and improve the effectiveness of its corporate governance arrangements.

The Committee is pleased to note that the Department has accepted the recommendations and has made formal commitments to effect improvements in those important areas. Such commitments include closer scrutiny and more robust challenge of future economic appraisals emanating from Translink.

I turn to the use of PFIs and, particularly, to the evidence session considering the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, 'Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects'. That session was important, not only because of the issue that was being dealt with, but because it was the first time that the Committee had held an evidence session in the local community. The session was convened at Wellington College, Belfast — one of the six education pathfinder projects — and the Committee appreciated the time

and the effort that the school's board of governors, principal, staff and pupils put into facilitating us.

In 1999 and 2000, five contracts were let for six education pathfinder projects. A feature of those projects was the transfer of surplus land and buildings from the public sector to the PFI operator. Following negotiation, £23 million was agreed as the value for those assets. The Committee was particularly interested in the status of Balmoral High School, which was one of the six pathfinder schools. That school closed six years after its new premises were opened in 2002. With proper foresight, that project could, and should, have been avoided.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I will indeed; I will leave it at that.

Mr Wells: I share the frustration of many Members this morning at the short time that has been allocated to each Member who wishes to speak in the debate, but I accept the Speaker's ruling that the matter should have been taken up with the Whips. In future, the Business Committee should divide the length of time allocated to a debate by the number of Members who wish to speak. I suspect that this morning's debate will collapse quickly, but many Members will have wanted to have made more in-depth contributions on what are technical and lengthy documents.

I have been on the Public Accounts Committee only long enough to attend a few meetings, so I will not pretend to be the great font of all knowledge on the reports that the Committee has issued. I am still finding my feet; I am a novice. In the past, I watched the great stalwarts of the Public Accounts Committee. Members will remember Seamus Close, a Member for Lagan Valley, who got uptight and angry about every penny that was spent wrongly; Jane Morrice from North Down; and, of course, Mr Dallat from East Londonderry. I watched, with interest, those three stalwarts of the Committee, and I have been impressed by the work that has been done up to now. It is hoped that my becoming a member of the Committee will not ruin its good work. I have also been impressed by the work of my colleague Simon Hamilton.

The Committee is performing a useful role. However, I was naive when I joined it, because I wondered what else could remain to be done after the Committee had completed its hard work. After all, the Committee had brought Department after Department and agency after agency into the Senate Chamber, given them a roasting and sent them away with a flea in their ear. Surely the Departments and agencies had learnt their lesson; they would implement correct procedures and we would not have any further problems. How wrong I was.

It reminds me of a friend that I had at Queen's University, 30 years ago. I will call her Eileen, for the

sake of argument. I lived on Elmwood Avenue, close to the Catholic chaplaincy. Every Saturday morning, I watched Eileen going to confession, and I wondered what happened when she got there. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me, and I stopped her one day and asked her what happened at confession. She told me that she went in and told the priest that she had smoked, drunk, chased men, disobeyed her parents and been lazy and slovenly, and then she asked for forgiveness. I said that that was great, but I wanted to know what happened next. She told me that she was granted absolution. Then I asked her what would happen next week, and she told me that she would go in and tell the priest that she had smoked, drunk, chased men and disobeyed her parents.

To some extent, that is what happens with Departments — they come before the Public Accounts Committee and get a grilling; the Committee exposes their mistakes; the Departments go away in sackcloth and ashes; and, a few years later, they return before the Committee because they have done the same thing as they were doing five years earlier. They never learn their lessons.

Why is this important? Mitchel McLaughlin has mentioned the Northern Ireland Railways contract for the Bangor to Belfast railway line — a project on which £20 million was wasted. For years, I have been campaigning for a Ballynahinch bypass. That £20 million would have built me two Ballynahinch bypasses, and left some change for the ribbon.

Unfortunately, that money is out of the public budget for transport and it is gone for ever. That lesson should have been learnt, but I suspect that it will come up time and time again.

We have seen the same problems crop up and the same issues remain unresolved, and they come back to haunt Departments. Such issues include the lack of accountability and the lack of control over arm's-length bodies — and we saw that clearly with the Northern Ireland Events Company. I am glad that the former Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure Mr Poots brought that situation to heel immediately.

There was a debacle with Rural Cottage Holidays Ltd, where the lack of control by arm's-length bodies allowed that company to get away with what it wanted. I suspect that the Public Accounts Committee will have a lot of work to do over the next few years, and I look forward to that. I hope that we will reach the stage where lessons will be learnt and where we will not have to come before the Assembly. At least the Executive can say that little, if any, of the examples that were reported on happened during their watch. The situation will become more interesting as we bring our own Ministers before the Committee to justify their decisions while in office. I hope that that will be seldom, but I suspect that I will be wrong.

Mr Burns: I will not dwell on any confessions.

A Member: We would be here all day. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Burns: I have not been a member of the Public Accounts Committee for very long, as I joined in March. However, since then few good-news stories have come before the Committee. I have been shocked by the mismanagement of public finances. I commend the work of the Public Accounts Committee for highlighting the waste of public-sector money. I am glad that the motion has been tabled, and I will talk briefly about some of the reports mentioned.

The problem common to all the reports appears to be bad procurement, which leads me on to the subject of the Belfast to Bangor railway line, which was referred to by Mitchel McLaughlin and Jim Wells.

I am a keen user of public transport, and I would like to see the railway line between Antrim and Lisburn reopened and, ideally, in public ownership. That railway line would service Belfast International Airport. However, we have to compete for the money for that line alongside the backdrop of what happened on the Belfast to Bangor railway line — and the report into the upgrade of that line makes for bad reading. The project was a disaster and ended up costing double the original estimate, with a massive overspend, bad management of wages, poor performance by consultants, a lack of written contracts and poor bookkeeping. At the end of the day, the people just walked away after overspending by millions of pounds. No money was ever recovered from the contractors who messed up the project and the intended benefits were never realised. The original specification of a 90 mph speed limit had to be reduced to 70 mph. However, no one was held accountable.

Lessons must be learnt. People cannot come to the Public Accounts Committee with a project that will cost so many million pounds, start the project and then run short of money. Nevertheless, when such projects are started, they must be finished, and so contractors ask those in charge of Northern Ireland's finances for another £10 million to finish their project because so much money has been spent already. A report will then come before the Public Accounts Committee. That is not good enough and falls far short of what should be happening. We should never get involved in a situation similar to that of the upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor railway line.

11.45 am

In its 'Report on Use of Consultants', the Public Accounts Committee highlighted the spend on consultants, which has doubled to £42 million in the past five years. Indeed, Mr Dallat referred to the difference between medical consultants and those who send a bill for information that they have been given by civil servants. Money has been splashed about like

water. Nobody is accountable — it is the land of the consultants and the reports.

The findings of the 'Report on Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error' were also disappointing. The report indicated that levels of fraud and error were high. There have been both underpayments and overpayments, and half the overpayments were due to staff error. That means that people who are entitled to benefits, particularly the elderly, may not have been receiving their benefits.

Other reports revealed the need for computer systems to be updated. The outdated systems that are currently in use are a recipe for disaster. I commend the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee for tabling the motion, and I am committed to the Committee's work.

Mr Hamilton: Until a few weeks ago, I had been a member of the Public Accounts Committee from its inception last year. Committee members and others may have thought that I would disappear but, to borrow a phrase, I "haven't gone away, you know". I thank both Chairpersons under whom I served during my time on the Committee. I also thank my former Committee colleagues, from all parties. I especially thank the Committee staff, who do an excellent job, and the staff of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, who are friends and colleagues of the Committee.

It is a good Committee that works well, and its members — irrespective of their party affiliation in the Chamber — come together to deal impartially and dispassionately with the serious issues that face them. I enjoyed my time on the Committee. We undertook an extremely busy workload over those 18 months, and the numerous reports that are mentioned in the motion are evidence that the Committee's busy workload will continue.

Other Members who have spoken provided a flavour of some of the reports, which cover a broad range of themes including: conflicts of interest; fraud; gross overspends; and delivering better public services more efficiently. The Public Accounts Committee has made many — probably hundreds of — sensible recommendations. By and large, those recommendations are accepted by the relevant Departments, and I hope that lessons will be learned from that. It is difficult to gauge the success of the Committee at this stage; that will be judged later.

I will not dwell on the details of the reports; I will leave that to current Committee members. The Public Accounts Committee has a very serious and important role to play, especially at a time of budgetary considerations and tight finances when everyone is seeking value for money. In the past 18 months, the Committee has had to deal with the mess that was left by direct rule. It is

only now that attention is being given to the errors and faults of the period of devolution.

Not for a second would I advocate the Public Accounts Committee's future role being one that turns away from mistakes that have been made since devolution — far from it. It will always be essential to examine overspends, frauds, conflicts of interest and the improvement of service delivery. Those issues will always exist, and there will always be a need for the Public Accounts Committee to come down hard on whatever Department is making errors. The purpose of the Public Accounts Committee should always be to ensure that lessons are learned; the Committee should never dispense a kicking for kicking's sake.

Reflecting on my time on the Public Accounts Committee, the highlights were when the Committee was working in full flow.

Mr Durkan: The Member suggests that the Public Accounts Committee should not indulge in blood sports with officials who appear before it. As well as insisting that the Public Accounts Committee retains its very strong role, a way to solve the problem that was highlighted by Mr Wells from South Down might be for the Public Accounts Committee to insist that a budget line be flagged for anything from one to five years. Then, when dealing with budgetary issues, the relevant departmental Committee would always know to ask whether an identified problem has been worked on. Generally, once the Public Accounts Committee has prepared a report, everyone assumes that everything will be OK from that point on. Only when a significant problem emerges later do people realise that everything is not OK. The other scrutiny Committees should be vigilant and police their Departments to ensure that the lessons have been properly learnt and that any new procedures are being properly applied.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: I am certainly not advocating that the Public Accounts Committee engage in blood sports. Now that my good colleague Jim Wells is a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am sure that blood sports are the last activities in which the Committee will engage.

Mr Durkan makes a pertinent point; a much better relationship must evolve between the Public Accounts Committee, in carrying out its very important role, and the departmental scrutiny Committees. I do not wish to dwell on my next point, but I am a member of another Committee that is examining an issue that has led to, if not a tension, a realisation that Committees must establish a much better way of working with one another so that matters can be progressed. In that way, when the Public Accounts Committee finishes dealing with an issue and sets it aside, it will not be forgotten about. The Assembly must work towards that goal.

I know, from my experience as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, that it can certainly be very entertaining when the sexy stuff emerges — the discovery of records in a skip somewhere, or the misuse and abuse of credit cards — but that does not necessarily lead to the Public Accounts Committee achieving its goals in the best way possible. Regardless of our perspective, we are all trying to build a new Northern Ireland. We are trying to rejuvenate our economy, reform our public services and deliver best value for money for everybody in our country. We cannot, on the one hand, expect innovation and new ideas from our officials, while, on the other hand, put them off striving for such innovation because of the threat of receiving a kicking from the Public Accounts Committee.

Those are the sorts of issues that the Committee, and the Assembly as a whole, must resolve before deciding exactly how we should move forward. I hope that the Public Accounts Committee will continue to play a role in ensuring good value for money and better Government for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Purvis: I will focus on two reports, the first of which is the report on the Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland (HANI). That unique report focused on standards of financial management and control of a third-party organisation, namely HANI, and the weaknesses in the public-appointments system. The Committee's overall conclusion was that that case stood out as a lesson in how not to manage a relationship with a third-party organisation, how not to operate the public-appointments process and how not to handle a major conflict of interest.

We found an astonishing catalogue of shortcomings on the part of the two Departments involved; the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee concluded that the public sector was more vulnerable to abuse than it should have been and that that situation must not be tolerated. There were widespread weaknesses in financial control within HANI, and the Department for Employment and Learning, as a primary provider of funding, was ultimately responsible for the proper stewardship of taxpayers' money.

We were astonished to find that senior departmental officials had judged the obtaining of false invoices by a HANI employee to be a case of mismanagement. Such behaviour is fraudulent and can only be intended to subvert the proper use of public funds. We were also disturbed to find that the same former HANI employee was subsequently appointed to seven public roles. Astonishingly, the Department also extended that employee's term of office on one of its most prestigious boards.

The Committee noted the extent to which many of its key recommendations relating to public appointments had been identified by its sister Public Accounts Committee at Westminster in its report on the Emerging Business Trust. We have therefore concluded that the public sector has yet to grasp fully the importance of the ethical standards that those lessons are designed to reinforce.

The former HANI employee was also involved in a major conflict of interest issue in the Events Company, a body sponsored by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee found that the Department's response to the issue was weak and ineffective. We were surprised to learn that the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments is not independent of the bodies that it regulates. The Committee believes strongly that it should be independent.

Furthermore, we were concerned to learn that there are systemic weaknesses in the public-appointments system. That is unacceptable. The continuing perception of cronyism is not compatible with the structures being established under devolution. That is an enormous challenge for the Senior Civil Service, and the Committee expects it to act urgently to establish confidence in the system.

I will now comment on the report on the Child Support Agency's client funds accounts for 2003-04 to 2006-07. The agency's failings have been well publicised over the years, but the Committee was surprised to learn the full extent of the problems. The agency's accounts have, since the agency was set up in 1993, been qualified by the Comptroller and Auditor General. One of the reasons for that ongoing qualification was that staff in the agency made many errors when first calculating the amount of child maintenance, and those errors accumulated as debt. The amounts owed were not paid, thus the figures in the accounts are incorrect.

A further complication is that the agency's IT system cannot produce an accurate list of who owes money and how much is owed. The Committee took a very critical view of that. Although the agency is dependent on its GB counterpart for IT, it was the Committee's view that the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency still had a vital role to play in resolving the IT problems. The Committee was dismayed to learn that only one in three absent parents pays any money towards the upkeep of his or her children, and it was concerned about the effect that that was having on children's lives. Child poverty is a major issue in Northern Ireland, and — shockingly — the total uncollected debts were continually rising and were in excess of £70 million. That was unacceptable to the Committee.

The Committee's view is that the agency must be faster and better at collecting money owed, and it could do more to recover money owed from people who do not pay any child maintenance. Indeed, the

statistics regarding the amount of arrears collected and prosecutions for recovery of debts were disappointing, to say the least. Therefore, the Committee encouraged the agency to make more extensive use of its powers to recover money owed and to pursue any additional powers that will help to reduce the escalating levels of debt.

Other issues included the high cost:collection ratio in comparison with GB. The Committee expects the Department to take forward our recommendations in the new child maintenance and enforcement division.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Choiste. B'fhearr liom a bheith ag labhairt anseo inniu faoi ollscoil nua i mBéal Feirste thiar darbh ainm Springvale; sin an aisling a bhí ann ag an tús. Déanann an tuairisc seo cur síos ar chuid den fháth ar scriosadh an aisling sin. Beidh níos mó le rá faoi sin.

The Public Accounts Committee's report on the Springvale educational village project makes grim and depressing reading. It is an indictment of Government Departments and of the University of Ulster, and it points up the crucial lessons that must be learnt and acted on if similar debacles are to be avoided in the future.

I commend the Committee for its work and for the way in which it has framed, clearly and concisely, its conclusions and recommendations. Regrettably, the experience of the Springvale educational village project smacks not only of incompetence but of discrimination against the working people of west and north Belfast. The greatest damage to the project was caused under a Minister from the Social Democratic and Labour Party during the previous power-sharing Executive. The Public Accounts Committee's report confirms that the most senior civil servants in the Department for Employment and Learning knew, one year before its collapse, that the University of Ulster intended to renege on its commitments to the Springvale project.

Therefore, the investment of millions of pounds of public money is wasted. That is of particular concern, given that the same civil servants who were pledging money to, and releasing finance for, the project were also undermining it.

12.00 noon

Members will know that the Springvale project was formally launched 10 years ago this month, in September 1998. The then US President, Bill Clinton, his wife, now Senator Hillary Clinton, and the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, came to the site on the Springfield Road to ceremonially turn the first sod. The promise made that day to the people of west and north Belfast — some of the most deprived communities in the whole of the Six Counties and in these islands — has never been honoured.

The Public Accounts Committee said in its report that the Department for Employment and Learning:

“failed in its role as Government’s representative on the Springvale project.”

It continued:

“The evidence clearly shows that the Department did not ensure that the project promoters had a firm grip on the viability of the project”

and that it failed to communicate properly with local communities. The Committee concluded that the Department’s monitoring process was “clearly inadequate” and described its response to the University of Ulster’s decision to pull out of the project as “weak and ineffective”.

It is not the first time that an opportunity to deliver measurable change to the lives of people most affected by conflict and by some of the most socially disadvantaged and structured discrimination has been spurned. The educational village concept was put together after lengthy consultation. It was a very democratic process, in which all sections of the local community came together to paint their vision of the joined-up approach that would give particularly disadvantaged people, such as women who had dropped out of learning, a bridge back into education.

It is unacceptable that those proposals, which those communities helped to form, were sabotaged. The Springvale experience should never be repeated. If these institutions — I am mindful of the current difficulties — are to have any credibility whatsoever, they must deliver real and progressive change for all sections of our community, but particularly for those with the greatest need.

In conclusion, I welcome the Public Accounts Committee’s call for the establishment of a significant educational facility at the Springvale site. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): This is my first Public Accounts Committee debate as Minister of Finance and Personnel; there have only been two in the history of devolution, so I am pleased to be able to respond to the debate. I have listened intently to the Members who have spoken in the debate and who have attended throughout and listened to other Members’ contributions. I have listened in particular to the members of the Public Accounts Committee, who spoke with knowledge and passion.

I acknowledge the Committee’s hard work, which is evident from the increasing number of reports that it produces. I also acknowledge the hard work of those who have taken part in the Committee’s deliberations in the previous and current mandates, as well as its Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson. I wish to add my comments to those of Members who have commended the work that the Comptroller and Auditor General and

his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office undertook in supporting the Committee.

I have heard it said that accounting officers consider an appearance before the Public Accounts Committee as their least favourite appointment of the year. I can understand why, having listened to the contributions that have been made today and having read the reports. Although it is sometimes an uncomfortable experience, it is right and proper that those responsible for spending taxpayers’ money be held accountable to the Assembly for the use of resources under their control. Scrutiny of public expenditure is in all our interests. Not only does it instil confidence in our system but it allows us to promote good practice in the management of public funds and to expose examples of the poor use of resources.

It should not stop there, however. Billy Bell, who is a former Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, recognised that its role is retrospective. He said of his evidence sessions that, in many cases, the door had opened after the horse had bolted. However, although evidence sessions are a vital part of the Public Accounts Committee’s process, in that they rightly hold public servants to account, it is the Committee’s reports, which provide us with examples of good and bad practice, from which we must learn.

An important part of the accountability process is the application of examples of good practice that are highlighted in the Committee’s reports, and the avoidance of examples of bad practice. My Department plays a key role in that process, and works closely with the Committee and the Audit Office. My Department seeks to help other Departments to improve their management and use of resources, and it circulates the Committee’s reports to accounting officers to promote good practice and to highlight lessons that should be applied across the public sector.

An example of good practice is the Audit Office report ‘Good Governance — Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm’s Length Bodies’ and the subsequent Committee report that Paul Maskey referred to when proposing the motion. The Audit Office highlighted several instances of good practice, and the Committee subsequently produced an excellent report with 17 recommendations, all of which were accepted.

In recognition of the importance of that report and the important role of arm’s-length bodies within the public sector, my Department has created a team that is headed by a senior and experienced finance official. That team will initially work with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — and subsequently other Departments — to improve and embed best practice in the sponsorship and management of arm’s-length bodies. I assure the Committee that its report will feature heavily in that work.

During his opening remarks at the first evidence session of the Public Accounts Committee after devolution in May 2007, the then Chairperson, John O'Dowd, said:

“Our purpose is to ensure that public finances are spent wisely and properly, because those finances are limited.”

Although that is indeed the role of the Committee, we are all responsible for ensuring that taxpayers' money is used economically, efficiently and effectively, and that public services are delivered to a high standard.

Since the last such debate in the House on the Committee's reports, in January 2002, the landscape of public-service delivery — never mind the political landscape — has changed dramatically, not least through our reform agenda. That landscape will continue to change. We want to deliver modern and efficient public services for Northern Ireland and, in striving to do so, we must be innovative. If we continue to do the same things in the same ways, we will continue to get the same results — and that is not good enough.

To make the progress that is required to improve our public services, our public servants must take risks and think outside the box. As Mr Hamilton said, public servants occasionally may not get it right. However, if public servants do not get it right, despite their good intentions, we should be measured in our response, rather than damning in our criticism.

It is right and proper that we hold public servants to account, but we must also allow them some latitude to be innovative and to do things differently for the benefit of our public services. Therefore, I ask the Committee and the Audit Office to consider its reports and recommendations in that light. Rules and regulations are required to guide us, but they can stifle the very progress that we all desire if they become too numerous and too onerous.

The Public Accounts Committee plays a vital role in the oversight of the public sector and the process of accountability, from the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports, to the evidence sessions, to the Public Accounts Committee's reports, and, finally, to my responses through the memoranda of reply. All of those stages of the process form a very strong framework to ensure public accountability and share lessons that have been learned.

My respect for the Committee and its work is not in question, but I ask it to accept that there will be times when I, and my ministerial colleagues, may not consider it appropriate to accept the recommendations that it makes in a report or to apply a control to the level of scrutiny that it suggests. In such circumstances, I shall consider my response carefully. I may not always be able to meet the Committee and, if it continues to have reservations in such situations, it may be appropriate for a matter to be considered further in the Chamber.

All Members want modern and efficient public services in Northern Ireland, but the harsh reality is that public finances are tight, so we are all trying to do more with less. Therefore, further improvements in our public services must be funded, to some extent, by improvements in efficiency. Two important initiatives are helping us to do that.

The first initiative is the work of the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) in the Department of Finance, which my predecessor established in 2007. As Members may be aware, PEDU has two main functions, the first of which is to examine the scope for Departments to deliver higher levels of cash, to tackle inefficiency and release resources for reinvestment, and to work with Departments on specific areas in order to ensure that resources deliver required outcomes. I am confident that, in the not too distant future, the fruits of that work will be seen in the form of increased efficiencies.

The second main function is to achieve better financial management in the public sector. I commend the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office for bringing financial-management issues, wherever they find them, to the fore. Virtually every decision that a public servant takes in a work context has a financial consequence. That is why a higher standard of financial management in the public sector is crucial, not just for accountants, but for all public servants. If high-quality public services that represent value for money are to be delivered, all public servants need the financial skills to do so.

However, that does not mean that the employment of more accountants is all that is needed, although I am sure that we all agree that they are important. Although, in the dim and distant past, numbers may, too readily, have been left to the number crunchers, times have changed. In order to make improvements in financial management that will allow the delivery of services that taxpayers, rightly, expect, the Department seeks to embed the highest standards of effective financial management in the culture of public bodies. It must be ensured that from the accounting officer to the administrative officer, all public-sector workers are not only financially literate, but are also fully aware of the financial environment in which they operate and the responsibilities that that brings.

Recently, my Department has worked with others in the public sector in order to elevate the profile of financial management. That has been done in several ways. One key element of that work has been to improve financial professionalism in public bodies. Every finance director in the 11 Departments is a qualified accountant and a member of the departmental board. I consider the development, support and encouragement of good financial-management practice in their Department to be a key role for all departmental finance directors.

In parallel, the successful implementation of Account NI, a common account and financial-reporting solution for the Northern Ireland Civil Service in four — soon to be six — Departments, represents a major achievement for the Civil Service and will provide Departments and the Executive with financial information of significantly improved quality that is used to support decision-making. Every work decision has a financial consequence. It is, therefore, important that the Department strives to embed those standards throughout the entire public sector.

I now want to respond to points that were made by Members during the debate, and to try to cover most of them in the time that remains. As well as the issue to which I referred, which was raised by the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee in his opening remarks, he also mentioned the Committee's 'First Composite Report On Issues Dealt With By Correspondence'. I was pleased to note that the Committee concluded that Departments had provided full information to support the recommendations in the reports that were the subject of its deliberations.

Mr Maskey and Mr Adams referred to the Springvale educational village project. The Department for Employment and Learning's role will be to insist that when a range of promoters co-operate on a project, all parties work in an open and transparent manner; departmental officials attend project board meetings for major or high-profile projects; and, where weaknesses are identified, departmental officials ensure that they are dealt with at an early stage. It is, therefore, absolutely vital that lessons are learned and that the Department for Employment and Learning takes forward the report's recommendations.

Mr Maskey also referred to the Committee's report on the national fraud initiative. I want to commend the Committee for the public support that it has given to that initiative and the welcoming and positive nature of its report. The national fraud initiative is a key tool in the fight against fraud and error. It has been successful in the rest of the United Kingdom and is expected to be no less so in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon raised the issue of tackling public-sector fraud generally. During the debate, he and other Members pointed out, rightly, that fraud robs us of the scarce resources that are needed to improve public services. There is already a strong anti-fraud culture in the public sector. Procedures and measures are in place that demonstrate to people who seek to defraud Government and the public that such action is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

12.15 pm

My Department will continue to work closely with others and with the Audit Office to ensure that a co-ordinated approach to fraud prevention and management is implemented across the Northern Ireland public sector.

Mr Shannon also referred to the fraud in the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI). Following that instance of fraud, all 43 internal audit recommendations were implemented by OSNI management and have been carried forward into the practice of Land and Property Services. Mr Shannon also referred to the Committee's 'Report on Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy'. Since the publication of that report, a team has been set up within the Department of the Environment's road safety division to prepare a new road safety strategy for publication in 2010.

Mr Beggs referred to the Committee's 'Report on Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics'. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is taking appropriate action to ensure that all the Committee's recommendations are fully implemented. That should ultimately lead to a shortening of waiting times for outpatient appointments, and that will be of benefit to a significant number of the people of Northern Ireland. Mr Beggs also referred to the Committee's 'Report into Older People and Domiciliary Care'. Again, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made progress on the implementation of many of the Committee's recommendations and plans to ensure full compliance with them in due course.

Mr Dallat referred to the Committee's 'Further Report on the Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services'. It is in the interests of us all that the most efficient use is made of operating theatres, and thereby a reduction in waiting lists may be achieved. The Committee has kept a watching brief on that issue. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has established key targets for both the use of operating theatres and the numbers of cancelled operations which, if achieved, will further benefit the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat and Mr Burns referred to the Committee's 'Report on Use of Consultants'. That subject evokes much media coverage and comment, and I thank the Members for their comments on how we have approached that issue. It is important, because it relates to expenditure by all Departments. My Department has listened intently to the Committee and has conducted a significant amount of work to address the Committee's concerns. Most significantly, for the financial year 2007-08 and onwards, all Departments are required to provide DFP with an annual report on their use of consultants, as Mr Dallat stated. Those reports will provide an overview of the nature and extent of consultancy expenditure for all Departments. It will allow my Department to analyse the information supplied and circulate the findings to Departments so that best practice can be shared. It will also allow my Department to address with the Department concerned any issue of non-compliance with procedures.

Mr Lunn and Mr Wells referred to the Committee's 'Report on Northern Ireland Tourist Board – Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited'. One of the key issues in that report was the handling of conflicts of interest. I agree with the Committee's central conclusion that the appropriate response to any potential conflicts of interest is that they should be identified, recorded and managed effectively. My Department will continue to ensure that the issue of conflicts of interest is given due attention in relevant training courses for public servants, and that will include specific references to the Committee's reports where appropriate.

Mr Lunn also referred to the Committee's 'Report on Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards'. I note that the Department of Education accepted the Committee's recommendations and is implementing them. The Department has written to the chief executive designate of the education and skills authority to bring his attention to a number of the Committee's recommendations.

Mr Craig and Mr Burns referred to the Committee's 'Report on Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error'. The Department for Social Development's key aim is to ensure that people who are properly entitled receive the correct benefit. From the response provided to the Committee's report, I note that both the Department and the Social Security Agency are taking a number of steps to further minimise the incidents of fraud and error. It is absolutely vital that that matter is followed up and that we ensure that people get what they are entitled to, and that those who are not entitled to benefit do not receive it.

Mr McLaughlin, Mr Wells and Mr Burns commented on 'The Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line' report; the Department for Regional Development has provided an update of the progress made on responses to the Committee's recommendations. The update confirms that significant improvements have been made about the governance and control arrangements of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and Translink, which is welcome.

Mr McLaughlin also referred to the Committee's report, 'The Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects'. The majority of recommendations emanating from that report were of a general nature, so my Department addressed them. After the publication of the Committee's report and the memorandum of reply, my Department drew a number of the Committee's recommendations to the attention of the other Departments. The key message is that, where public bodies decide to dispose of surplus assets, value for money must be clearly demonstrated as a prerequisite for DFP approval when required.

I welcome Mr Wells's joining the Committee. During his contribution, he mentioned someone whom he had met at university. When he said her name, I began to get extremely worried as to whom he was referring. [Laughter.] He said that she went to a priest to ask for forgiveness for smoking, drinking and behaving in a slovenly way, and for chasing after this, that and the other. However, he said that, after she was granted absolution, she reverted back to her bad ways. I did not think that the Civil Service had descended to those levels. I realise that Mr Wells used that only as an example of some people's recurrent and repetitive behaviour. I welcome his remarks, and I look forward to his contribution, through the Committee, and his engagement on issues with the Department.

Dawn Purvis raised some issues regarding the Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland. We all agree that proper controls must be put in place to protect public money. That should be agreed at the start of any financial relationship with a third-sector organisation to ensure the most effective balance of risk is struck between the funding body and the third-sector organisation. She also referred to the Committee's report, 'Northern Ireland Resource Accounts: Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Client Funds 2003-04-2006-07'. Since the report was published, the Child Maintenance Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which places greater emphasis on stronger and more effective enforcement, has been enacted.

I have tried to cover most of the important points that were raised during the debate. I too would have preferred if Members had been allowed more time in which speak. However, that is not a matter for the Speaker or me to address.

I look forward to continued work with the Committee in the months ahead.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts

Committee: I will not need the full 15 minutes in which to speak, because the Minister has fully summarised what Members said during the debate. It is not worth repeating those contributions.

I thank all those Committee members and Assembly Members who contributed to the debate. I also thank the Minister for his contribution and response.

Of the Members who spoke during the debate, 10 are Committee members. Committee membership changed recently, which is perhaps the reason that George Robinson did not contribute. He joined the Committee only recently, attending his first meeting last week. Therefore, at this stage, he is still getting to grips with the Committee's work. I thank the Committee members for their contributions. I found the debate helpful and positive, and I look forward to building on the strong links that have already been established with the Minister's Department.

I also mention the excellent work of the Treasury officer of accounts and thank his staff, because they act as our principal contacts with DFP.

Jim Shannon spoke about the Committee's report on the road safety strategy. He brought us on the road to an interesting debate. We covered many issues, including the Committee's report, 'The Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line', about which Mitchel McLaughlin raised considerable concerns with the Committee. That issue was highlighted on two other occasions during the debate. Thomas Burns said that there are no good-news stories in his area and that he was shocked about the issues raised in the Public Accounts Committee's reports.

I have only been on the Committee for a number of months; but as regards good-news stories, the Public Accounts Committee looks at bad practice in the past and hopes that that will be turned into the good-news story of the future. That is the importance of the Public Accounts Committee. It is our wish to turn bad-news stories and bad practice into good-news stories and good practice.

We can joke about what Mr Wells said about confession — I do not know whether Jim Wells went to confession or not, but someone behind me asked what penance he would have received if he did. Maybe he could tell us at a Committee meeting. We look forward to hearing what penance he received.

Mr Shannon: It is the Public Accounts Committee.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts

Committee: Maybe that is exactly what it is — you have been landed with us instead, Jim.

Simon Hamilton said that he has not gone away, and the Committee appreciates his contribution to today's debate. Overall, today's remarks have been very encouraging. I believe that the debate has served several purposes: the principal reason for the motion was to demonstrate to the House and reassure Members that the Public Accounts Committee is working very hard to do what it has been doing, and should be doing, on behalf of the Assembly Members. The Committee has not been found wanting when it has come to investigating instances in which public funds have not been spent as well as they could have been.

Today, the House has heard how the Committee addressed difficult issues such as the use of consultants, older people and domiciliary care, and social-security fraud and error. Members have had the opportunity to comment on our performance. However, the Public Accounts Committee does not want to be seen solely as a Committee that seeks out and criticises inadequacies in the management of public expenditure — some may say that that is too easy. We want to offer positive advice through considered recommendations.

I hope that the debate shows that the Public Accounts Committee's focus is shifting towards the scrutiny of governance issues. That is the way forward as regards real effectiveness, and if lessons are learned from that, then fewer accounting officers will be coming before the Public Accounts Committee to explain why their delivery did not match their plans.

On that point, I return to the Minister for Finance and Personnel's comments about Public Accounts Committee's reports. The Committee's reports will not stifle the work of any Departments — the reports need to be produced, and Departments need to learn from them.

Mr Adams spoke about the Springvale site, and the Minister acknowledged that there are very important issues to be learned from that report, as well as from some of the other reports.

We can all learn from the reports that have been published by the Public Accounts Committee up to now. As the Minister said, we can ensure that mistakes are not repeated. In some areas, like west and north Belfast, it is too late, because the projects have already been scuppered. That is an issue which must be addressed — I look forward to that.

Jim Wells asked how we go forward. I think it is important that we look at departmental progress 12 months after the publication of reports to see which recommendations they have accepted, and where that has taken us. It is important that these reports are not just left on the shelf, where nobody will take encouragement from them. It is of utmost importance that we learn from the reports, and the Public Accounts Committee will be looking to see which recommendations have been implemented by Departments.

Sometimes, Members may question the effectiveness of working in Committees. However, sometimes small things show that Members do make a difference. I recently read an article in the September edition of 'Agenda NI' by Brian Clerkin. He wrote about the new emphasis on accountability that is now being demanded by the Public Accounts Committee. Mr Clerkin went on to write that every accounting officer, audit committee and every head of internal audit in every public body should make sure that they read all Public Accounts Committee reports and recommendations. He suggested that a nominated member of the management team should be made responsible for disseminating the key points to the relevant managers in the organisation, and that the points raised by the Public Accounts Committee should be tested against the organisation's risk register at both corporate and operational levels.

I urge Members, particularly the Minister, to read the article, bearing in mind that if those outside the public service can recognise how the reports of the Public Accounts Committee need to be used, then there

can be no excuse for those inside the public service failing to do so.

I hope that the witnesses who have come before the Committee have found us to be challenging but fair, and determined but understanding.

Finally, I wish to say to those who will appear before the Committee in the future that we do not seek headlines through sensationalism or unfair criticism. If witnesses cannot convince us, please do not try to confuse us. I ask them to ensure that they are fully briefed, because the Committee will be. I ask them to ensure that their responses are clear and concise. If they help us to find the problems, we will help them to find the solutions. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Public Accounts Committee First Composite Report (03/08/09R) and of the following Committee Reports:

Report on the Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line (1/07R)

Report on Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics (01/07/08R)

Report on Springvale Educational Village Project (04/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy (05/07/08R)

Report on the Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects (11/07/08R)

Report on Tackling Public Sector Fraud (13/07/08R)

Report on Use of Consultants (16/07/08R)

Report on Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards (18/07/08R)

Report on Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) (20/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland Resource Accounts — Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Client Funds 2003-04 - 2006-07 (21/07/08R)

Report on Older People and Domiciliary Care (24/07/08R)

Further Report on the Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services (25/07/08R)

Report on Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error (26/07/08R)

Report on Good Governance — Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (28/07/08R)

Report on National Fraud Initiative (33/07/08R)

Report on Northern Ireland Tourist Board — Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited (35/07/08R)

Report on Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland: A Case Study in financial management and the public appointments process (36/07/08R)

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

The Upgrade of the Belfast to Bangor Railway Line (NIA 20/07-08)

Outpatients: Missed Appointments and Cancelled Clinics (NIA 63/07-08)

Springvale Educational Village Project (NIA 67/07-08)

Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy (NIA 71/07-08)

The Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects (NIA 99/07-08)

Tackling Public Sector Fraud (NIA 112/07-08)

Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards (NIA 125/07-08)

Use of Consultants (NIA 127/07-08)

Northern Ireland Resource Accounts — Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Client Funds 2003-04 - 2006-07 (NIA 136/07-08)

Older People and Domiciliary Care (NIA 176/08-09)

The Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services (NIA 187/07-08)

Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error (NIA 187/07-08)

Good Governance — Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (NIA 209/07-08)

Northern Ireland Tourist Board — Contract to Manage the Trading Activities of Rural Cottage Holidays Limited (NIA 16/07-08)

Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland: A Case Study in the financial management and the public appointments process.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Dental Care

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

Lord Browne: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review the current dental service and ensure that Health Service dental care is available to all citizens.

I thank the Minister for being in the House for the debate, particularly as this is the third debate in the House on dental care in the past year. That illustrates the importance of the subject.

In June 2007, an oral-health strategy for Northern Ireland was launched, and a report was published. Perhaps the most disturbing finding of the report is that the oral health of Northern Ireland's population is the worst in the United Kingdom. Indeed, that has been the case for many years. Therefore, the implementation of the report's constructive recommendations for dealing with that should be regarded as an urgent policy priority.

Recommendation 3.1 of the report refers to:

"Preventing caries in children, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should be a key health objective for all Boards and Trusts in Northern Ireland."

Dental caries is a disease that damages the structure of teeth. Tooth decay and cavities are consequences of caries, and, if left untreated, the disease can lead to pain, tooth loss, infection, and in a few cases, it can prove to be fatal. The largest increase in dental caries is associated with diet change.

The strategy report refers to fluoridation as:

"the most ... cost-effective and equitable way of improving population dental health".

However, given that fluoridation is a controversial matter and that its introduction may be delayed or may not come about, the report states:

"an alternative, evidence-based, regional prevention programme for caries in children should be developed and implemented as soon as possible."

The report also recognises that much of the disease burden in the Western World is related to socio-economic factors:

"Health, both oral and general, is not equally distributed within Northern Ireland but rather varies across social groupings."

Tackling those inequalities should be a priority for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Smoking is now recognised as one of the most dangerous lifestyle problems, so I am interested to know whether the Minister can confirm that a procedure is in place by which dentists can screen at-risk patients for oral cancer, which the strategy report recommends. Has the Department established partnerships with health boards and trusts to improve dental service utilisation levels among those groups with historically low levels of attendance at dentists?

The report also recommends that each health board and trust should produce an annual action plan, which should be submitted to the strategic implementation group at the beginning of each financial year. Were action plans submitted by each board and trust at the beginning of this financial year?

Information on the progress in achieving the long-term targets that are set out in the report would also prove useful to Members. For example, is the target on course for 50% of five-year-old children and 40% of 12-year-old children being free from obvious decay by 2013?

The report states:

"In 2003 almost 8,000 young children received a general anaesthetic in a hospital to have decayed teeth extracted, over 1 million courses of dental treatment were started".

Members will agree that although those figures are five years old, they are staggering and unacceptable. Up-to-date information on numbers of children receiving such treatment would be useful.

Northern Ireland has an ageing population, which will present challenges to the dental-care service in the future. It is essential to maintain dental care for that group. Access to dental care must be a priority, and the service must be planned to meet customer needs rather than to be convenient for the provider. The number of dentists per head of population is higher in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, that does not necessarily imply a fair and equitable distribution, particularly in isolated and rural areas and among society's most vulnerable individuals. Indeed, the strategic report confirms:

"the greater the proportion of dental treatment carried out privately, the more likely the distribution of practices is to be skewed towards the more affluent areas."

The Minister and Members will agree that access to dental care and treatment must be available to everyone equally. However, the report identifies sections of our community that cannot access those essential services.

For example, in some areas, individuals with special needs experience unacceptable waiting times for dental appointments. As the proportion of the population with special needs increases, it is imperative to correct that inequality as soon as possible.

On 2 July 2007, the Minister informed Members that the health boards were considering how to employ salaried dentists in areas that have experienced problems accessing services. The Minister assured Members and the public:

“all possible steps will be taken to ensure that dental treatment is available under the Health Service to those entitled to it and who wish to avail of it.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p112, col 1*].

It would be useful to learn how those schemes are progressing, particularly the launch of the salaried-dentist scheme.

The Minister is aware that dentists are leaving the National Health Service to set up private healthcare. In my constituency of East Belfast, I know of two dentists who, in recent days, have informed their patients that they will be going private from December. That has caused serious concern, particularly among senior citizens who have been part of that practice for most of their adult lives.

On 29 April, the Minister informed the House that the formulation of a new contract between health and social services boards and the dental profession has been slow. Furthermore, the House was informed that a committed Health Service dental practice receives almost £30,000 in allowances that can be used to hire staff, buy equipment or refurbish premises. Has there been any further progress on the formulation of the new contracts? Are dentists who receive almost £30,000 a year and, subsequently, decide to leave National Health Service obliged to return that money?

The British Dental Association (BDA) reported recently that dentistry in Northern Ireland has declined over the past two years. Moreover, Central Services Agency statistics show that 5,300 fewer patients were registered for Health Service dental care in September 2008 compared with September 2007. Although dentist numbers have increased in the past two years, the number of dental practices has decreased.

The importance of access to dental care for all sections of our community cannot be overemphasised. Good dental care, and the prevention of tooth decay and gum disease, is essential for good health. It is, therefore, imperative that sufficient dentists are available in all areas of Northern Ireland. I hope that many of the laudable goals that are detailed in the oral-health strategy will be achieved as soon as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I congratulate both of my colleagues for securing this very important debate. Recently, when I was talking to

a member of my constituency about access to National Health Service dental services, my constituent responded, “What access?”

In April 2008, I made a plea to the Health Minister for greater investment in dental services in Northern Ireland. I cited the most critical issue in addressing access to NHS dental services in the Province as increased funding for the infrastructure of dental services, and said that I believed that dentists want to provide up-to-date, preventative care for patients. I am committed to supporting dentists in pursuing their professional aspirations through a properly funded dental service.

Recently, it seems that announcements about further investment and funding have simply come about through recycled funding that was already in the dental budget — it did not represent any additional spending on dentistry needs from the Minister. As many as seven million people in the United Kingdom do not have access to an NHS dentist. In 1999, Tony Blair promised that all patients would have access to NHS dentistry within two years. Today, statistics show that, nationally, only four in 10 people are on the books of NHS dentists.

On 2 July 2007, the Health Minister, Mr McGimpsey, announced that he would introduce a tailor-made contract that would be better than the 2006 contract in England and Wales. The new contract in England and Wales simply saw a decline in access. In the three months following its introduction, 300,000 people lost their dentists. Over one million fewer patients have been able to access NHS dentistry in England since the introduction of the new dental contract.

Mr McGimpsey promises that we will have a better service here. However, as we have been made aware by the British Dental Association — and as happened across the water — access to NHS dental services in Northern Ireland has declined over the past two years. In September 2008, 53,000 fewer patients were registered for Health Service dental care as compared to September 2006.

In my constituency, I am told that there has been a significant drop in the number of adult patients registered for NHS dental care in the Ards community care area of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. In September 2006, 55,228 adult patients were registered. At September 2008, there are 8,880 fewer adult patients registered, leaving a total of 46,348. Thankfully, the number of children — those under 18 years of age — who are registered for dental care has stayed fairly stable.

Throughout much of the recent literature on access to dental services in Northern Ireland, the phrase “interim measures to alleviate problems” seems to be common. Surely the only way to address the access issue is not through interim measures or bespoke

contracts, but through a radical dental reform that is underpinned by new, realistic funding.

I am told that the term “bespoke” refers to the upscale customisation that is reserved for the prestigious clientele. It seems that the Minister’s aspiration is to follow the folly of the experience of England and Wales. The financial patching-up of the existing dental service simply serves to drive dentists into the private-care sector.

At the end of this academic year, only 32 out of the 45 graduates who applied to work in Northern Ireland were able to find training posts. Against that background, and given the decline in dental practices over the past two years, 13 graduates have had to leave in that time. There is a clear need for capital investment, from the ground up.

2.15 pm

Scotland is the only area in the United Kingdom where there has been an increase — 6.6% for children and 6.9% for adults — in NHS registrations for dental services. How has that been achieved? Scotland has prioritised investment in the training and retention of dentists. The £500,000 allocation by the Minister this year for vocational training is not enough. Dentists must seek work outside Northern Ireland, and that sum of money reflects the degree of priority that the Minister has given to what is becoming one of the most visible social needs in healthcare.

Mrs O'Neill: Sinn Féin is committed to creating a society in which healthcare inequalities are eradicated and everyone has equal access to healthcare services. Healthcare is a right, and should be free at the point of delivery — that includes access to dental services.

This is the third debate in the Chamber on dental care during this mandate. However, we must continue to revisit the subject, because there is still a major problem in the North with respect to access to NHS dental care. Today, and in earlier debates, we have heard from many Members about the ongoing problems, and we are all aware of the startling statistics that illustrate the fact that the North’s oral-health levels are among the worst in this part of the world.

There is a blanket problem throughout the North; however, there appears to be a greater access problem in rural areas. I represent Mid Ulster where, according to British Dental Association statistics, between September 2006 and September 2008, 9,166 fewer adults registered for Health Service dental care. That figure covers just one constituency. Moreover, 8,000 of that drop in registrations occurred in the past year — from September 2007 to September 2008. Those figures demonstrate that not enough has been done to secure dental services for the people of Mid Ulster and, indeed, across the North.

Such decreases in NHS dental service registrations occurred despite the fact that several initiatives have been rolled out in the past 18 months to improve dental services. Those projects are welcome; however, some of them are at too early a stage for their success to be measured. Nevertheless, other projects have proven unsuccessful. For example, £400,000 was allocated to recruit dentists to areas of particular concern. According to British Dental Association figures, that investment has not addressed the access problem.

Although the number of people being registered is decreasing, in the past several years, the number of dental practitioners has increased, which begs the question: why? We must get to the bottom of those causes.

There is still a problem with maintaining the required level of new graduates and with ensuring that enough training places are available, so that those graduates are not forced to seek employment elsewhere. We must consider innovative ways to provide training places. As I said during previous debates, each year in the North, we aim to produce 40 new graduate places in training practices so that those individuals can begin their careers. However, in the past two years, that target has not been met. In 2007, there were just 30 new graduate training places, and 32 in 2008. Consequently, graduates are forced to seek work elsewhere.

The cost of providing surgery facilities to accommodate a new graduate falls on the practice, and, as Iris Robinson, the Chairperson of the Health Committee, said, that amounts to approximately £30,000, plus the cost of providing a dental nurse. Health Service funding meets the cost of training; however, it does not recognise the required investment in infrastructure at practice level. That disparity presents significant challenges for Health Service practices that wish to take on new graduates, and I hope that the ongoing consultation with the profession can address that matter.

Simply deploying numerous trainee dentists is not a quick-fix solution to the problem of access. However, in the long term, investment in vocational training and development will certainly be of assistance in ensuring that dentists are equipped and ready to take on the challenge of a modern, fit-for-purpose dental service.

Health Service dentistry provision is being reformed, and the profession is engaging constructively with the Department about the nature of that reform. We must secure a long-lasting solution to what is a growing problem. It has been said already that access to Health Service dentistry has declined over the past two years, with fewer than 53,000 people being registered with dentists.

In answer to a question from my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín, the Minister indicated that discussions with the BDA were ongoing and that the intention was to pilot a new contract in 2009. However, I note from a

BDA briefing that it is only hoped that the new arrangements will be in place by then. Can the Minister confirm which is the case? Are we at the stage to roll out the pilot and to conduct a proper evaluation of a project that will, I hope, bring much-needed improvements to the health of people in the North?

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

Mr McClarty: I welcome the debate, although I recognise that it is the third Assembly debate on dental service provision in just over a year.

It is accepted by the House — and, indeed, by the Minister — that there is a problem in the Province with the provision of Health Service dentistry. Unfortunately, and as we all know, thousands of people, particularly those in the west of the Province, find it difficult to gain quick and regular access to National Health Service dental treatment.

There are many reasons for that, not least because more and more dentists have increased the number of private services that they provide. Coupled with that is the fact that although there has been an increase in the number of dentists, there has been a reduction in the number of practices in the Province. Dentists also face more regulations and rising costs. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises that several issues must be worked through in order to ameliorate that situation.

Although I welcome the motion, it must be recognised that we have a Health Minister who is fully aware of the problems, who has taken decisive action already, and who is engaged fully in negotiations with the British Dental Association about new Health Service dental contracts.

We cannot expect the problems that have been created as a result of direct rule underinvestment in health and dental services to be removed overnight. Unfortunately, the Health Minister does not have a magic wand. Rather, he is developing the necessary processes, and I am confident that he will succeed in delivering improved Health Service dental provision for the Province. Indeed, he has already steered through the Assembly the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which was granted Royal Assent in February. The Act places a duty on each health and social services board to provide — or secure — the provision of primary dental services in its area to the extent that the board considers necessary to meet that area's needs. If a board cannot get an independent practitioner to set up in a particular area, it becomes the duty of the board to secure dental services in some other way — for example, by employing a salaried dentist.

Those are real and meaningful changes to the duties on and powers of our health and social services boards to provide Health Service dental provision in their areas. However, it will take time for the new processes and practices to deliver results, so, unfortunately, we

may have to be patient. I ask the Minister to update the House on the progress that has been made.

In addition, the Minister previously invested the substantial sum of approximately £8 million in Health Service dentistry in order to address the profession's concerns about the provision of the service. That investment included £4 million to help dental practices with their overheads, and that move was welcomed by the profession. The Minister invested £3 million to help buy cross-infection control equipment to reduce patients' risk of infection. He also announced £500,000 to incentivise dentists into training new graduates.

That means that an attractive package is now available to encourage dentists to become trainers. The initial response has not been as successful as was hoped, but the fact is that the process will take some time.

We all recognise that a problem still exists with Health Service dentistry provision in Northern Ireland. Thousands of people still find it difficult to register with an NHS dentist, and that problem is more acute in the west and north of the Province. The Minister and his Department are engaged in constructive negotiations with the British Dental Association on reforming the contractual arrangements between the Department and dentists to deliver Health Service provision. Those negotiations are progressing more slowly than one would have hoped, but it is important that we do not repeat some of the problems that have been experienced in England and Wales. I support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the debate and thank the Members who tabled the motion. As has been said, this is the third debate on dental care since restoration. That highlights the fact that the main concerns that were raised in the previous debates are still outstanding. It was useful to have Mr McClarty set out the Minister's stall.

In response to the first debate on 2 July 2007, which Tommy Gallagher and I secured, it was acknowledged that problems exist with the arrangements between NHS dentists and the Central Services Agency. At that time, the Minister acknowledged that the issue was not the number of dentists but was about arranging proper contracts for their services. He added that, in short, the issue was primarily one of access.

The second debate on 29 April 2008, which Members from Sinn Féin secured, was about access to services. I now want to know how Members can pick up from where we left off. After the second debate, the Minister acknowledged that he was in talks with the British Dental Association to develop a new contract and that, because of the problems across the water, such a contract would have to be bespoke, to use his word. He said that the contract would give health and social services boards more control over where dentists locate their practices — that is an issue, because black spots exist, where access to dental services is poor. The contract,

the Minister said, would, therefore, improve access, as well as focus on preventive care and provide guaranteed out-of-hours services.

It has been said that the BDA wants a new, properly funded system in which dentists can give the modern, high-quality care that they want to provide for their patients. The BDA is concerned about the need for investment in existing infrastructure and in the expansion of existing practices, both of which will help dentists to meet the legislative and regulatory demands.

I am aware that the Minister and his Department have invested considerable resources in dental health. However, as far as I am aware, the Western Health and Social Services Board has not yet managed to put dentists in place — will the Minister give an update on that situation? Will he also provide an update on the matter of salaried dentists, an issue that is being pursued? I believe that the Minister also mentioned private-sector involvement in the NHS — I have no concerns about that if it is used to tackle the existing backlog, but I want to know where such involvement sits with NHS provision.

A point that I made in the previous debates, which was that poor oral health has a negative impact on people's general health and well-being, still stands. We are aware of specific diseases that are associated with tooth decay, and we want a quality dental service. More emergency dental service is needed, because, although the dental hospital is very good, it cannot do everything.

I also have a real concern for those patients who are just above the benefits level and must pay for all their treatment, because they are often the hardest hit. Often, those people require complex treatment, such as root canal work, and they cannot afford it. We also know, from listening to our constituents, that visiting a dentist can be a very clinical experience, and patients are often unsure of what is happening.

2.30 pm

Why are dentists dissatisfied and disillusioned with the National Health Service? Work carried out on a private basis is very lucrative, and the big challenge is how to encourage, motivate and support dentists to work in the NHS. The ethos of "drill and fill" demotivates those dentists who would otherwise stay in the NHS. Wider access must be maintained.

In addition to a better working environment, we also require more dental hygienists and nurses as part of an integrated approach to dental health. The other factor involved is dental health promotion. I am aware that that issue has been mentioned by the Minister and the Department. General oral health must be the long-term focus of dental health.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it. Dental provision is an

important issue for many people, and I hope that, through this debate, we can make progress

As many Members have said, it has been recognised that Northern Ireland has a very poor record of oral health. That cannot be good for the general health of our population. Indeed, Lord Browne has given facts and figures in relation to that very point. Our Government and our Assembly have a duty of care to provide people with easy access to a local dentist, as was the case not long ago.

Conditions must be right to encourage and entice dental practitioners to open their doors to everyone in the community. Our Government must follow their own guidelines when they say that prevention is better than cure — something with which we all agree.

If people cannot reach a dentist, they cannot receive the treatment they need; and it is obvious, and unfortunate, that their condition will deteriorate. It is a vicious circle, and patients may fall into poor health as a result

The Health Service should look after us from the cradle to the grave and should be free at the point of delivery. I hope that that sentiment still carries weight with the Department. The Department must ensure, among other things, that dental treatment is available to all.

As has already been acknowledged, more funding went into the budget for dentistry in 2007. However, some dentists continue to go down the private-practice route, making it increasingly difficult for many people to gain easy access to dental care.

Now that we have a working Assembly and — I hope — a listening Minister, our constituents want, need and expect us to deliver a local dental service to them and their children. The Assembly, in conjunction with the Health Promotion Agency, must encourage people to look after their teeth and their oral health.

MLAs have been elected to the Assembly to help provide basic health facilities including dental care. Members of the public are not interested or excited about how dentist's contracts are worked out. They simply do not understand why they cannot get the services of a dentist when they need to. People want the facility to be available when they need it. The Alliance Party fully supports the motion and hopes that the public will be able to receive dental treatment when required.

In relation to the BDA and the future of dentistry in Northern Ireland, that body has a number of key issues to deal with. There is much to be done if access to Health Service dentistry is to be improved. The BDA believes that action is required in a number of areas; I will cover the first of those, which is the main one. In the longer-term the new arrangements for Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland, currently being negotiated between the BDA and the Department, must

create a system in which dentists can give the modern, high-quality care that they want to provide and that their patients want to receive.

That will mean a properly funded system that provides high-quality and affordable patient care at its heart. That is the main theme and thesis of today's motion, and it is hoped that the Minister will listen. I know that he is working hard to improve our lot in relation to dentistry, but it is important that he goes further to provide a better service for the masses — one that they can access when they need it. I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the debate, as other Members have done, and I thank the proposer of the motion for allowing the Assembly to return to this subject. On 29 April of this year, my colleague Michelle O'Neill and I tabled a similar motion, because, like all Members, we were concerned about the lack of access to Health Service dental treatment. The debate on the Sinn Féin motion was preceded by the tabling of a similar motion by the SDLP, on 2 July 2007. This is the third time that such a motion is being debated; perhaps it will be third time lucky and we will receive assurances that the dental service treatment is working for our community.

I know that additional money has been made available, but, despite the Department's oral-health strategy and primary dental care strategy, the ordinary person on the street says that there does not seem to be any difference in access to dental care or treatment. Many Members have went through some of the relevant figures, and, according to the BDA's briefing paper — for which I am grateful — the situation is getting worse, as the House was informed by the proposer of the motion. According to the BDA, there are 53,000 fewer patients registered with a dentist this year than there were in 2006. That situation must be examined; it seems that we are getting worse instead of better.

I acknowledge that a substantial amount of money has been spent in the Health Service and that it received additional money in the Budget, but the question of whether that is enough must be asked. It seems that we are debating a Health Service-related motion every day that we come to the Chamber. Members must ask whether there is enough money in the budget, or whether other measures could be taken to achieve efficiency savings that will ensure that the people who are in greatest need are targeted.

I could go through the list of improvements that have been made in the Health Service by virtue of the fact that we have the Assembly and a local Minister. As local representatives, Members are aware of the local needs, and our communities are not shy about stopping Members in the supermarkets or on the streets to tell them where needs exist. We must recognise that

we have a local Minister, and local people will challenge him to meet their needs.

Members must also recognise that the current dental provision does not meet the needs of urban or rural communities. Members who spoke previously mentioned how much harder it is to access dental care west of the Bann. I could go into specific cases, but they have been highlighted in previous debates. The lack of service and access to services mean that we are punishing the most vulnerable in society, and we must get our acts together in that regard.

Children who live in the 20% most deprived wards are almost twice as likely to experience dental decay as children from the 20% most affluent areas. That is a startling statistic that the Assembly must challenge. The motion calls on the Minister to review the current dental service. Let me save the Minister some money and time: he does not need another report. I will be his adviser on this matter: the Health Service dental treatment is not working. That is the review completed. It will save money on conducting another review. We should leave it at that and proceed with changes. I will advise the Minister on a lot of other subjects, if he would like. That would be an alternative to producing more glossy reviews or documents. We know that the system is not working; we should move on. I would appreciate if, during his response, the Minister would inform the House of how he proposes to make changes and ensure that they work.

The Department's oral-health strategy set a number of targets. It aimed to reduce the proportion of adults without any natural teeth by 8%, or less, by 2008; increase the proportion of adults with 21 or more natural teeth to 78% by 2008; and, by 2008, to reduce the proportion of adults reporting at least one problem related to oral health from 47% to 40%.

How will we deal with those three targets in 2008, of which there is only a few months left, if we are saying that people cannot access dental healthcare or treatment? I support the motion and appreciate the opportunity to discuss the matter.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I have listened in horror to some of my constituents' stories about their dental health problems and the fact that they cannot get any help or relief from their pain. One can do nothing but feel sympathy for them. I refer them to a dentist who may be able to see them, but who might charge private-treatment prices that may be too expensive. The cost of treatment would not be an issue if it were a medical problem. Thankfully, no one in the Province stops going to his or her doctor because he or she cannot afford treatment. That will become truer as prescription charges are reduced and eventually cancelled, and I thank the Minister for announcing that decision yesterday. Many people are grateful for that decision.

The sad fact is that Northern Ireland has the worst record for oral hygiene and tooth decay than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. The British Dental Association's statistics show that a 12-year-old child in England will have, on average, one rotten tooth; in Wales the figure is one and a half; in Scotland it is one and three quarters — whatever that may mean; and in the Province it is two and a half. We have a real need for good dental care. However, many of our problems stem from the fact that in Northern Ireland, and the UK as a whole, there is a severe lack of dedicated NHS dentists.

Mr Hamilton: The Member remarked on the low levels of dedicated NHS staff. Does he share my concern at the news that the last remaining dentist in Comber, in our constituency, is changing from NHS to private practice? That will make access to NHS dental services even more difficult in an area that already has problems, and it will have a negative impact on the oral-hygiene concerns that he has expressed.

Mr Shannon: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member's comments. The situation in Comber is mirrored in Newtownards, the Ards Peninsula and many other places. It is sad that NHS patients in Comber no longer have a dentist.

People now decide to see their dentist to have a tooth removed, to stop the pain and to ensure that they are not faced with a big bill. For that reason, Northern Ireland has the highest number of people in the United Kingdom who have no natural teeth. We should note that even in the Republic of Ireland, which used to lag far behind us in dental care, children have the lowest levels of tooth decay in Europe. That would not be an issue if there were enough dentists. A cracked tooth could be removed, and a child could be shown at first hand how to clean his or her teeth and gums.

A recent article in the international press had a quiz about comparing teeth: it read, "Spot the British teeth". We are internationally famed for having bad teeth, and have been so for many years. That must change.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Shannon: I will, but you will have only 20 seconds. *[Laughter.]*

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that the problem was flagged up many years ago by Spike Milligan in his famous poem about English teeth?

Mr Shannon: I have a minute left. I appreciate Mr Robinson's comments, but, had I given him more time, I would not have any left.

We have been left with a generation that has not been taught about good oral hygiene and is suffering the effects. I am old enough to remember when dental nurses visited schools and gave pupils tablets that turned the plaque in their mouths blue, just to show how much they needed to brush their teeth. That is not

politically correct any more, and has gone the same way as the nit nurse. Our children do not understand the risks and problems associated with not taking care of their teeth when they are young.

My constituency has felt the effects of the lack of dentists who are willing to treat NHS patients, and my colleague Simon Hamilton has given a clear example of that. The BDA has said that dentists tend to be concentrated in major cities and urban centres away from some of the deprived or less-populated urban and rural communities that often need treatment most. A child from a middle-class professional family is more likely to have 20% less tooth decay than that of a working-class child.

2.45 pm

That is not entirely surprising, given that many people cannot get a dentist willing to treat them on the NHS; many families cannot afford private treatment and choose to go without any treatment at all. There are more than two million people in the UK who cannot find NHS dentists; that absurd problem must be resolved urgently before it is too late for our children. Only 9% of the 75% increased spending on the NHS was allocated to dentistry. The dental system must be brought up to date. It is feared that the shortage of dentists will have doubled by 2011. We must do something now to ensure that that statistic is never realised in the Province.

The Minister made the right decision in scrapping prescription charges. I ask that he also thinks long and hard about dental care and that he invests some money to ensure that no one will be denied dental treatment for financial reasons. I ask the Minister to examine ways of lowering the cost of dental treatment and to provide better packages to encourage more dentists to treat patients on the NHS. We are addressing poverty in Northern Ireland and trying to give people something to smile about. I ask the Minister to play his part in ensuring that those people will be smiling with their natural teeth. I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: Mr McGimpsey took over as Health Minister just over 18 months ago. His brief was faced with years of problems — such as dental care in the Province — that had built up under the direct rule regime. Mr McGimpsey has been an active Minister, in stark contrast to other Ministers who seem to consider calling Executive meetings and giving Northern Ireland joined-up Government as too much for them. The Minister has been working hard to develop a unique dental contract for Northern Ireland, which is one potential solution to shortfalls in dental cover. The strategy is sensible and realistic and designed to avoid the problems that have been experienced with the national contract.

Some of the motions that come before the House — such as the one that we are debating today — are of a headline-grabbing and grandstanding variety. The motion is framed with a cheap and easy headline in mind. It is not constructive and implies inaction on the Minister's part, which could not be further from the truth. The Minister announced an additional £8 million for dental services in Northern Ireland.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you. He gave £400,000 to each health board to directly employ salaried dentists. The Minister also invested £500,000 to encourage serving dentists to take on trainee dentists. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is too much gnashing of teeth. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gardiner: The training grant for trainee dentists amounts to almost £19,000 a year, which is double the amount in England and Wales. Trainers also get to keep the trainee's gross earnings, which amount to £40,000 a year on average. The Department pays the trainee's salary of £29,000 a year. That package represents a clear financial incentive for practising dentists to train new dentists. The scale of the problem must be put in context: Northern Ireland still has a higher number of dentists per 100,000 of the population than Scotland, England and Wales.

One suggested solution was to make young trainee dentists repay the cost of their training by forcing them to work in the National Health Service for several years. That sounds like a good plan, but such a contract would run into legal difficulty, and the shortage of dentists is a nationwide problem. Indeed, dentists would simply move away from Northern Ireland, and more student dentists would move to English and Scottish universities. That would make matters worse.

The Minister is diligently exploring possible solutions. For example, he is assessing the potential for dental organisations to tender for National Health Service dental work. As recently as April, he told us that that could present an opportunity to target what he calls service black spots.

The solution to the problem of dental cover will be reached through hard, painstaking negotiations, such as those that the Minister has engaged in with the British Dental Association to try to achieve a local contract for all Northern Ireland dentists. Some people may be critical of the Minister's efforts, but, in my view, that is unfair. If I were a betting man, my money would be on the hard-working Health Minister, Mr McGimpsey, who has clearly supported a Health Service that is free at the point of access. He has announced the abolition of prescription charges, and he is working to provide a comprehensive dental service across the Province.

Mr Gallagher: There appear to be two schools of thought as far as the motion is concerned. One is that the Business Committee must sharpen up its act and not allow repetitive debates to be held in the Chamber. The other is that this debate is necessary because the public continues to face serious problems in accessing NHS dentists. I agree with the second school of thought. Every week in my constituency office, I hear from constituents about the serious problems that they encounter in accessing dental care. I therefore commend Lord Browne for tabling the motion.

Reference has been made to Northern Ireland's poor dental health record. There is no doubt that our record is by far the worst on these islands. The pity is that it is the most vulnerable groups — the elderly, young children and the financially disadvantaged — who suffer most. Indeed, it is a pity for all those who need dental care, especially those who need it urgently.

I agree with Michelle O'Neill's point about the particular access problems experienced by those who live in rural areas. Public transport is poor, and, again, the financially disadvantaged are affected most: if they even manage to find a dentist, they must, on top of everything else, pay considerable transport costs.

As a result of the first debate on this issue on 2 July 2007, the Minister, to his credit, responded to the crisis by announcing to the Assembly, immediately after the summer recess, on 17 September 2007, details of a £4.4 million package. As has been mentioned, some of that money was for allowances to help dental practices meet overhead costs. Over £1 million was put towards infection control, while some was spent on vocational training allowances. However, over £400,000 was earmarked for the employment of salaried dentists. Indeed, other money has been invested to help to improve the service since that announcement was made.

However, only one health and social services board has been successful in recruiting salaried dentists, which is another source of frustration for the public. The Western Health and Social Services Board, which covers the area that I represent, has not even yet reached the stage of advertising for salaried dentists. It is very frustrating that that kind of bureaucracy exists at that level in the Health Service — it is frustrating for Members, and irritating and disappointing for the people who are in need of services. That matter must be examined. It would be helpful if the Minister could bring about a step change in those boards that have not yet recruited salaried dentists.

In the meantime, we must intensify the work that is under way with the dental profession to resolve the outstanding issues. We know that dentists must meet the costs of maintaining their premises and equipment, and that is clearly one of the reasons that dentists are

turning in greater numbers to private work. Therefore, that issue cannot remain unresolved for much longer.

Training allowances are also very important. As the Committee Chairperson said, they are vital if we are to retain young graduates in Northern Ireland.

The proposer of the motion mentioned the issue of fluoridation. We must revisit that issue, because if one considers the dental health of people in the Republic of Ireland, a case can be made for supporting the argument for fluoridation. Indeed, the case for a better dental health strategy is a pressing matter.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to speak to the motion, because there is a great need for access to dental treatment. That is especially true when it comes to the most vulnerable groups in society: the young; the elderly; and the disabled. I praise the steps that have been taken, as they have resulted in a reduction in the waiting list for people with disabilities. That reduction is largely down to the excellent work that has been carried out at the Causeway Hospital, and I applaud all the staff who are involved there.

However, the three most vulnerable groups are the least likely to seek regular dental treatment. In fact, the Department's 'Oral Health Strategy for Northern Ireland', which was published in 2007, acknowledged that fact, and it recommended ways in which to deal with the treatment shortfall. The strategy highlights one stark fact, which is that, when children reach the age of 18 and must pay for their treatment, their attendance for regular examinations drops rapidly. The next high point occurs at the age of 40, but, after that, there is a continuous decline in dental examinations. The strategy also states that loss of teeth is one of the main causes of nutritional deficiency in older people. That cannot be tolerated in a twenty-first-century society.

Some constituents have told me that they struggle to find the money to pay for treatment, especially for dentures. Will the Minister examine ways in which to address older people's specific needs? Furthermore, will he take into account the continuing demographic changes and bear in mind that we must not only seek to prevent dental problems but ensure that everyone who requires treatment gets it?

There is a further acknowledged link between material deprivation and poor dental health. That situation must also be addressed. We cannot permit young people to have poor health as a result of their not receiving adequate dental treatment. The departmental strategy shows that poor health and poor dental health are linked.

If the statistics are to be believed, the problem of access to dental practices is not a major issue for most of Northern Ireland's population. However, people with special needs and/or mobility needs seem to have difficulty accessing treatment. That issue must be tackled. As I said earlier, the Causeway Hospital is

leading the way in treating that group. Many people have been treated successfully — in some cases, after years of waiting. Such an approach must be taken to ensure that that most vulnerable group is treated. However, there is no point in having good treatment if people cannot access the facilities. I support the motion and thank my colleagues for tabling it.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, which calls on me:

“to review the current dental service and ensure that Health Service dental care is available to all citizens.”

Dental services in Northern Ireland comprise hospital dentistry, community dental services and general dental services. My Department regularly reviews the dental workforce. The previous workforce report, which was issued in March 2006, showed a relative balance in the supply of dentists into our workforce. However, in order to meet future workforce needs, the report recommended that we increase the intake of students into the school of dentistry from 40 to 45 and that we increase the number of vocational training places for new graduates to 40.

3.00 pm

I am pleased to announce that I have made the funding available for an additional five dental student places from August 2008, which makes the dental school at Queen's University the largest in Ireland. I also made additional funding available last year in order to increase the number of vocational training places to 40. In fact, Northern Ireland puts more direct funding into vocational training than any other part of the UK.

My Department intends to conduct another workforce review of the entire dental service within the next 12 months. The hospital dental service is a specialist service, which treats patients on referral from primary care and provides services such as oral surgery, orthodontics and restorative dentistry. Like any other secondary care service, the hospital dental service is subject to the waiting list targets, and, to date, has met those targets. Patients are, therefore, able to access those services to the standards expected by the public. My Department is also about to commence a workforce review that is specifically targeted at the hospital dental service, and hopes to report its findings and recommendations next year.

The community dental service works from health centres in primary care. Its role is to care for patients with special needs, such as a learning disability, a physical disability or a compromising medical condition. The community dental service also provides care for socially disadvantaged children. A full review of the community dental service was conducted in 2003, and my Department is progressing a programme to deliver on the recommendations of that review. At present, special-needs patients

are able to access the appropriate services from the community dental service.

General dental services are delivered through high-street dental practices. The four health and social services boards are responsible for making arrangements with local dentists for general services in their own areas. However, 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.

As Members are aware, registering with a Health Service dentist has continued to be problematic for many people in certain areas throughout Northern Ireland. That had been the case before I assumed responsibility for health matters. Even though Northern Ireland has one of the best dentist:population ratios in the UK, patients are still having problems when they try to access Health Service dentistry. That is due to a drift of dentists into private practice. Although we appear to have a sufficient number of dentists, we have an insufficient number willing to provide Health Service dentistry.

I have already said that under current contractual arrangements, general dental practitioners who are independent contractors can choose to provide general dental services, private dentistry, or a mixture of both. Dentists can, therefore, set up practices anywhere they wish and treat as many or as few Health Service patients as they want. They can also walk away from the Health Service at short notice. In most cases, however, dental practices continue to provide Health Service dental care for exempt adults and children. Indeed, Sue Ramsey talked about that problem and about the fact that the service is not working, and suggested that a consultant should send me a bill. The fact is that 860,000 patients are registered, but we must take into consideration the 50,000 people for whom the system is not working. That is where I am specifically concentrating my efforts.

The motion calls on me as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

“to review the current dental service and ensure that Health Service dental care is available to all citizens.”

My Department published the primary dental care strategy in November 2006. The strategy aims to modernise dental services and ensure that everyone has access to a dentist. In order to deliver those reforms, as Members will know, my Department is engaged in negotiations with the British Dental Association to develop a new contract for Northern Ireland. I am aware that Members have received the BDA's position paper on the subject.

The BDA is negotiating terms, conditions, contracts and money, and, therefore, will present a strong argument. In getting a contract, of course, it takes two to tango, and we have worked hard to get that contract. Members

will also be aware that a new contract was introduced in England and Wales in April 2006; however, it has not been popular with the profession there, and has failed to deal with all the access issues. The Department of Health will say that some progress has been made. A recent report shows that the average dental salary in England and Wales is roughly £100,000; however, the dentists there are not happy.

With the British Dental Association, my officials are developing a bespoke dental contract for Northern Ireland, and are working to avoid the problems experienced by the GB dental contract. The new contract will give health and social services boards more control over where dental practices are located and the patients whom dentists treat, which will improve access. It will focus on more preventative care and provide guaranteed out-of-hours services. That is what we want.

Health Service dentists raised improved pay and conditions as a key area of concern, and, importantly, the contract will provide those. However, everyone is aware that there is not a bottomless pit of money; there is a limited amount available. It will not simply flow, so all proposals must be justified and must stand up to scrutiny. Being told that dentistry must be properly and more realistically funded is music to the ears of the British Dental Association, but I have to balance that with other priorities.

I will now answer Lord Browne's questions. Each trust submitted annual action plans at the beginning of the financial year, and the Department measures the decay rates and the preventative schemes that trusts monitor. He asked whether the target for 50% of five-year-old children to be free from decay by 2013 is on course — the Department is meeting its targets for improving dental-decay rates in five-year-olds, which were set out in the Department's priorities for action. He also asked about waiting lists for people with special needs — those patients are seen in waiting list target times.

Lord Browne asked about general anaesthetic figures. In 2004, 40,000 teeth were extracted from 8,600 children by general anaesthetic, whereas in 2007, those figures had decreased to 6,000 children and 30,000 extractions. One could argue that those figures are still too high, but there has been a reduction.

Lord Browne and other Members asked about salaried dentists. Salaried dentists have been recruited in the Northern Board area, and, contrary to what Tommy Gallagher said, the Western Board has advertised six salaried-dentist positions. That is why, on 29 April — the last time that the issue was debated — I said that I was commissioning a new initiative to tender for dental services.

Therefore, despite our best efforts, progress on the new contract has, until recently, been slow. I have stressed to officials and the general dental practice

committee of the BDA the importance of expediting those arrangements. When negotiations have been satisfactorily completed, it is proposed that the new arrangements will be piloted in 2009, as planned, before the new contract is rolled out.

We have invested some £8 million, which, contrary to some assertions, is not recycled money. There was an underspend in the dental budget because of dentists leaving, and I invested all that in extra provision for dental services. That money would have gone back to DFP, so it is not recycled. That is the largest single investment in dental services in the past 20 years. Members were able to cite where that money has been spent, particularly Mr McClarty, who gave me a list.

Members will recall that on 29 April, I advised the House of the Department's intention to secure additional dental services through a large-scale tendering process. The main advantage of that tendering exercise is that it will allow boards to cite those additional services in areas of highest access need.

Contractors will allow the Department to undertake Health Service work. That has the potential to largely eliminate the current access problems. That has been the experience in England, Wales and Scotland.

During the past four years, 50,000 fewer patients received Health Service dental care. That is the nature of the problem that the Department faces — and which I am determined to deal with. Following receipt of legal advice, the Department was required to consult widely. I made an announcement to the House on 29 April 2008, and the Department has worked on the matter throughout the summer. The consultation period ends next week, after which progress can be made. When consultation is complete, the Department will issue the tender as soon as possible. I anticipate that the Department will have preferred bidders for additional dental services early in 2009.

Sue Ramsey made the important point that, although oral decay must be dealt with, access to dental services is the key issue. Oral health depends on lifestyle and diet. Consumption of less sugar and fewer fizzy drinks can prevent oral decay. Northern Ireland has the highest intake of sugar and fizzy drinks anywhere in the UK, and hence has the worst oral health. The way to combat that is through better diet and the use of fluoride toothpaste. Public health studies show that progress has been made.

The Government in the Irish Republic took a different approach; they fluoridated the water supply. That is why the Republic went from having the worst oral decay rates in Europe to the best. I am aware that the DUP and Sinn Féin oppose water fluoridation. I suppose that, as an all-Ireland party, Sinn Féin must currently be campaigning for fluoride to be removed from the Republic's water.

Access is the key issue. Members who made that point during the debate understand where action must be taken. Several other points were made, and I have tried to respond to them all in my comments. As I have said, improving oral health is one side of the issue. Providing access to dental services is most important.

Of course, the Health Service cannot hope to match the sort of rates that dentists are able to charge for cosmetic work, for example. However, the Department hopes to provide dentists with a good, steady income. It hopes to provide access through a tendering process, whereby dentists can tender for the dental needs of a particular area. As I have mentioned, 50,000 patients are short of access.

That is the direction in which the Department is going, and it will take other steps, if necessary. That is the most practical, timely and cost-effective way to deal with current access problems in Health Service dentistry. I am optimistic that by the end of 2009, patients will, once again, be able to access Health Service dentistry throughout Northern Ireland. I trust that the House will support me in that approach, as I continue to work at it.

As I have said during previous debates, if anyone has a better idea, let me know about it. No one has ever done so. I have never received a single proposal suggesting a better way to do something because my way is wrong, except to ask that I provide more realistic and better funding — therefore, more money. That is my approach. The Department has made investment and taken several initiatives, such as the tendering process. The obvious way to do that is through a contract with the British Dental Association. Although the Department has also worked hard on that, it takes two to tango.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I trust that, when the next debate on this issue takes place, Members will see that further progress has been made. I share exactly the same aims as everyone else.

Mr Newton: The main purpose of the motion — which is the third to have been debated on this issue — is to deal with the fact that many people throughout Northern Ireland do not have access to a dentist, either because of a lack of financial means or a lack of dental practices in their area.

That is the case even though, according to Central Services Agency sources, Northern Ireland has a higher ratio of dentists per person than other parts of the UK — those facts have already been trotted out.

One of the problems identified is that dental surgeries more closely resemble small businesses than medical facilities. If it is not economically viable for a dental surgery to survive in an area, none will open or stay

open. That has led to a situation in which dental surgeries will only remain open in affluent areas. Those who need care most will be forced to travel long distances or face not going to a dentist.

3.15 pm

It is noticeable that more and more dental practices are turning to private dentistry, which means that socially disadvantaged people cannot afford the oral healthcare that they require. That means that the oral health of many Northern Ireland citizens has gone unexamined for many years.

Dental registration is highest among eight- to 18-year-olds; for that age group, free healthcare is universal. However, as other Members stated, of those people, who must pay for their treatment, far fewer register with a dental practice. That affects socially disadvantaged people such as the unemployed, the disabled, those with a lack of education, those with an addiction or those from minority-ethnic groups. That is worrying, because the dentist is often the first to detect diseases such as oral cancer. General tooth decay can have a detrimental effect not only on health but on overall well-being.

Again, as other Members have said, the current system for providing healthcare in Northern Ireland is under review. However, we must ensure that those who cannot receive dental care owing to their social situation will be able to access treatment after this review — the word “access” crops up again. I accept that the arrangements for the provision of Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland are subject to reform and that constructive dialogue with the profession about the nature of that reform, to which the Minister referred, is ongoing.

Many dentists struggle to provide Health Service dentistry. Any cuts in administrative or practice allowances will result in more NHS dentists moving into private practice. The opening of additional dental practices should not prove detrimental to existing NHS dental practices. The location strategy should be based on qualified need; the terms of the review should not see Health Service dentists disadvantaged, and those dentists should be encouraged to supply additional NHS dentistry.

Concerns have been expressed that figures from the Central Services Agency show that almost 53,000 fewer people are registered for Health Service dental care in 2008 than was the case in 2006. The figures for adults are as follows: the number registered in September 2008 is down 49,757 on the number registered in September 2006, of which there was a decline of 26,300 between September 2006 and September 2007, and a decline of 23,457 between September 2007 and this month.

The British Dental Association has recommended that action be taken in three key areas. First, it has identified a need to create a system in which dentists can provide the modern high-quality care that patients expect. That means a properly funded system that is affordable to patients as they require it. Secondly, the BDA has said that increased investment in the future of dental healthcare is needed, and that involves investing in educational programmes in order to ensure that the Northern Ireland dental service has skilled graduates of the highest quality in its ranks. Thirdly, the association identifies a need to invest in existing infrastructure, expand practice facilities and create initiatives that will help dental practices to open in areas where there is a defined need.

That may require incentives to newly qualified dentists to establish practices. However, as I already said, care must be taken not to impact negatively on already established practices.

There is desperate need for dental care in my constituency of East Belfast, for which the Eastern Health and Social Services Board has responsibility. Since 2006, some 9,000 fewer adult patients have registered for Health Service dental care. Some 88,000 adults were registered for dental care in September 2006 compared with some 79,000 patients in September 2008. In the Sydenham area of East Belfast, half of all children aged between three and five are not registered with a dentist.

The Minister must recognise constituents' frustrations, expressed by Members on their behalf. Concerned constituents have not seen the problem addressed as quickly as they would have liked.

I want to deal with some points that Members raised. I fully support Lord Browne's points. He placed great emphasis on the need for an effective strategy for oral-health provision. His primary argument was that dental care should be accessible for everyone.

Mrs Robinson, in her capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, also stressed the need for accessibility. She quoted statistics that illustrated the number of adults not receiving dental care. She also expressed the concerns of qualified dentists who have difficulty getting into a practice. Indeed, Mrs Robinson emphasised the positive experience of dental care in Scotland, and pointed to that as an example of best practice.

Michelle O'Neill welcomed the pilot schemes, but indicated that, perhaps, it was too early to judge their success. She also stressed the need for jobs for graduates.

In support of his Minister, David McClarty stressed that negotiations were ongoing, and he called for time to deliver results.

Carmel Hanna talked about the concept of salaried dentists. She said that she viewed private dentists as a

temporary measure on the path to a much improved Health Service. She also highlighted the frustration of National Health Service dentists.

Kieran McCarthy stressed the need for progress and for additional funding that must deliver for patients.

Sue Ramsey offered her services to the Minister as a consultant. She said that Health Service dental care is not working and that there is no need for more glossy reports.

Jim Shannon benchmarked the standards of oral hygiene of children from local areas with that of children from other areas of the UK.

I am sorry that Sam Gardiner took a negative stance on the motion while defending his Minister. The motion makes no attempt to attack the Minister. Rather, it highlights concerns for the well-being of the public and the availability of access to dental care.

The Minister, of course, defended his strategy. The motion was tabled to highlight the needs of constituents and the frustration experienced by Members in the Chamber.

There is no real key to that —

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

Mr Newton: The motion is not an attack on the Minister, and I ask that he pays attention to the problems raised by the BDA.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review the current dental service and ensure that Health Service dental care is available to all citizens.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Environmental Improvement Schemes in the Markets Area, Belfast

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr A Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to fulfil the commitments given by her Department to the local community in relation to the Environmental Improvement Schemes in the Markets area, Belfast.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to table the motion. I also thank the Assembly's Research and Library Service for providing Members with very helpful information, particularly on neighbourhood renewal schemes and programmes.

I table the motion reluctantly, because the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, has made her commitment on the proposal to complete phases 3 and 4 of the environmental improvement schemes in the Markets area. Those schemes pre-date the Minister, and she has clearly made her commitment.

I acknowledge the fact that the Housing Executive officials with whom I have worked over the past few years continue to demonstrate their personal and professional support for the project. I do not want to take any issue with them, but I wish to make the point that in May 2008, I met the Minister to discuss several issues relating to South Belfast. It is fair to say — and the Minister and I can dispute this point, even though it is not very important — that we did not exactly hit it off over some of the matters that were under discussion. Perhaps that is par for the course.

I entered into further correspondence with the Minister, and on 18 June 2008, I requested a further meeting; to date, I have not received a response. That is why I was reluctant to table the motion. I expect that the Minister is present to reaffirm her personal and departmental commitment to delivering the project. However, the issue has a history of some years' standing, and I want to address that.

The Markets area is a small residential area on the edge of the city centre. For decades, it was one of the largest inner-city working-class communities, with thriving industry and commerce. There were abattoirs, bakeries, water springs, engineering companies and, of course, markets. With progress, however, comes change, and although the project to provide new social

housing in that community is welcome, it is not the most successful of schemes.

The scheme was designed with little or no real local community consultation. It has ended up with a small residential community being hemmed in on all sides. On one side is Cromac Street — the main road — on the second side is East Bridge Street, on the third side is the railway line and on the fourth side are the gasworks.

That part of the Markets area where the two schemes are based is hemmed in on all sides. The initial building design means that the area comprises back alleyways, back-to-front housing and very little vehicular access, which means that parts of the area are falling into disrepair and have become focal points for much vandalism and antisocial behaviour. That behaviour is always being sensationalised — perhaps rightly so — but what is eventually being recognised is that this community has turned from being a thriving, commercially vibrant area into one that is now ranked fortieth out of 890 of the most-deprived small areas. There are high levels of multiple deprivation; in the super-output areas of the Noble indices, the Markets area is among the top 2% for the worst living environment and the top 6% for the health deprivation indicator.

3.30 pm

Those statistics, coupled with the unemployment figures, show that the Markets is an area of considerable deprivation; indeed, it is being increasingly marginalised as progress continues apace outside its immediate vicinity. The last work that was carried out on the railway station meant that the railway line had a bigger and better wall that borders part of the Markets community. The welcome developments on the gasworks site, which was substantially supported by the Department over the years, has seen many millions of pounds spent on a site that borders the Markets community but from which that community gains little or no benefit.

Promises were made years ago that when the gasworks development took place there would be serious and consistent attempts to ensure that people in surrounding communities had equal access to job opportunities. Unfortunately, that has not panned out. There is, therefore, an increasingly marginalised community in the Markets that has not benefited from the surrounding economic developments of recent years.

The Markets is a neighbourhood renewal area, yet it continues to rank high on multiple deprivation indices. It is an area that is in desperate need of remedial work. The Housing Executive, many in that community and I have been raising those issues for years; indeed, I have raised them with the local management of the Housing Executive. I arranged for the chief executive of the Housing Executive, with a senior team, to tour the area to see the situation literally on the ground.

I have raised the issue with the Minister directly, as have community associations, local clergy and other representatives, such as local schools. Many people in the area have been working hard with the local statutory agencies, and particularly with the Housing Executive, to ensure community improvement. Proposed schemes that emanated about 2000 have been in operation since about 2004. There are two small blocks, housing four flats each; they are not penthouses or of high quality and they need to be demolished. Demolishing those two little blocks would allow work to take place that would open up the district, allowing for vehicles to travel through and people to walk in traditional streetscapes.

The benefit of such a scheme is to increase access for the local community. It would also allow for some properties that are falling into disrepair to be given over to tenants as driveways or gardens. In addition, if the considerable resurfacing required by these proposals was undertaken, it would make a valuable contribution to improving the built environment in the area.

Promises were made to the local community, and hopes ran high at public consultations to debate the schemes. However, because of the delay since 2004 in implementing the schemes, I defy anyone to tell me that anyone in the Markets area even remembers that those schemes were promised to them. That is unfortunate, because many good people, including Members and representatives of statutory bodies, are working with the community's interests at heart.

I urge the Minister to remind herself and the Department that those schemes were promised to the Markets community, yet they are, after several years and for a variety of reasons, still outstanding. The board of the Housing Executive and the Department itself have taken far too long to make a decision on the demolition or otherwise of those two little blocks of flats. Even if those flats are not demolished, other work should be carried out.

Those schemes have been deferred year on year. We are now told that one will go ahead in February 2009 and the last in January 2010. I introduced this motion because promises and commitments have been made year after year. However, I am concerned that further delay in those projects means that the area continues to be neglected, does not have the quality of environment to which it is entitled and has not seen progress in improving its physical appearance. Nor does further delay give people in that community hope that statutory bodies do care while multimillion-pound developments are continuing all around the Markets area.

I know that the Minister made a commitment to those projects, but I urge her to ensure that there is no further delay. I urge her not only to ensure that the commencement date is adhered to — if not brought forward — but to ensure that the budget for those projects is ring-fenced

and guaranteed. Otherwise, the scheme will be delayed by further years, and people will give up hope on what is only a £2 million spend in an area that has been greatly neglected for years. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Member for his ongoing interest in the Markets area. As always, I welcome the opportunity to bring the needs of that community to the attention of the Assembly. I have served that community for some 30 years, and I agree with the Member that the area has many social needs. However, I am a little disappointed, but not surprised, by the motion. Rather than genuinely focusing on helping the community in a constructive way, the motion is more concerned with taking cheap Judas swipes and making mean attacks on the Minister. That is unfair.

Mr A Maskey: I am disappointed by the Member's comments. In my remarks, did I do anything other than commend the Minister and, particularly, officials in the Housing Executive for their personal and professional commitment to the project? The local community is determined to work with the relevant agencies. Did I say anything that criticised the Minister?

Dr McDonnell: The wording of the motion is ambiguous and dubious, as was much of what the Member said. His shyness and reluctance was touching, but he cannot have it both ways. As the Member said, the Minister has done her job, and the Housing Executive has done its job. There is no substance to the motion.

The motion is not helpful. I emphasise the point that the people of the Markets have been neglected for decades by direct rule Ministers, who were preoccupied by other agendas, including personal political agendas, as they drifted past here. The people of the Markets deserve better from any of their representatives than political scheming.

The Member knows full well — and has half admitted — that the scheme for the Markets was approved 14 or 15 years ago. He knows full well that some £3 million has already been committed and spent on phase 1 and phase 2 of the environmental scheme, which resulted in a much-welcomed upgrade of the estate.

Under phase 3, which must be considered honestly, eight fully occupied, good, modern flats are being marked for demolition, merely to make way for car-parking spaces. Those are relatively new homes which, in my estimation, are worth some £1.25 million in an area of high housing demand. From my meetings and discussions with people in the broader Markets community, I am acutely aware of the desperate housing need and the concerns that people have over the demolition of eight perfectly good flats to make way for a car park. I have a list as long as your arm, and perhaps longer, of people in the Markets who would give their right arm to get one of those flats. They do not want those flats to be knocked down.

Undoubtedly, there is a severe car-parking problem in the area, which is caused by commuter car-parking. Development of the city centre and the gasworks has created pressure, and people who live in the Markets find it almost impossible to get into and out of their area during the week, never mind park near their home.

Vehicles are parked close to residents' doors, and emergency vehicles experience difficulty accessing houses. Would it not be better for the Member to join other Members and have a chat with his colleague the Minister for Regional Development about creating a sensible parking solution for the area? Such a solution could override the earlier plan to charge people who live in the area an extra inner-city car-parking tax. We need a solution that addresses commuter parking problems and that releases the space that will enable residents to get to and from their homes. That makes a great deal more sense than evicting people from eight good homes in the area, given that people are crying out for homes and there is a long waiting list. Good homes should not be demolished.

Those issues must be dealt with. I am happy to meet with the Member — or anybody else — to consider the matter. Whatever the shenanigans in the Executive, I urge the Minister for Regional Development to have a word with the Minister for Social Development about some of the matters that are involved in phase 3 of the scheme. Likewise, I ask the Minister for Regional Development to end his Department's spat with the Department of the Environment in order to ensure that phase 4 of the environmental scheme gets the green light.

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

Dr McDonnell: Phase 4 has been stopped dead in its tracks because of a dispute in Roads Service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Mrs Anna Lo.

Ms Lo: It is Ms Lo; thank you. The neighbourhood renewal strategy generated a great deal of hope and expectation in communities in disadvantaged areas. The strategy's interdepartmental collaboration in community, economic and social and physical renewal was considered to be the first initiative that would make a real difference to the lives of people in those neighbourhoods.

The environmental improvement schemes formed part of the strategy's physical renewal objective. Although the strategy has had some success, there have been disappointments, primarily with the lack of buy-in from Departments other than the Department for Social Development. That Department's intention to hand over the implementation of the action plans to local councils in the future has, understandably, caused a great deal of concern and uncertainty in those communities. Indeed, I wonder how the rest of the plans will be delivered.

I am pleased to support the motion, and I, too, call on the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to complete phases 3 and 4 of the environmental improvement scheme in the Markets area. The Minister has been responsive to community needs, and the community has appreciated her regeneration plan for the Village.

Recently, the Minister, Carmel Hanna, Alasdair McDonnell and I visited residents in Great Northern Street and the Lisburn Road, and, as a result of that visit, Roads Service will inspect the roads on Friday 3 October 2008 with a view to improving surfaces. It is therefore great to have the Minister's support. However, I understand frustrations in the Markets area about the delays and the lack of progress that has been made in promoting the frontage there since the completion of the two previous phases.

3.45 pm

Phases 3 and 4 will help to create a more attractive and sustainable environment in the Markets area. A brighter environment will lift the spirits of the people and will enhance their well-being.

I take this opportunity to commend the residents of the Markets area for the way that they have shared their neighbourhood with elderly Chinese residents in the sheltered-housing scheme in McAuley Street. I lobbied for that scheme, which was the first sheltered-housing scheme to be built on the island of Ireland. The residents from the Chinese community have been very well looked after, welcomed and well received by their neighbours. That very much demonstrates the wider perspective of a shared future in the Markets area, and the residents should be praised for their efforts.

I call again on the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to complete the remaining two phases.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, which is the first time that I have had the opportunity to speak in my capacity as the Ulster Unionist Party's spokesperson on social development issues.

The amount of money that has been spent, and is due to be spent, on the Markets area indicates that that part of Belfast has done rather well as regards resource allocation from the Department for Social Development and other Government agencies. It is hardly an area that has been neglected by the Department. During phases 1 and 2 of the improvement scheme, a very significant sum — more than £2 million — was spent. In phases 3 and 4, a further £1.7 million has been earmarked mainly to realign roads and introduce traffic-calming measures.

Those sums are not insignificant. Were similar expenditure to be forthcoming for Mid Ulster, I assure any doubters that my constituents would be very happy indeed. If elected representatives from Belfast are suggesting that the sum is trivial and is of no real use to the Markets area, I assure them that the people of

Mid Ulster would be grateful and would be well capable of putting it to good use.

There may well be delays that are affecting the improvement schemes in the Markets area. However, as any MLA can tell the House; when one tries to do anything in Northern Ireland, the Planning Service or the Roads Service become involved, and delays are sadly inevitable. I have no doubt that there are real problems facing residents in the Markets area. Those problems are found in the inner-city areas of any British city, and they include the need to provide housing and other issues that have received much media coverage in recent times. One such issue that needs to be addressed is that of commuter parking.

Those issues are being addressed through partnership between DSD and bodies such as the Belfast City Council, the Housing Executive, the Belfast Regeneration Office and the Markets Development Association. It is quite clear that the Markets area has not been abandoned by the powers that be.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): First, I thank all speakers who contributed to this debate.

It is disappointing that this institution has reached the point at which relatively local issues are commanding prime time on the Floor of the Assembly. That is a consequence of the complete lack of Government business being presented to the House. That, in turn, is a consequence of the decision by the party proposing the motion to block all business of the Executive Committee.

Once again, I call on it to face up to its responsibilities and let those of us who want to get on with our work do so.

It is particularly noteworthy that the motion, which is primarily about housing, has been proposed by a party that is holding up much-needed housing reform and stalling my draft housing Bill at the Executive. I will take no lectures from people who — although they pretend otherwise — care only about themselves.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I have only started, so I will continue.

Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, because it allows me to clarify some of the matters that have been raised.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive identified the Markets area of south Belfast as the focus for a programme of environmental improvement works to be delivered in four phases over several years. Phases 1 and 2 have already been completed, at a cost of £600,000, which represents a significant investment. Phases 3 and 4 will involve a further investment of

£1.7 million. The overall investment in the area will amount to £2.3 million.

Phase 3 involves the realignment of roads; the introduction of traffic-calming measures; and the demolition of eight properties to make way for additional car parking, which is of particular concern to me, as I am yet to be convinced of the need for it. Members from that area are aware that housing demand remains high and that those eight properties are occupied. I have made it clear that my foremost priority is social housing, and I am therefore not minded to agree to demolishing properties in order to provide car parking. Furthermore, I am concerned that increasing the number of car-parking spaces in the vicinity may detract from the recent initiative to reduce the blight caused by commuter parking. Access for emergency vehicles is another reason for the demolition of those properties, and that does require careful consideration. I am more concerned about that than about addressing car-parking need.

Standing here today, we will not address those concerns. Therefore, I have asked my officials to convene an on-site meeting for all interested parties. I assume that the Member who proposed the motion will want to take part in that meeting, and I will issue invitations to him and to other local representatives.

Work on phase 4 will also involve several traffic-calming measures and some road realignment. Unfortunately, the start of that work has been delayed due to ongoing discussions involving the Roads Service. The Member who tabled the motion may wish to speak to his party colleague the Minister for Regional Development to ascertain why the matter has dragged on longer than expected. Work cannot begin on phase 4 without agreement with the Roads Service, and, accordingly, I have written to Minister Murphy.

Outside those schemes, a tremendous amount of work is already under way to improve the physical environment in the Markets area. For example, this year, there has been substantial funding for a variety of work to remove graffiti and rubbish, erect fences, and empty drains throughout the estate. Moreover, the Housing Executive supports a programme to undertake other minor works, such as landscaping, shrub and tree planting, and various external masonry repairs. Of course, that is in addition to the regular maintenance programme.

Environmental improvement works are not confined to the estate. My officials are working closely with various statutory agencies and communities to deliver a programme of environmental improvement works, particularly along arterial routes. Currently, we are completing a scheme at the junction of Cromac Street and East Bridge Street to enhance that gateway to Belfast city centre.

It involves the upgrading of footpaths and traffic islands and the planting of semi-mature oak trees. The scheme will be further enhanced by a new piece of sculpture situated outside St George's Market. Members of the local community have been closely involved in the development of the plans.

Earlier in the debate, Dr McDonnell referred to various issues that affect the Markets. I thank the Member for his contribution, and share his concerns about car-parking problems.

Anna Lo referred to issues related to neighbourhood renewal, the lack of buy-in from other Departments and other matters in the south Belfast area that fronts onto the city centre.

Billy Armstrong compared environmental improvement schemes, and referred to the amount spent on city-centre urban areas compared with urban towns in rural constituencies.

I trust that Members and Markets residents who are here will be reassured by what they have heard. I do not see any visitors; I thought that there might have been some in the Public Gallery.

When I see the proposer of this motion, Mr Alex Maskey, in the context of the Markets, I think of only one thing — the events surrounding the cruel murder of Robert McCartney. I think of Mr Maskey's remarks in the immediate aftermath of that event —

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, it is very regrettable that the Minister wants to introduce the tragic murder —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is this a point of order?

Mr A Maskey: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a point of order. Just let me finish.

If the Minister is in any way trying to align me with what was a brutal murder that I have repeatedly condemned, then she will very soon be listening to my lawyers. It is a shambles and a disgrace that the Minister is seeking to divert attention from the issue of an environmental scheme in a small residential area at a cost of less than £2 million, which she is partly to blame for delaying —

Mr Deputy Speaker: What is your point of order?

Mr A Maskey: My point of order is that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will sit down for a moment. I must hear the point of order.

Mr A Maskey: The point of order is that the Minister, in trying to deflect what does not amount to even mild criticism of her handling of this scheme — I could go much further, and criticise the Minister for her failure to look after the Markets community — has sought to

associate me with a brutal murder which I am on record as repeatedly condemning.

I am advising the Minister to choose her words very carefully, because my lawyers will be scrutinising the Hansard report. The Minister will not run off at the mouth at my expense. That is my point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Carry on, Minister.

The Minister for Social Development: I think of Mr Maskey's remarks in the immediate aftermath of that event, and his stance in relation to the violence that greeted the police conducting their follow-up investigations in the Markets. More than that, I think of Robert McCartney's partner and his two sons, now exiled in England, and of his brave sisters who were forced from their homes and who are still denied justice. I think of the so-called republicans who saw nothing that night.

I met Mr Maskey a few months ago to discuss housing in the Markets. I will meet him again soon, and I have written to him recently — a fact that appears to have escaped him. We will talk about housing. However, when he walks into my room next month all that I will see is the image of Robert McCartney holding his two young sons.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to put on record my disgust at the Minister's remarks. This is a debate about a motion on environmental improvement schemes for the Markets area. What the Minister said was completely out of order.

I commend Alex Maskey for moving the motion. It is the prerogative of Members to raise in the Assembly any issue that is relevant to their constituents.

The Business Committee has discussed the purpose and validity of some motions, and it was accepted by all party Whips — albeit reluctantly — that it is a prerogative of Members to table motions.

4.00 pm

As my colleague Alex Maskey said, the rationale for tabling the motion is to get the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to the continuation of phases 3 and 4 of the scheme for the people of the Markets area. It is becoming apparent from the Minister's comments, and those of her colleague Alasdair McDonnell, that her focus is on car-parking spaces. It is concerning that the Minister has such a skewed and narrow vision for the third and fourth phases of the scheme.

The motion is about vehicular access, not just car parking. The Minister mentioned access for emergency services, but the motion is about access for residents, providing uplift for the area, and ensuring that the environmental improvement scheme enhances the area. The issue is about neighbourhood renewal and much more. Despite being an elected representative for 30-odd

years, Alasdair McDonnell still has not caught the flavour of what is going on in relation to the discussions —

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No; the Member will not give way, the Member has heard enough from you.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No; the Member will not give way, and the Member will not be interrupted either.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: I have been elected repeatedly for 30 years by people in that area —

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is not a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is clear that the Member does not want to give way.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The debate is about how the Assembly, through the Department for Social Development, can ensure that the commitment to undertake the environmental improvement scheme in the Markets area — which could be a similar scheme in any of our constituencies — is reaffirmed.

Anna Lo pointed out the difficulties with securing commitment from other statutory bodies and agencies to buy into the neighbourhood renewal strategy. She also highlighted how the people of the Markets, in conjunction with the Chinese Welfare Association, adopted the sheltered-housing scheme for Chinese residents. That was achieved through consultation and through people wanting to be inclusive and having a vision of how to improve the area — that is how it should be.

With all due respect to Billy Armstrong, I am not sure of his point other than that he felt that people from the Markets area should be happy with their lot. If that were the case, we would not be having the debate. I know that Billy has recently become a member of the Committee for Social Development. Our reason for tabling the motion is to ensure that the uplift for the area happens.

Returning to the motion, I am disappointed that it seems that every time a motion involving the Minister for Social Development is tabled, there is an antagonistic response from some Members — that is dead on; it is all part of the cut and thrust of debate. However, what is not mentioned —

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No; the Member will not give way.

What has not been mentioned by any Member here is that the scheme is a result of consultation with people living in the Markets area. It has been created by the residents, who went through the process of identifying

the needs of their area. It is their families and neighbours who are on the housing waiting list; they know what that involves.

It is those residents who have said what would improve their area; what would improve vehicular access; what would ensure that they do not feel hemmed-in, and what would ensure that they feel part of a community. They have seen huge projects being undertaken — such as the development of the gasworks area — and have seen huge companies setting up in Belfast. However, they are the people — along with residents of areas such as the Village — who have benefited very little from the massive investments that were made in the city centre. In the grand scheme of things, £2.3 million is a lot of money; however, it has been proven that spending money creates the potential to attract money. This is what people have asked us to do on their behalf to improve the general well-being of the area.

I do not see any difficulty with Alex Maskey, or any other Member, tabling a motion on this issue. No one is denying that commitments are needed from other Departments.

I ask the Minister when she wrote to Conor Murphy, because I suspect that it was very recently. If Conor Murphy or any other Minister needs to be involved in the project or in its delivery, Sinn Féin will ensure that they are involved in that. We are not cheerleaders for our Ministers. It is about holding people to account.

I ask the House to support the motion and I thank the Member for tabling it today. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún arís. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 28; Noes 50.

AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler,
Mr W Clarke, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Dr Farry, Mr Ford,
Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann,
Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill,
Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy,
Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey,
Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P Maskey and Ms J McCann.

NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley,
Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Bresland,
Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burns, Mr T Clarke,
Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Durkan,
Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner,
Mr Hamilton, Mrs Hanna, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin,
Mr Kennedy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea,*

*Dr W McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry,
Mr A Maginness, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr O'Loan, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Ritchie,
Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Burns.

Question accordingly negatived.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Future of Ballycastle Health Centre

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the opportunity to have a debate about the future of the delivery of GP services in my constituency. Ballycastle health centre is trust-owned and was built in 1966 to house one GP service. During the past 42 years, the service has increased, but there has been no structural expansion of the building. The health centre now houses two GP practices, each with three GPs and their accompanying clerical and auxiliary services. The two GP practices serve around 8,000 people, making it a large health centre.

The health centre has been characterised as a D-category building by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Health Estates Agency. What does that mean? The agency has said that improvement to the building is:

“uneconomical or impossible regarding functional suitability for GP clinical practice”.

That tells its own story — the building is no longer fit for the purpose for which it is being used.

According to the three GPs who lobbied me — Dr McLister, Dr Burns and Dr O’Kane — the current useable floor space in the practice is 185 sq m. Departmental guidance states that a practice of that size ought to have at least 560 sq m, which leaves Ballycastle health centre with a massive shortfall.

I visited the health centre earlier this month to see for myself the adequacy, or otherwise, of the facilities.

All Assembly Members will also have received a letter from Dr McLister, Dr Burns and Dr O’Kane regarding the case for a new health centre. It is important that a new health centre is built in the coastal town of Ballycastle.

I welcome the Minister’s attendance, and I hope that he will respond to the points that I and other Members raise about the need for a new health centre in Ballycastle.

When I visited the three doctors, our meeting had to be facilitated in rooms in the adjoining Dalriada Hospital building. It tells its own story when the inadequacy of the building in which GPs work means that a meeting with a public representative has to be facilitated

elsewhere. I heard at first hand from the GPs of the building’s inadequacy to deliver twenty-first century medical care.

The public has certain expectations of their GP service that they are entitled to have met. They expect to be able to consult with their GP privately; they expect to have an adequately sized examination facility; and they expect there to be adequate space for clerical work to be carried out and for their records to be properly housed.

The building being used by the two practices cannot meet those expectations. It has no minor-surgery facility; its treatment rooms have no disabled access; it has no disabled toilets; it has no public toilets; and it does not have a clinical area capable of facilitating gynaecological procedures. That list goes on, and it shows that a large coastal town — the population of which almost doubles during the summer — is being serviced by an overcrowded health centre. That situation must end, and the Department can help to alleviate the problem. It is not possible for the public’s expectations to be met in the existing health centre. Therefore, a new building must be put in place.

It is not only the public who have certain expectations of a GP practice. GPs have expectations of the service that they deliver to their patients. They want to do their best, and they want to deliver the service in the most modern facilities available. GPs want to meet their patients’ demands, but that cannot be done in the dysfunctional building in Ballycastle. The endeavours of GPs based there are being hampered.

Furthermore, the GP practice in question is a teaching practice, and the three doctors whom I have mentioned are affiliated to Queen’s University. Dr O’Kane is a tutor for a fourth-year undergraduate attachment. Queen’s recommends that practices with an attachment should have a dedicated research facility, a library and a specially allocated workspace with Internet access. Those recommendations simply cannot be implemented in the building in Ballycastle and, therefore, they are not available to undergraduate students. Dr McLister is nearing completion of the programme to become a postgraduate tutor for F1 and F2 doctor posts. Doctors under Dr McLister’s tutelage will require a workspace beside their tutor, but that requirement cannot be met in the existing building.

Dr McLister, Dr Burns and Dr O’Kane have identified a location — across the road from the site of Dalriada Hospital and a few minutes’ walk from the existing health centre building — that could be utilised as a GP practice. The Department has prioritised the project, but I appeal for the Department to go further and make the project happen. The solution to the problem in Ballycastle is staring the Department in the face. I appeal to the Department to take action to deliver that important project in my constituency of North Antrim.

During my visit to the practice earlier this month, I was informed that some healthcare has to be administered behind screens in the waiting area. The letter that Dr McLister, Dr Burns and Dr O’Kane sent to all MLAs details the case of a disabled patient who was unable to gain proper access to the health centre building. That letter states:

“On one occasion a collapsed patient had to be manually lifted from a wheelchair to the treatment room couch by three members of staff as the wheelchair did not fit through the door. This caused immense distress to both the patient and the family members who were there. Our disabled patients also have no access to toilet facilities.”

Dr McLister, Dr Burns and Dr O’Kane have to run their practice from two consulting rooms in order to allow two surgeries to run in tandem. That means that one GP cannot practise at the same time as the others, which is a complete waste of human resources. It causes delays and results in an inefficient service.

The Minister knows that that is poor value for money. His Department must make efficiency savings, but it is impossible to start to make efficiencies given this situation. The constraint on this practice means that it is not fit for purpose; it is trying to deliver twenty-first century medication in a twentieth-century facility, and, frankly, the two do not fit.

I hope that the Minister recognises that what is happening in my constituency is no longer acceptable and that he will take measures to improve that unsatisfactory situation. The purpose of the debate is not just to gripe about the problems that my constituents face but to try to identify a course of action to remedy the situation in which Ballycastle health centre finds itself — in an ineffective location and with an inefficient structure.

The Minister kindly visited Rathlin Island recently, at the invitation of his colleague Rev Dr Robert Coulter. He was welcomed there, and he made several improvements that will address the islanders’ health needs. However, the decision to improve islanders’ access to healthcare puts even more strain on the Ballycastle health centre practice, as it happens to deal with the lion’s share of the island’s patients. In recognition of the demands that the Minister knows exists, I urge him to ensure that the plan to develop a new GP surgery at the Dalriada site is given the go-ahead. He cannot, on the one hand, increase the demands and expectations of patients, while, on the other hand, allow them to continue to use an outdated, dilapidated, dysfunctional building that is not fit for purpose. I hope that he recognises the inadequacies of that situation.

The Minister wrote to me last month after I asked him to examine the case, and he agreed that the building is a priority. However, he said that constraints on the budget prevent that priority from being progressed. Again, I urge him to take home the feasibility study that has been submitted to his Department and to read it for himself. If such a situation existed in his constituency or

in any other part of Northern Ireland, it would not be considered to be an acceptable way to deliver services. I urge him to find the necessary resource and mechanism to allow the new GP surgery to go ahead.

In his letter to me, the Minister said that a regional review of capital investment priorities has just been commissioned and that he hopes to report to the Assembly in the autumn. Is the Minister in a position to update Members on that review? I hope that he will not tell us that we must wait another 10 years for the new surgery. Rather, I hope that he will give us some hope that this GP practice in Ballycastle will be able to move ahead, develop a better service and meet the expectations of patients and the hopes and aspirations of the GPs who deliver a very effective service in intolerable conditions. I hope that the Minister recognises that case and responds positively to it.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing the matter to the House.

I spoke to the doctors at the health centre last week, and I was horrified by some of the stories that they told me. I was particularly horrified to hear that the clinic is not yet compatible with provisions in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). Many people will be shocked to hear the examples that Mr Paisley has given today.

The clinic provided all local MLAs with information on the burning issue: the need for a new site for the health centre in Ballycastle.

The issue must be treated with the utmost urgency. The Department could do more to support and engage with GPs to ensure that all health centres are compatible with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Last week, I asked the Minister what health centres had adequate access for people with disabilities, but he was not in a position to answer. I hope that he has further information on that today.

4.30 pm

The facility is not DDA compatible, and Mr Paisley Jnr outlined an occasion when someone in a wheelchair had to be carried by three members of staff across a reception area. Everyone was watching, there was no privacy whatsoever, and the person was carried into a very small treatment room. That example outlines the major problem that must be addressed. We need to find out how widespread the problem is. The Minister should undertake to find out the extent of the problems in health centres regarding compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 to ensure that disabled people get the service that they so rightly deserve.

Last week, the Minister admitted in answer to a question that I put to him, that the accommodation in which the GPs practise in Ballycastle health centre

falls below the standards that he would like for health and social care facilities. I welcome that admission. However, the communities in Ballycastle and Rathlin Island would welcome a firm commitment from the Minister that funding will be provided to bring the GP practice up to standard. The number of people availing themselves of the service is increasing due to the rising population in the area, and if adequate facilities are not provided to match the excellent service that the practice undoubtedly provides, it will be in a state of crisis in 18 months.

The Minister went to Rathlin Island and gave a commitment to increase the access to healthcare for residents of the island. Part of that healthcare must include GP facilities in Ballycastle.

I read over the business case that the practice put forward, and it is extremely comprehensive and sound. The developing better services strategy previously indicated that Ballycastle health centre was a priority for replacement, categorising it as a 1A priority. However, due to the limitations of the current facility, it will not allow the practice to be proactive in the development and redesign of its services, even though that is what the doctors dearly want. The guidelines indicate that the practice has only one third of the floor space that might reasonably be expected of any standard practice. As the business case states, the slippage of the developing better services programme and its subsequent funding is unacceptable in the current climate, and the risks and practice development issues must be addressed immediately.

Mr Paisley Jnr has already referred to some of my other points, so I will not repeat them. However, some examples of the limitations of the current facility include the lack of an appropriate minor surgery facility, the lack of DDA compatibility, insufficient disabled access, no disabled toilets, no public toilets, confidentiality problems at reception, confidentiality problems in waiting areas — the list goes on. Therefore, the issue must be addressed. The Minister went to Rathlin Island to speak to residents, but he should also pay a visit to the health centre in Ballycastle to see the situation for himself. Then he will understand that the MLAs who represent North Antrim are speaking so passionately about the issue because it affects our constituents.

The doctors in the health centre deliver an excellent service for the people of Ballycastle and Rathlin Island, but they need adequate facilities to match the excellent service. I urge the Minister to give a commitment here today that he will deliver facilities for Ballycastle before it is too late. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O’Loan: Ian Paisley Jnr has raised an important issue: medical practitioners should not have to seek political support to achieve ends that ought to be achievable in a professional way. It is a measure of

their frustration and of the seriousness of the situation that they have felt it to be necessary.

The old-fashioned advice to a preacher is to say what you are going to say, say it and say what you have said, so I will do something like that. I intend to make three points: first, to say something about what is wrong; secondly, to say something about what has happened; and thirdly, to say something about what should be done.

I will not say much about what is wrong. I am aware of the detail and the seriousness of the situation; it has been made clear by the two previous contributors. I shall take those points as read, although I emphasise that I am conscious of the detail of those very serious points.

I will move on to say something about what has happened in response to the situation. I wrote to the Northern Health and Social Services Board and received a response, and I have also written to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I know that he will be in touch with me. The Northern Board made clear the course of action that was taken over several years on this issue, but the way in which the board’s management has dealt with the situation does not give me much comfort.

I am aware of a sequence of events that goes back to November 2003. I would not be surprised if it goes back further than that, because the health centre premises in question have been inadequate for a very long time. In November 2003, a process began that examined the potential acquisition of an adjacent site and a newbuild on that site, but it was aborted because a different solution was identified.

Another process seems to have begun in January 2004 to consider a refurbishment, including an extension and improvements in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. That process continued for two years only to be abandoned because a further, apparently better, solution was embarked on, which was to create a modern health and care centre. I am a great believer in health and care centres because they integrate several primary medical facilities, GP services and other direct community medical services.

That option seemed to be, at that point, the best solution, and was allowed to continue for some time. However, at a certain critical stage, although that option was one of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust’s top five primary-care priorities, it was not included in the trust’s overall priorities because of competing pressures for capital funding. It became another cul-de-sac.

I am told that the current state of play is that representatives of the Northern Trust recently met members of both practices and are reviewing what structural work could be done in the existing building, including the creation of an additional surgery and

separate reception areas, subject to the availability of resources.

That sequence of events should concern us all. Often, while an ultimate and best solution is being sought and worked at, temporary measures ought to be taken that would redress a very serious and quite unacceptable situation. That did not happen at all in the intervening years.

The current situation seems weak and does not instil confidence that a proper solution will rapidly ensue, particularly when the phrase “subject to the availability of financial resources” is used.

The delivery of a modern Health Service is one of the big challenges faced by the Minister and Northern Ireland. That challenge presents major problems for the Minister, because the example that we are discussing is one of many that the Minister will have on his desk. There are enough resources to address the problem, but fundamentally better solutions are required. It is not easy to turn our large ship around, and we must give every support to the Minister if and when he proposes radical solutions. The problems at Ballycastle health centre highlight an unacceptable and intolerable situation. The Assembly is entitled to look to the Minister for a remedy and to ask when it will be put in place.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have listened with much interest to the points that Members, particularly Mr Paisley Jnr, have made in the debate, and I share their interest and concern about the future of medical services in Ballycastle.

I am sure that Members will agree that people across Northern Ireland are entitled to have access to safe, high-quality health and care services and that we need the appropriate environment in which to deliver those services. I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed both in the House and in correspondence that I have received from Mr Paisley Jnr, my party colleague Rev Dr Coulter, Mr McKay and Mr O’Loan. I appreciate that the accommodation at Ballycastle health centre is well below standard.

Funding for the improvement of GP practices is contained in the general medical services budget, which also covers the delivery of clinical services for patients through the general medical services contract. That funding envelope is cash limited with no separate budget for premises and infrastructure. Therefore, funding under the contract must be prioritised between both patient services and investment in premises. As with other boards, the Northern Board must consider and evaluate the competing priorities for funding and respond appropriately.

The harsh reality is that the Northern Board, like other boards, is constrained by financial pressures. Therefore, all general medical services and primary-

care pressures for funding in the Northern Board area, including those in Ballycastle, have had to be considered within those budget constraints. Ballycastle health centre is just one example of a Health Service building that would benefit from major infrastructure investment. I am sure that Members will accept that there has been a historic level of underinvestment of capital resources across all of our health and social care facilities. A significant capital-investment programme to address years of chronic underinvestment is required.

The Health Service estate comprises a wide range of properties of varying age and condition — for many of those buildings to be fit for purpose and meet current and future demands, significant gaps must be filled. For example, many of the facilities were built in the early 1960s, which means that they are over 40 years old, are past their best and require renewal. They do not meet our current needs, let alone our future needs. I am also concerned about the safety issues if we continue to use those premises.

The level of investment in our health and social care system has, for too many years, been insufficient, and it is important that the infrastructure receives the necessary level of investment to ensure that, as far as possible, it is fit for purpose to deliver the healthcare services that will see us well into the twenty-first century.

Members will be aware that I made a bid of £5·7 billion for the investment strategy over the next 10 years, £1·1 billion of which was within the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That bid was made on the premise that there had been too many years of neglect in health and social care, and that immediate investment in infrastructure is required in order to sustain services for the future.

4.45 pm

However, after the outcome of the Budget and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland process, I was provided with only £3·3 billion in total, with just over £700 million in the current CSR period. Of that £3·3 billion, almost £1·1 billion is already contractually committed. That level of funding is insufficient to support all the infrastructure investment that is required throughout the health and social care system. Unfortunately, no additional funding is currently available, which means that careful consideration must be given to investment proposals.

Early in summer 2008, in the light of existing funding constraints and in order to ensure that available resources are targeted appropriately, I instigated a strategic review of capital priorities. The review was led by health estates in conjunction with the Department’s infrastructure investment directorate. Its aim was to examine trusts’ and boards’ proposals for infrastructure needs in the medium to long term, within budgetary constraints, and to make recommendations to me on the way forward.

In that context, infrastructure includes newbuilds, equipment and information technology. Existing facilities that require significant refurbishment are also considered. As part of the review, each of the trusts and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have been asked to review their proposals for infrastructure developments and submit their priorities to the Department.

Today, I received a report on the review. Although I will need time to consider its findings, it is already clear that I must take some difficult decisions about which capital projects I will be able to fund, not only during the current CSR period but during the decade beyond. The total demand across the estate exceeds my allocated budget. Therefore, I must carefully consider the review's findings. Several key initiatives compete for that limited funding, including the primary and community care infrastructure programme. That is a Province-wide infrastructure investment programme, which is to be delivered over the next 20 years.

The Ballycastle health and care centre forms part of that primary and community care programme and is one of the priorities identified by the trust. However, I must add that many other facilities are in a similar position. Until I have had the opportunity to give full consideration to my capital programme in the round, I will not be able to make comments about capital provision for Ballycastle's practices. As I said earlier, it is simply not possible, with my budget, to meet all needs immediately. I must consider and make difficult decisions about priorities in order to ensure that the limited funding at my disposal is used to maximum effect. I am sure that Members would expect nothing less.

I listened carefully to Mr Paisley's comments about basic health and safety, disability access, provision of public and staff toilets, and so forth, at the existing building in Ballycastle. Clearly, the current situation is unacceptable and must not continue.

Mr O'Loan made the point that while we wait on the new proposal for a health and care centre in Ballycastle — which will cost around £12 million that I do not have at present and will have to consider carefully in the light of the strategic review — there is a problem in the here and now and with what citizens in Ballycastle have to tolerate from their primary-care provision.

I undertake to the House that I will reconsider existing premises. If I am not able to proceed with full-blown investment of £12 million for a new health and care centre within a reasonable period, I will examine carefully the existing premises that doctors and patients must use in Ballycastle.

I am not aware of the situation there because I have not visited the premises. However, as described by Mr Paisley Jnr, the basic requirements of disability access, confidential consultation, provision of public and

patient toilets and other facilities being provided are far from tolerable.

I will investigate as quickly as possible, and I will respond to the Members who have spoken this afternoon.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 6 October 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you are careful not to set precedents, even for points of order. However, would it be in order of me to express, on behalf of the Executive and the Assembly, my sincere sympathy and condolences to the deputy First Minister on the death of his mother earlier this morning? Anybody who has spoken to the deputy First Minister over the past weeks and months about his mother's illness will know just how close they were.

The passing of a mother is a difficult time for anyone; many of us have already passed through that shadow. Although politics may be considered a rough trade, all Members know that we must set aside any political issues and recognise the difficulties that the family are facing at this time. This is a time of deep mourning for the family. They will have many happy memories; however, they are passing through a time of great difficulty.

On behalf of my party, as well as the Executive and the Assembly, I express my sympathy to the whole family circle to make it clear that we will remember them in our thoughts and our prayers.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I thank the First Minister for his comments, and I join him in expressing sympathy to the deputy First Minister on the loss of his mother, Peggy McGuinness, whom I knew personally. She will be sadly missed in the Derry area and, indeed, further afield. She was a very well-known and respected woman. Her sense of humour, as well as her political prowess for a woman in her eighties, will be very much missed. On behalf of my party, I express my condolences to the wider family circle. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: Further to the First Minister's point of order, I express sympathy to the deputy First Minister on behalf of the SDLP. To lose one's mother is a great blow to anyone, at any age, and it is deeply regrettable.

Mr Kennedy: I join with others in extending sympathy on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party to the McGuinness family on the death of their mother. We are not made of stone, and we realise that the passing of one of the main figures in any family will cause obvious distress. We extend our thoughts and prayers to the deputy First Minister and his family at this time.

Mrs Long: I add the condolences of the Alliance Party to those already expressed in the Chamber. We send our thoughts and prayers to the McGuinness family at this time. We were aware that Martin's mother had been ill, and that it has been a difficult period for him, both politically and personally. We recognise that and want to extend our sympathy to him and to the wider family circle.

Mr Speaker: We all sympathise with the McGuinness family at this time.

Before we proceed this morning, I wish to comment on remarks that were made during the sitting of the Assembly on Tuesday 30 September 2008. On studying the Official Report of proceedings, I noted with concern comments made in relation to Mr Alex Maskey by the Minister for Social Development, when she was responding to the debate on a private Member's motion. My concerns about the Minister's comments were shared by other Members who approached me during the hours and days following the debate.

My concerns arose from two issues. First, although there were no unparliamentarily expressions used, the remarks did not, in my view, come up to the standards of good temper and moderation that should be expected from debates in this House. Secondly, and perhaps to compound the issue, the remarks in question bore no relevance whatsoever to either the subject of the motion being debated or to comments made by any Member during the debate. For both those reasons, I find the Minister's remarks to have fallen short of the requirements of Standing Orders and the standards of the House.

The point of order made by Mr A Maskey provided him with an adequate opportunity to reply to the comments, and I encourage the Minister to reflect on the reply and on my comments this morning. I remind Members that these standards of which I have spoken — good temper and moderation in debate — apply to all.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you explain why you have not referred to good temper and moderation in other cases? There have been numerous examples of bad temper and lack of moderation in many speeches up until this point. Why are you making this ruling on this particular incident?

Mr Speaker: On at least four occasions in the House, I have spoken to Members and Ministers about going outside the debate, whatever the subject. Secondly,

on a number of occasions, I have encouraged Members to be of good temperament and to show moderation when they are speaking in the House. This is not the first occasion; and anyone who reads the Hansard report will see that it clearly shows that the Minister went totally outside the subject of the debate on three occasions.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The draft regulations are subject to the affirmative procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Employment Act 2002. The regulations were laid in draft on 19 August 2008 and, subject to the approval of the Assembly, it is intended that they will come into operation on 22 October 2008 in line with amendments to the equivalent legislation in Great Britain. The regulations will amend the Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002. The 2002 regulations implement a European directive, which sought to give fixed-term employees the right, in principle, not to be treated less favourably than permanent employees of the same employer doing comparable work, including in relation to statutory sick pay (SSP).

Employers have a statutory liability to pay SSP for up to 28 weeks to any employee who is incapable of work for four or more consecutive days and who satisfies the qualifying conditions. Prior to the introduction of the 2002 regulations, SSP was not payable where contracts of service were for three months or fewer. The 2002 regulations removed that exclusion. However, when considering the GB version of those 2002 regulations, the English Court of Appeal ruled that the removal of that exclusion did not apply to temporary agency workers. That decision clarified the law: agency workers in GB, and, therefore, in Northern Ireland, with contracts of three months or fewer, are not entitled to SSP. That is against the policy intention of the 2002 regulations.

Members will be aware that the principle of the statutory payments legislation is to treat all workers who are liable to pay National Insurance contributions on their income in the same way, regardless of their length of contract. That court ruling means that agency workers with contracts of three months or fewer are the only group of workers excluded from entitlement to statutory sick pay, despite their qualifying for other statutory payments such as statutory maternity, paternity and adoption pay. These amending regulations, which are minor and technical in nature, correct that anomaly and restore the initial policy intention of offering further protection to agency workers on short contracts.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their

detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the draft regulations. At its meeting on 17 September, the Committee recommended that the draft regulations be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee, I support the motion. The regulations have been laid in draft and are subject to affirmative resolution. On 2 July, the Committee first examined the Department's proposal with regard to these regulations, and on 17 September, it examined the proposed statutory rule. On both occasions, the Committee was content with the policy proposal.

The Minister has explained the purpose of the rule and the technicalities involved. The rule will allow agency workers the same rights as their permanent colleagues, and that is to be welcomed. It is a significant step forward in the recognition of all workers as being equal. It is a major boost for the high proportion of women who undertake agency work to allow them greater flexibility to manage homes, families, and their many other commitments. No longer will such workers be treated and regarded as second class.

With that in mind, I am pleased to give the Committee's support to this motion.

12.15 pm

Mr Newton: I welcome the motion. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning said, there was considerable debate in the Committee on the matter, which will bring into full rights many who were excluded. There has been a tendency in recent years to use agency workers — I do not want to use the term "abuse" — in the knowledge that there were rights from which they were excluded. Therefore, I welcome the amended regulations.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to those Members who contributed. Although the provisions of the regulations are, as I said, minor and technical in nature, and are required in order to restore the original intention of the 2002 regulations, they will benefit many agency workers.

The House has, on several occasions over the past 12 months, I believe, debated issues pertaining to agency workers, to their rights and to people with unscrupulous employers who might abuse those rights. This amendment closes one loophole, and I welcome the support of the Committee and those Members who contributed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Diseases of Animals Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 February 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill (NIA Bill 22/07).

I seek the approval of the House to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill to what might seem to be a very generous deadline, especially as the Department's consultation process resulted in only five responses. However, the Committee gave the matter consideration and considerable thought before arriving at the date of 17 February 2009, which, we believe, represents a realistic target.

Obviously, if the Committee can complete its formal scrutiny of the proposed Bill any sooner, it most certainly will. The Committee office and officials from the Department have met in order to discuss the logistics of progressing the Bill, and that contact will continue throughout the process. As the Committee is not in a position to return to the House to ask for a second extension, it is essential that we get the Bill right in the first instance, and I believe that we are doing so.

The current legislation, the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, is more than 25 years old. When the Second Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill was introduced on 15 September 2008, I spoke of the risks posed to the industry and the Northern Ireland economy by continual threats from established diseases, such as TB and brucellosis, and new diseases, such as bluetongue.

Since the 1981 Order, we have seen the devastation that was caused by BSE and foot-and-mouth disease. The proposed Bill recognises correctly the threats of those and other animal diseases and the valuable lessons to be learned from the way in which the Government, the Department and the industry reacted to those threats.

It is imperative that those lessons are included in the legislation, and the Committee intends to take extensive evidence from the Department and the industry to ensure that the Bill affords the utmost protection to the Northern Ireland economy. In introducing the Bill, the Minister acknowledged that the Committee had received three presentations on it. That is a mark of how important the Bill is and why the Committee must take an appropriate period to scrutinise it.

During the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill, several Members referred to the Ruddock Report. That

report was published as a result of an inquiry into the Department's handling of the alpha-nortestosterone debacle, and it particularly considered the Department's power of entry. Lessons have also been learned from that event, and those lessons do not necessarily afford protection to the industry per se. Rather, they offer protection to the people who work in the industry. It is also imperative that appropriate consideration be taken to ensure that the Bill provides that protection.

I have outlined several logistical considerations to a Bill at Committee Stage. As the Department must do, the Committee must consult on the matter, and the public notice for that consultation was placed the day after the Bill passed to the Committee. Unlike the Department, the Committee must consider any written responses, decide on which witnesses to call for evidence, take that evidence and examine the Bill on a clause-by-clause bases before producing a draft report, which the Committee intends to issue to the Department for consideration. Following that, the report must be printed, laid in the Business Office and considered by the House.

Given the importance of the Bill, the Committee is of the view that that cannot be done within the period that is defined by Standing Order 33(2), particularly as the Assembly will be in recess for part of that period. The period to which we seek to extend also includes the Christmas recess, but it is a realistic period, given the depths of consideration that are required.

The Committee takes the matter of protecting against animal diseases seriously, and it is certainly not our intention to delay the Bill any longer than the 18 months that it has taken the Department to bring it to the House. It is an extremely important piece of legislation, and the Department was right to take that time to ensure that it had, in its mind, got it right. Equally, it is important that the Committee is not rushed in its deliberations of the Bill and that it is afforded the opportunity to hear from the Department and the industry so that it can consider the impact of each and every clause on the industry and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

I hope that the Committee will, in conjunction with the Department, get the opportunity to get it right. We cannot afford any other result.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 February 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill (NIA Bill 22/07).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

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 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 in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the delayed publication of a strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish their strategy without further delay and to detail how this strategy will promote reconciliation, the ideal of a truly shared future and how it will help the Executive's commitment to eradicate poverty.

I apologise on behalf of my co-proposer Dolores Kelly for her inability to be present today due to a long-standing family commitment.

The SDLP accepts the Alliance Party's amendment, but with some reservation, because it calls for the production of:

"an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities."

The nub of the motion is the SDLP's frustration at the incompetence and fumbling by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in relation to the publication of a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration. I hope that the Alliance Party will acknowledge that the Minister for Social Development has made progress on housing, and I will deal with that matter in more detail later.

Without desegregating housing, integrated education will not work. Through their inability to publish the cohesion strategy, the political masters at OFMDFM have failed to display even minimal competence. Time and time again, the Assembly has been fobbed off with a series of evasive and waffly answers from OFMDFM. Over a period of six months, in answer to Members' questions about the cohesion strategy, there have been increasingly incoherent answers on when that strategy will be published. On 1 April 2008, April Fool's Day, OFMDFM stated:

"We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals".

On 22 May 2008, some seven weeks later, OFMDFM again stated:

"We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals".

On 28 May 2008, in response to a further question OFMDFM repeated the phrase:

"at an advanced stage".

However, on that occasion the word "strategy" was substituted by "programme".

On 28 May 2008, in answer to a question from a Sinn Féin Member, OFMDFM again promised that it was "finalising detailed proposals" and was:

"committed to tackling racism, sectarianism, and intolerance in any of their manifestations."

Members should note that the order of the words relegates sectarianism to second place behind racism. Sectarianism, racism and intolerance are inextricably linked; they are all facets of one prism. No one abhors racism more than I, as a representative of South Belfast, which is the most ethnically diverse constituency in the North. However, sectarianism is the primary cause of division here. It is hundreds of years old, whereas racism is a relatively recent offshoot and manifestation of that original cancer.

On 10 June 2008, my colleague John Dallat asked for an assurance that the amalgamation of the separate strategies into a single cohesion strategy will not involve a reduction in the level of funding that is available. OFMDFM gave an answer to a question about racial equality that had not been asked. That seemed to be another diversionary tactic, an impression that was reinforced in an answer to a question from a Sinn Féin Member.

On 10 June 2008, OFMDFM stated its:

"intention to publish the Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration as soon as possible."

OFMDFM is, undoubtedly, playing the Assembly for a fool in the matter of the strategy's publication. The DUP and Sinn Féin appear to be conniving and employing diversionary tactics to shift the focus from their obligation to produce a cohesive strategy towards a watered down programmatic approach on sectarianism that has been further diluted to a racial equality programme. I recognise that racism is a serious problem in society, but it should not be cynically used and abused to divert attention from the core issue of sectarianism.

The publication of the strategy has been caught up in the perpetual rowing behind closed doors in OFMDFM. Much as the DUP and Sinn Féin may despise each other and fight like cats and dogs, they are united in their lust for power, domination and division, and they are determined to hold on to power. Given how the two parties act, it is perhaps naive to hope or expect that they will do anything to dismantle sectarianism.

The Executive have not met for more than three months, but neither the First Minister nor the deputy

First Minister has missed any photo opportunities during that period. However, as far as the community is concerned, it has been a case of all picture, no sound and certainly no substance.

12.30 pm

I want to end on a note of hope. One of the Executive's successes has been Minister for Social Development Margaret Ritchie's performance in office. She has used her ministerial powers to tackle the growing housing crisis and effect positive social change in pursuit of reconciliation and a truly shared future. Over the next three years, the Department for Social Development (DSD) will develop at least 30 shared future housing neighbourhoods in existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates. Those neighbourhoods will allow existing tenants to live in an area where diversity is welcomed and encouraged.

Radical social change is necessary in order to banish the issues that divide us and enable us to work together to overcome global challenges. We cannot expect to heal our divisions if we continue to reinforce them by maintaining segregation. For too long, people have grown up, played and lived in separate neighbourhoods, been taught in separate schools, followed different sports and been slow to share the workplace — those are the most regrettable legacies of the Troubles. That segregation fuelled the conflict, and, because of that physical and mental entrenchment, communities grew further apart. Furthermore, they were unwilling and unable to recognise that segregation was the cause of their insecurity, not the solution to it.

A proactive, progressive public policy can help to achieve reconciliation, and housing is the obvious starting point. Margaret Ritchie has ensured that the concept of a shared future will be a central theme in all housing policy development. We know that 80% of people, given the choice, want to live in a mixed neighbourhood. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a small Housing Trust development in Warrenpoint, where people from all backgrounds lived side by side peacefully. Both our neighbours were policemen, and we were all good neighbours. Today, individuals who are waiting for shared social housing have little or no choice in that regard and, usually, end up in single-identity estates because there is no alternative. They must tolerate flags and bunting outside their house regardless of their feelings on the matter.

A considerable amount of community involvement is required in those shared future developments to ensure that tenants are ready to commit to sharing and to abandon the trappings of a single-identity enclave. It is not sufficient to focus attention on new developments, because the majority of social housing neighbourhoods remain single-identity estates. Five neighbourhoods have already — with community support — signed up

for the programme, such as the Ballynafeigh neighbourhood in south Belfast.

A shared future means a better future; however, that is not enough. A shared future in housing is, at present, only possible in areas that already have some cross-community integration. Much more work is required to counter the mentality that exists in staunch single-identity communities. Moreover, our system of allocating houses according to objective need reinforces the status quo. The existing housing segregation leads to segregated waiting lists, and, therefore, in the majority of instances, housing will be allocated to people from the same community background as the previous tenant. That perpetuates the segregation.

Minister Ritchie announced her intention to regard shared future housing as an entitlement for those who want it. It is a radical proposition that replicates existing provision in the education sector. Many parents choose integrated education because they want their children to be educated in a mixed and shared environment. The state, rightly, strives to meet that demand. Why does the housing sector not offer such provision? If parents want to raise their children in a mixed and shared community, the state has a duty to meet that demand.

Mrs Long: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; and calls on the Executive to meet immediately to commit to producing an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities.”

I thank the Members for proposing the motion and accepting the amendment.

Our amendment does not seek to change the thrust of the motion. Instead, it presses the need for action as well as strategy. Unfortunately, this devolved Administration has been rather poor at addressing those issues. In fairness to the current First Minister and deputy First Minister, it is not solely their problem, because very little progress was made when previous Executives dealt with that aspect of policy. In fact, it is to our shame that most progress in relation to a shared future and a racial equality strategy was achieved during direct rule, when triennial action plans were developed and annual action plans were formulated.

We need to get to grips with that, because it is probably one of the biggest challenges that faces the Assembly. It is not an easy issue to wrangle with, because it cuts to the very heart of the divisions in society. It also cuts through almost every aspect of life. Many reports have cited the extent to which sectarianism, division, racism, bigotry and hatred influence people's choices about where to go to school or where to live; where they feel safe going to work or to receive training; about their access to jobs and services; or about all of those. It cuts

right across the board, and it is something that must be tackled if people are to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and to participate fully in their community.

This matter will not be easy to address, but the fact that it is difficult is not an excuse to delay the process. The divisions go to the core of our community. Fear, prejudice, bigotry and a lack of trust hamper political progress in the institutions, and hamper the ability of communities to fulfil their potential. Furthermore, they hamper the ability of individuals to make their own choices, free from any pressure.

I am honest and open, and do not claim that the shared future strategy and racial equality strategy are perfect documents. The Alliance Party broadly welcomed them, as did the people who implemented and delivered them. They were a good place to start. When the Executive and OFMDFM announced at the start of this Assembly that they wanted to review the strategy, the Alliance Party made it very clear that it was not averse to that, and that is on record.

It appears that almost every direct rule document has to be unpicked and rebuilt from scratch, and we expressed our concern about that. One needs a wheel to get from A to B, but one does not need to reinvent it. Any policy that has the thumbprint of the direct rule Administration on it tends to be jettisoned, regardless of its worth. That must be overcome.

We recognised that the strategy would have much more power in communities if the imprimatur of a locally devolved Administration supported it. We had no difficulty with the current Administration, the Executive and OFMDFM wishing to review it. We would have preferred to see aspects of the strategy expanded to cover other groups that are not currently mentioned in the racial equality or the shared future strategies. Although dealing with their exclusion from society may be implicit in the strategy, it would be good if it were explicit. From that perspective, we did not have particular difficulties with the notion of a review.

We hope that, with the Executive and OFMDFM imprimatur, they will take ownership of the strategy and pursue it enthusiastically. That is something that we would welcome. However, there has been little enthusiasm, even to complete the review and submit a proposal to the Committee so that progress can be made. The time taken on this process has been excessive. It would be hard to say otherwise because — as Carmel Hanna rightly said — we have been told that the strategy has been at an advanced stage of development since the start of the year.

On several occasions, the Committee has been told that the submission of the strategy is imminent, yet we still do not have the document. The Committee was assured that its members would see it before the Halloween

recess, and I am sure that the Junior Minister will refer to that in his response. I welcome that assurance, but I will believe it when I see it, because we were also promised it before the summer recess. It was also hinted that we might even have seen it before the Easter recess. We are, therefore, dealing with a moveable feast. It concerns me that those deadlines are put back and that we see no progress.

I hope that the junior Minister will not be overly insulted if I say that OFMDFM has become something of an abyss into which things disappear. After entering that chasm, only the most dogged of documents escape and see the light of day again.

A few weeks ago, one of my colleagues quipped that the strategy — CSI — is well named because, at this point, we would need crime scene investigators to locate it.

Progress must be made to produce something substantive, which brings me to the amendment. Far from indicating that the Alliance Party is dissatisfied with individual Ministers — which appears to be what Members have taken from it — the amendment attempts to focus on the fact that the policy is not just about strategic thinking at Executive level, or about platitudes; it is about producing detailed action plans that can then be supported on the ground, where they will make the most difference.

We have had to wait a long time for the strategy, and the last time we had a shared future strategy, we had an equally long wait for the resultant action plans. I am pressing for an action plan now because, given that the Executive have had so long to work on the matter, I want them to produce a strategy and an action plan, so that we can get started on making changes.

The experience with the previous strategy was not that it was wrong, but that its vision could have been expanded. For example, the direct feedback on the racial equality strategy indicated that robust actions were necessary. In some ways, reviewing and beefing up action plans — in response to comments from those who were charged with delivering the shared future strategy and the racial equality strategy — is more important than rewriting the strategic document.

The amendment focuses on a couple of areas in which central Government have a role, because the feedback that the Alliance Party has received — whether through the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister or through questions in the House — indicates a focus on the impact of local government and a bottom-up approach.

Given my position as chairperson of the good relations partnership in Belfast City Council — so I declare that interest — I recognise the important role that local government must play in connecting with the public and in being able to facilitate local community groups

progressing at their own pace; however, there is a much wider aspect to segregation in our society that requires the Assembly's support and action.

The shared future strategy will impact on employment matters — the Minister for Employment and Learning spoke earlier — because people's choices about where they work, live or access training are restricted because of divisions in society. People have mind maps that delineate where they feel safe to go, and unless we recognise and deal with such divisions when producing policies in all areas of governance, we will not be able to offer people the support that they require to make choices.

Shared housing has already been mentioned, and I do not wish to criticise anything being done by the housing Minister to create more of it, but we must recognise that, with regard to public housing, it is a drop in the ocean. For example, we must consider the people who live outside such designated developments, and the protection and support that they receive when they are under pressure and facing difficulties from intimidation. Unfortunately, the policy still appears to be to move those who are threatened and intimidated, rather than those who threaten and intimidate. Therefore, although shared-housing projects are useful as a template for the future, we must consider other matters — such as the right to live in a single-identity area — which do not just affect people who make the choices, but also everyone around them. In essence, the first person of a different identity to move into a single-identity area breaches someone else's express wish. So there are issues that must be addressed.

The Alliance Party wants the Executive's document to be produced swiftly; a detailed action plan to be prepared and to go to public consultation; and for Members to reach the point at which we were when elected, when we were in the process of actually delivering a shared future, rather than talking about it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment.

12.45 pm

I wish to clarify my party's position. When I first heard that we were to debate CSI, I, too, thought that the motion was about 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation', which is one of my favourite television programmes. However, as has been said, the motion is much more important than that — it is about producing a strategy for our Province.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am aware of how much hard work has been done to produce the strategy. Undoubtedly, the strategy must be produced. However, the strategy that is published must be the correct strategy, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

It must answer all the needs that pertain to fairness and equality that exist in the Province, and, for that to be achieved, a great deal of thought must be put into the proposals and recommendations that are made.

I agree that it is vital to have a strategy in place and to adhere to its recommendations. Although I would prefer it if the strategy were being implemented already, it is most important that the right strategy be released, so that it can play a part in changing the situation in Northern Ireland. The strategy is important to all Committee members. It has not been forgotten about or pushed aside in any shape or form. I am aware of my own drive and that of the Committee to eradicate poverty. The implementation of the strategy is one of the Committee's commitments and remains of the utmost importance.

I am also aware that, with the so-called credit crunch looming, it is even more vital that we propose and follow the correct approach, in order to ensure that those who are already struggling to keep their heads above water do not sink to the bottom as a result of the extra financial burden. The concepts of a shared future and the eradication of poverty are linked in the sense that we in Northern Ireland are working together to cross all the existing boundaries. We can achieve a great deal as a Province when we have people from all ethnic groups, all religious persuasions and all political backgrounds working together.

On Saturday morning, I hosted a coffee morning in Newtownards town hall to raise money for the families of soldiers, sailors and members of the Royal Air Force. I was heartened to receive donations, both big and small, from all sectors of the Ards community. Ladies had baked big cakes and small cakes for the occasion, and I even met a woman who came just to do her bit in the kitchen. Those people came together as a result of a common bond, which is that they have loved ones working in the armed forces. Therefore, they wanted to do their bit to help. In those few hours, we were able to raise more than £1,000 to help those in need. I would love to see that happen on a larger scale right across the Province; that is, people working together to do good and to achieve a result. That can happen, and, for it to happen, the strategy is integral.

I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to publish the strategy only after the Committee has considered it and made its recommendations. That request is made in the knowledge that they are already working hard on getting it right. I must make it clear to colleagues — because it seems to be unclear at present — that the strategy is, and will remain, an urgent matter; therefore, it will not be put on the back-burner. I have every reason to expect that the strategy will be released as soon as it is ready and correct.

There is no doubt that some of the old division lines still exist in the Province. Moreover, some new ones have developed — as the number of migrant workers has increased, new prejudices have come to the fore. However, it is also clear that much work is already being done in the Province to combat growing prejudices. I congratulate those community leaders who have worked so hard to ensure that all members of the community are included in their schemes and who, in some places, have gone so far as to arrange cookery lessons with the help of translators to enable migrant workers to cook efficiently and economically.

Such work is happening already and is being sponsored through different initiatives. Although more funding may become available when the strategy is completed and the Committee has made its recommendations, I want to make it clear that work is being done with communities to promote cohesion, sharing and integration. Previously, the junior Ministers have indicated that £1 million is available to fund 23 different ethnic organisations. That shows that work is being done at different levels.

The work that is being undertaken now does not rely completely on OFMDFM's releasing a paper, although that will enhance that work. I have every confidence that when the strategy is released — it is a matter of urgency, so it will be published soon — it will complement what is already in place. Members are aware of the £21 million that OFMDFM has set aside for good relations over the next three years. A further £7.5 million, again over the next three years, has been allocated to improve relationships and to deal with challenges. Again, that shows OFMDFM's commitment.

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

Mr Shannon: We must support the motion. We must also do our bit to contribute to the strategy, and we must have faith in our community workers.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I echo the views of all Members in wanting to see the publication of a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy as soon as possible. Therefore, I was pleased when the First and deputy First Minister confirmed to the OFMDFM Committee last week that that strategy would be with the Committee before the Halloween recess. Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue.

It is important to have a strategy that promotes substantive equality through the eradication of inequality and exclusion; factors that have sustained racism and sectarianism. Only when that is attained, will we have established the ground on which we can build a shared and better future. I hope that the strategy will act as a road map towards the building of the kind of shared and better future that we all want to see — one that is based on solid building blocks that tackle exclusion and inequality.

The deputy First Minister has signalled a financial investment of around £29 million to roll out the programme. We have agreed the building blocks of laws and practices that set the context for the resource allocation for building a shared and better future. I look forward to hearing the details of the proposals.

There can be no hierarchy of equality. Any good-relations strategy that is based on having due regard to promote equality of opportunity and does not include actions to address relationships between section 75 vulnerable groups in wider society is not only doomed to failure, but ignores the legal and policy base that gives it legitimacy in the expenditure of public resources.

The funding programme must enable excluded groups to identify what we must do to change our behaviour and our implementation of public policy. If that is not done, we are in danger of labelling them as victims who need support rather than groups and people who need resources to change the patterns and behaviours that have caused their exclusion.

I am aware that some politicians would prefer some minority groups to stay silent, or see a good psychiatrist. However, Sinn Féin is determined to deliver genuine equality and good relations for all in this society.

Recent unwise and unsafe commentary by some politicians — one of whom may be forgiven because, as she has acknowledged, she is not the brightest light in the candelabra — makes it all the more necessary for the House to affirm that equality for all is at the heart of building a shared and better future. I reassure all who experience disadvantage and exclusion that that is Sinn Féin's central position; a position that agrees with the Equality Commission's guidelines, which state:

"social cohesion requires equality to be reinforced by good community relations".

Sinn Féin's view of a shared and better future is premised on a belief that community relations that are built on inequality are community relations that are built on sand. No matter how close the contact that different groups may have, unless that contact is underpinned by equality, it is absolutely meaningless.

Men and women share houses and have good relations. However, that does not mean that gender inequality is not a crucial problem in our society.

Social need is closely interrelated to cohesion, sharing and integration. Both the St Andrews Agreement and the Programme for Government set the context for tackling poverty through the criteria of objective need. Therefore, I hope that Ministers such as Margaret Ritchie ensure that people in north Belfast are allocated houses based on their need. Currently, more than 80% of those on housing waiting lists in north Belfast are of a Catholic and nationalist background. However, their

needs are being undermined by the pursuit of a flawed, shared future agenda.

Hopefully, it is not the case that the proposers of the motion want to talk about how much they want a shared and better future while wishing to maintain the same structures, patterns and outcomes of deprivation that make people's lives a misery. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I broadly support the motion and the amendment. This Assembly is founded on the principle of a shared community.

Intrinsic to that concept, and its realisation, is the recognition of our diversity and the determination to make mutual respect and recognition the basis for a Northern Ireland that is at ease with itself and that is characterised by a more pluralist society.

The Ulster Unionist Party accepts that existing patterns of division are likely to remain for some time, and we have expressed our misgivings about certain policy aspects of the 'A Shared Future' document. Too much of that document is intent on undermining — rather than on being more positive towards — pluralism.

Building a shared community that best reflects the values of the modern United Kingdom is at the heart of my party's vision for Northern Ireland. That vision of a shared community is an essential part of the entire political project that is represented by the Assembly, and any foot dragging in that regard has the potential to destabilise the institutions and their effective operation. The strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration — and the delay in its publication by the OFMDFM — therefore, matter.

Many people outside the Assembly have understandable fears that OFMDFM is paying lip service to the concept of a shared future; they fear that OFMDFM is talking the talk, but not walking the walk. Many suspect that OFMDFM is locked in a bear hug of mutual veto and that that sterile situation has led to the paralysis in Northern Ireland's Government at the Executive level.

On 30 May of this year, the junior Ministers, Mr Donaldson and Mr Kelly, emphasised the importance of working towards a society in which there is respect for each other's traditions when they opened the conference, 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration — our role in a better future'. On that occasion, junior Minister Donaldson said:

"We have now entered a new and hopeful period in our shared history. We have an unprecedented opportunity to build a shared and better future for all."

However, a mere four months later, the Executive is in cold storage, having failed to meet since June. Where is the vision of 30 May? What has happened to that unprecedented opportunity? Is a shared and better future for all no longer a priority?

The danger that lies at the heart of a failure to work on the basis of mutual respect, and to give proper weighting to cohesion and a shared future, is that it helps to create a political vacuum, which nurtures the attitudes that contributed to the painful, bitter experience of the Troubles.

Society is observing the Executive's pathetic inability to function in any meaningful manner. We must ask how, after the past three months of inaction and paralysis afflicting OFMDFM, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister can speak with authority on the issue of cohesion, sharing and integration. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion.

Cohesion, mutual respect and working together are not optional add-ons to the institutions; they should be at the core of what we are doing here and what we are trying to build. Action to provide for the most vulnerable can be achieved only by strong legislation and leadership, which, in turn, are dependent on a mutually agreed programme. Recently, the Executive signed up to the UK-wide goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020. How can that goal be delivered when the Executive cannot even meet? They cannot meet even in the context of a global economic crisis.

The strength of the Assembly is based on mutual recognition and on mutual respect, and we achieve that by recognising our diversity — not by pretending that division does not exist. We cannot build cohesion, sharing and integration through trite slogans or by denying social realities that have emerged over generations.

Mr Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Kennedy: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a profound responsibility to end the present sterile stand-off.

1.00 pm

Mr McCausland: The creation of a shared and better future for Northern Ireland is an important point and clearly requires a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration. Equality, diversity and interdependence are important principles for the future of Northern Ireland and this part of the United Kingdom.

Carmel Hanna's speech sounded more like a party political broadcast than a speech about cohesion, sharing and integration. It seems that the only party doing anything in this regard — in her perspective — is the SDLP. I suggest that that is rather wide of the mark, and that there are issues that her party should examine.

She talked about shared housing — and her colleague Alban Maginness is here today. When the community that used to live in the Torrens estate in north Belfast were forced out of their homes by republican intimidation, Mr Maginness subsequently said that that

was fine, because the land could be used for nationalists. He said that it was a windfall site. A windfall is where someone receives good fortune unexpectedly. The description of what happened in the Torrens area as a windfall — or good fortune — was a sad reflection on how Alban views the housing situation in that part —

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, I reject entirely what the Member has said. Secondly, I remind him that the decline of the Torrens estate was due to several factors. Certainly, there was some intimidation. However, the people who left the Torrens estate did so in an organised fashion and to an agreed programme, and were rehoused immediately. The Torrens area was a windfall site in the context of providing additional housing, as it had become a sink estate. There was an opportunity for it to be rehabilitated and rebuilt. That was done and, therefore, it was a windfall site for housing in north Belfast.

Mr Speaker: In relation to the point of order, perhaps the Member was interpreting what the Member had said. However, he may wish to clarify his position.

Mr McCausland: I am grateful to Mr Maginness for confirming that he described that site as a windfall. It was a shameful and sectarian viewpoint, and it is still the same today.

As regards shared housing, when plans were put forward for the Summervale site in north Belfast, another member of the SDLP Alex Attwood opposed progress on that site and demanded that a very high wall be built around it so that there would be a clear division between it and the neighbouring Mountainview estate. It is interesting to see that there are issues not just for one or two parties, but for all political parties, including the SDLP.

It is not just an issue of shared housing. There are also issues of how people view others and view the past. I reiterate what I said in the Chamber on 29 September — the comments made by Gerry Kelly on the television programme about the Maze Prison breakout have set back community relations in Northern Ireland by several years. There was no sense of remorse for the actions of that day; no sense of deep regret for what happened. That absence of any sense of remorse has been damaging for community relations and for the creation of a shared and better future.

Naomi Long said that most progress was made under direct rule. She referred to the creation of the shared future strategy and the triennial action plan. Progress, or at least developments, took place under direct rule. However, it was done with very little political input and very little sense of ownership, and the resultant document was a poor one.

It is a crucial issue, and we should take our time to get it right.

Dr Farry: I appreciate that the strategy did not have a huge input from political parties. However, does the Member acknowledge that the consultation on 'A Shared Future' received an unprecedented level of response — over 10,000 responses — from across the community?

Mr McCausland: Irrespective of the number of letters that are manufactured and sent in, the process is flawed if politicians, who are the elected voice of the entire community, do not have a share in it. Indeed, even Naomi Long acknowledged that the document is flawed. The issue of a shared future is fundamental; therefore, we must set about the process properly and get it right.

Several of this morning's newspapers refer to the creation of a shared future in the world of sport. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has made a number of significant references in recent weeks to the need for the Gaelic Athletic Association to make changes to its ethos to create a better shared future for the world of sport. Unionists from across the unionist family have acknowledged that the GAA has made some changes but have highlighted the need for further change. The problem is that both Sinn Féin and the SDLP have failed to support that call. Those parties have failed to promote the need for change towards a shared future in the realm of sport.

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

Mr McCausland: This matter is crucial, and it must be dealt with properly.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. The deputy First Minister is committed to good relations based on equality. Indeed, Martin McGuinness has stated that OFMDFM:

"will introduce a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration to tackle sectarianism and racism, which will refresh the previous Administration's separate but associated policies on good relations and good race relations." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 30, p26, col 1*].

As Martina Anderson said, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was reminded last Wednesday that the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration will be presented to the Committee before the Halloween recess; that is a welcome development. It is the role of the Department — in which the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and their colleagues operate — to preside over the delivery of a clear, shared vision of the type of society that we want to live in.

Contrary to the First Minister's recent arrogance, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are effectively joint Ministers. I hope that Peter Robinson will respect that fact in the time ahead.

The strategy refers to the role of local government. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister must support delivery at local level, and district councils are key in this matter. Statutory mechanisms are required to institute power sharing wherever it is resisted or refused, often by unionist-dominated councils east of the River Bann.

The situation is different west of the Bann. One of the d'Hondt systems of proportionality has been practised in the four Tyrone councils and in places such as Fermanagh, south Derry —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: The Member will not give way.

The d'Hondt system has also ensured that unionists are treated equally on Derry City Council — [*Interruption.*]

The Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McElduff: Unionists are treated equally on Derry City Council regarding the allocation of senior posts. Similarly, in 2007-08, Bert Wilson of the Ulster Unionist Party was chairman and Clive McFarland of the DUP was vice chairman of Omagh District Council. I am a member of that council, on which nationalists predominate in numbers.

For 2008-09, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council has a DUP mayor and a DUP deputy mayor, and, again, the majority of the council's representatives are nationalists.

Mr A Maginness: The Member praises, and properly supports, the use of d'Hondt in local councils. Does he also support the use of d'Hondt for the appointment of a Minister for justice?

Mr Speaker: The Member can have one extra minute of speaking time.

Mr McElduff: Thank you very much for the extra minute, Mr Speaker — I will need it.

Those unionist Members who are listening to, and participating in, the debate today could do cohesion and integration a favour by spreading the message —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: No, the Member will not give way.

They could spread the message to places such as Limavady, Larne and Lisburn. Individual Ministers have a major role to play in fostering tolerance, equality and good relations in the North — and Nelson McCausland mentioned that himself.

I am speaking as an individual MLA, not in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Minister who is perhaps most in default is Gregory Campbell. His public utterances and conduct since assuming office have been, at best,

ungracious and begrudging towards organisations that have a Gaelic Ireland outlook, and, at worst, insulting and offensive.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: The Member will not give way.

On Friday 26 September, the 'Belfast Telegraph' — which is hardly a Sinn Féin propaganda sheet — featured a piece from the columnist Lawrence White. He said of Gregory Campbell:

"If he finds mixing with GAA types or Irish language groups offensive, then he should simply resign from his post."

An article in 'The Irish News' on Tuesday 30 September stated:

"It's impossible to connect Campbell's two weeks of anti-GAA rhetoric to the incident in Down",

where a GAA club was burned down. It went on to say:

"However, Campbell must ask himself if his recent comments helped to foster a greater sense of understanding and respect towards the GAA."

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure must face increased scrutiny. He constantly insults the largest sporting and cultural organisation in Ireland — including in the Six Counties. If he is unfit for office and incapable of showing respect to other people's traditions, and if he wants to remain in the trenches, he should consider his position as Minister with responsibility for culture and sport.

Mr Elliott: Who better to follow in this debate than Mr McElduff from West Tyrone. He was very quick to tell us about some council areas in the west of the Province. I sit on one of those councils, and I suggest that some of Mr McElduff's d'Hondt proposals are really just window dressing and do not get to the crux of matter — sharing with unionist counterparts in those councils.

He mentioned Fermanagh earlier, so let us consider Fermanagh. Many symbols and memorabilia were removed from the offices and chamber of Fermanagh District Council. They stopped the flying of the Union flag — the flag of this Province — on council buildings. Therefore, do not tell me that nationalists and republicans from west of the Bann support equality.

Mr McCausland touched on the GAA. Let us be blunt, folks: if we are to promote cohesion and the sharing of responsibilities in the Province, people must get real about some of the hurts that have been caused in communities — and that applies to both sides of the community. Let us consider the GAA for a moment. I happened to be in Lisnaskea yesterday, where car loads of GAA supporters drove up and down Main Street at 6.00 pm, blaring horns, waving flags and sitting on the doors of cars.

If nothing else, doing that presented a danger to the people involved and to the public. The local Protestant unionist community was intimidated by those people's actions.

1.15 pm

People must gauge such incidents in that community for what they are. I am happy for people to celebrate their culture, and I want to respect that culture, but they must do it in such a way that will allow us to respect it. However, I have yet to see evidence of that. Those people can drive about with the flags of their GAA team flying from their cars, and that is fine, provided that they realise the hurt and intimidation that they are causing to some people in the minority community in that area. They must respect that community.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I am into cohesion and sharing, so yes.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member accept that he contributed to negative community relations in County Fermanagh? When the whole county was in a euphoric mood about the progress of its Gaelic football team, he made a public statement saying that he hoped that Fermanagh's Gaelic football team would be beaten. That set back community relations and caused shock and dismay in the county.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his interjection, because it allows me to clarify my position. If Mr McElduff had read the report accurately, he would realise that I did not say that I hoped that the Fermanagh team would lose. I said that some constituents, who are members of my community, told me that they were sick, sore and tired of listening to nothing but GAA at work. They had had enough of it, and, for once, they were saying that they wanted the team to lose. They were so fed up that they did not want it to continue for another three weeks. Those people experienced serious intimidation from their work colleagues, in an area where, in an office of about 10 people, only two might come from the Protestant unionist community. Ordinarily, those people would have joined in such discussions, but, because of the intimidation factor — something that Mr McElduff and his colleagues must get into their heads — those people did not feel included.

As a member of the Orange Institution, I have debated on public platforms with members of the GAA, and I am happy to do so. However, those people will not be able to move on unless they start to respect our tradition. It does not help matters when IRA or republican commemorations take place at GAA grounds. The organisers of those events need to be careful, as do the owners of the grounds at which those events take place.

Mr McElduff mentioned a statement that Mr Campbell made about a GAA club that was burned down. I totally condemn that act and hope that Members on the

other side of the Chamber will condemn the acts of people who have burnt down Orange Halls throughout the Province over the years.

Mr Durkan: I begin by expressing my personal condolences to the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, on the death of his mother, Peggy. She was a very kind, charming woman, who was loved not only by her family but by her many neighbours and the wider community across the city. I offer condolences to Martin McGuinness and to the wider McGuinness family.

The fact that we have power-sharing arrangements here is a great example of progress for our society, but politicians sharing the corridors of power cannot be the end of the journey. We must ensure that we have a society in which we truly share the streets where we live and in which we share the terraces of sports grounds and all the playgrounds, including school playgrounds. Therefore, we need determined policies, programmes and strategies to ensure that we build a community that is ever more united on the basis of being ever more equal. We must work on the basis of respect and of being respected, and on the basis of identifying, reversing and removing inequality, injustice and hardship. That should be our common commitment. That is why we must have a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration.

The OFMDFM Ministers are not always present when the Assembly debates the work of that Department, so I welcome the fact that junior Minister Kelly is here today. I hope that he will use his time to reassure us that when OFMDFM Ministers talk about introducing a programme — as opposed to a strategy — it will not mean a lesser commitment than we might expect from a strategy. Words are often used in different ways in order to mean less than that which is required or intended. I hope that Mr Kelly will be able to spell out the commitment that is envisaged when the OFMDFM Ministers use the word “programme” rather than “strategy”.

All equality should be equal. That is why such a strategy must address a range of issues, including racism and other prejudices that people suffer in our society, whether they are being attacked for their sexuality or for other factors. We must be clear that we cannot have a strategy that is so comprehensive that it does not specifically confront sectarianism, or is uncomfortable in doing so. There must be a full-frontal assault on sectarianism in all its forms. Some of us have concerns about some of the language that is being bandied about — the way in which some matters are being rebranded — because that might lead to a lessening of the focus on sectarianism itself.

Mention was made of the lack of progress during the previous period of devolution. I am on public record as saying that I felt somewhat embarrassed that, when

I was Deputy First Minister, we could not publish ‘A Shared Future’. That was partly because the then First Minister felt that even in a consultation document, a question about the idea of a shared society could be dangerous. He felt that the unionist community would react very badly even to the notion of a shared society. He based that view on experiences that people had had as a result of employment legislation and the idea that a shared workplace meant a neutral workplace — that there was a dimmer switch for Britishness while the volume was being pumped up on Irishness.

For my part, I thought that if those were the issues and concerns that people had, we really needed a debate and nationalists needed to hear the unionist view and experience if we were to truly understand the issues and move forward. Regrettably, it was left to the direct rule Administration to publish a document that progressed some of the good work that had been commissioned from Jeremy Harbison and others during the previous period of devolution and which asked some very challenging questions. We can ask each other challenging questions in this Chamber, but, as others have said, we must all ask ourselves challenging questions. I hope that the strategy, when it appears, will challenge us all.

The Executive can do much good, as can Members in the Chamber. Were a Civic Forum to be put in place, it could achieve a great deal on social inclusion and the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Durkan: I hope that we can use a revived Civic Forum to formulate some policy-outriding work on those areas.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We are discussing a very important document, so it is crucial that we get it right. We must also remember that the OFMDFM Ministers have told us that the document will be presented to the OFMDFM Committee before the Halloween recess.

The new strategy should emphasise that equality will be recognised, and not used simply as a smokescreen or as a form of tokenism. Good relations must be defined in accordance with the 1998 Act, which clearly identified that good relations are based on:

“due regard to the need to promote equality”.

The NIO’s purpose behind A Shared Future was simply to ignore inequalities, deprivation and patterns of exclusion and to create a smokescreen behind which it could say that it was building good community relations, but that people should ignore and set aside their aspirations for the future.

Dr Farry: On the subject of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and its good-relations provisions — which

the Member's colleague Martina Anderson mentioned earlier — does Mr Molloy agree with me that there is a case for amending that Act so that the good-relations provisions apply not just to race and religion, but to all the section 75 categories, including, most notably, sexual orientation?

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for his intervention. Section 75 represents the primary legislation that deals with those matters and is, therefore, what we should primarily be concerned with. Obviously, that can be discussed in meetings of the OFMDFM Committee.

We must recognise that 'A Shared Future' is simply a smokescreen, and that there is a need for a new strategy to deal with equality. Forty years ago, the civil rights campaign was batoned off the streets of Derry because it dared to raise the issues of equality and justice, at that time in respect of Catholics and Protestants. Now, we live in a multicultural society that includes many nationalities, and it must be recognised that racism has become a major issue. Racism, coupled with sectarianism, leaves us with a major problem on our hands. It must be recognised that the recently formed communities here must be consulted and must be involved in the production of any policy documentation in the future. Such documents must not simply involve a tokenistic inclusion of those communities, and must not ignore their needs.

It is important to recognise that, during debates such as this, every party seems to be in agreement on the issues of sharing, cohesion and integration, and yet, during other debates — when discussing the need for an Irish language Act, for example — that does not appear to be the case; integration falls to one side. When discussing Gaelic games, integration falls to one side — in fact, the debate becomes very aggressive. When discussing the rights of Travellers, again we find that integration is not an issue that society wants to recognise.

Mr McCausland: When driving through Dungiven the other day, I noticed that the hurling club there — for which there is a large sign on the main street — is named the Kevin Lynch Hurling Club. Does the Member believe that naming a hurling club after a convicted terrorist contributes to the creation of a shared and better future?

Mr McElduff: Nelson declined to mention that Kevin Lynch, who is highly respected in the Dungiven area of County Derry, was the captain of Dungiven's under-16 hurling team when they won an all-Ireland title, and that he also lined out for Derry.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member tell us what rank that individual also held in a terrorist organisation?

Mr Molloy: I am the Member who gave way, and although I thank my colleague for his co-operation, I will attempt to get back on course. It is important to remember that Kevin Lynch was a freedom fighter and

a hunger striker. He was held in very high esteem by the local community, and the Gaelic team for which he played was named after him. If one looks through the history of any society or organisation, one will find that many have been named after various people, at various times, for various reasons. That does not mean that they should not be integrated, or that the Gaelic Athletic Association should be isolated, and deprived of funding and resources by the Assembly.

There are other issues that concern groups of people who are not allowed to be integrated — the victims of the past, for example. Some parties hold to the interpretation that there are different classes of victims. That issue must be dealt with.

Some Members have spoken very strongly against the reintegration of ex-prisoners into society, and their need to be able to adapt to all aspects of society in their normal working routine. If we are really talking about integration, we must be genuine about it.

Jim Shannon made the point that, in meetings of the OFMDFM Committee, there is a very open discussion of the issues of integration and victims, and the other issues with which we are dealing. If we are to have a genuine discussion on those matters, it is important that we take into account the factors that affect all sides of the community, that we start to deal with those in a realistic way, and do not simply create a smokescreen. The proposed amendment to the motion creates a smokescreen. It is very important that we discuss the document and give it due consideration.

1.30 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak to the motion.

The motion and the amendment ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to: publish the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration immediately; detail how the strategy will promote reconciliation; explain how the strategy will help the Executive's commitment to the eradication of poverty; and produce an action plan to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities. I will address each of those issues, but I also want to reassure people in the Assembly, and those outside the Chamber who may catch snippets of the debate on TV or in the newspapers, that we are fully committed to tackling division.

As outlined in legislation and policy, the Executive are committed to equality for all sections of our community. All Ministers in OFMDFM support the building of constructive cross-community work, which is now part of everyday life. All Ministers in OFMDFM are wholeheartedly working to eliminate sectarianism, racism, division, polarisation and prejudice. The

Executive have fully supported those commitments and objectives in the strategic priorities and cross-cutting themes of the Programme for Government. All Members here are wholly committed to a shared and better future for all. Despite the disagreements, every Member who spoke in the debate spoke up for that cause.

Before I address the specific issues that the motion raises, I want people in communities to hear a united and shared message from the Chamber that building our new future is a unified and unifying task. The rough and tumble of political debate in the Assembly must not discourage those dedicated people who take serious personal risks to bridge deeply felt division. I am sure that I speak for all Members by saying that our society requires everyone to work together to secure the new relationships that are growing in so many places. We want that work to continue and be built on to create a shared and better future for all. We will not shy away from tackling head-on the difficult and challenging issues that face us.

The question about publishing the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration, and the involvement of the OFMDFM Committee in that, is straightforward for me to answer. During Question Time on 29 September 2008, the deputy First Minister confirmed that the draft strategy will be submitted to the OFMDFM Committee before the Halloween recess. That was reiterated when the First Minister and deputy First Minister appeared before that Committee on 1 October 2008. To reassure other Members, the strategy will be presented to the Assembly, and the programme proposals will be subject to full consultation and an equality impact assessment.

I emphasise that, considerable work has been done on the strategy over the past 12 months, in line with all inherited policies. We made a joint decision to fundamentally examine the strategy to establish whether it was fit for purpose for the new dispensation. We want to make the strategy as effective, ambitious and comprehensive as possible, and we are moving strongly in the right direction. Several Members mentioned that everything that was done before is being abandoned. That is a myth. We are trying to refresh and rebuild existing strategies.

There are some preliminary comments to make before I address how the strategy will promote reconciliation. First, the strategy must be seen in the context of the legislation and policies that promote equality across all sections of our community. The strategy will also sit alongside existing policies on tackling and ending hate crime and promoting respect for diversity. We will not consign to the dustbin the work that people have done and the successes that they have achieved. The exercise is about consolidating, building on and resourcing tried and tested good practice. We must be innovative to ensure that the

strategy is targeted at the changing face of communities and society.

Secondly, I want to address the myth that we have shelved the promotion of community relations — nothing could be further from the truth. Over the past 18 months, all the OFMDFM Ministers and their departmental officials have actively led and supported work on the ground, and I know that many Members have done so too. However, from a ministerial and departmental perspective, I am pleased to highlight the increased funding of £7 million for good relations and good race relations that was secured in the 2007 spending review as an example of our commitment.

That increase has already been provided during the current year — for example, to minority ethnic groups, which now receive funding of approximately £1 million. The involvement of junior Minister Donaldson and me, during the summer, with the working group that focuses on issues in north Belfast has brought about a £100,000 increase for youth-intervention schemes. Thanks to that support for people who work at interfaces, improvement has continued throughout the summer months.

As I turn to the focus of the new strategy, I do not want to go too far ahead of our discussions with the Committee. However, I will explain some of our priorities: to tackle the visible manifestations of sectarianism, racism and intolerance; to dismantle peace walls, with communities' support; to work with communities who live in interface areas to eliminate sectarian attacks, youth rioting and civil disorder; to tackle the incidence of, and reasons for, racial attacks; to provide and expand safe and shared spaces and public services; and to support local people, with the participation of minority-ethnic groups, to deal with local issues through local solutions.

I have included that list in order to give a flavour of the practical objectives that the strategy seeks to achieve. By promoting reconciliation in a practical way, we seek to challenge and support communities to become places where any person, regardless of race, colour, religion, political opinion or sexual orientation can live, work, rest and socialise in an environment of tolerance, respect, safety and freedom from hate and violence.

Central Government believe that strong political leadership is essential for the success of the strategy. The establishment of a new Minister-led good-relations panel will drive and oversee the work throughout Government, in local government, and with key stakeholders to tackle the type of issues that I have mentioned. A strategic action plan and locally delivered action plans will be developed and implemented, and will skilfully take account of all good relations and race-relations issues through complementary bottom-

up, top-down approaches. Those are ambitious and comprehensive objectives. It is not only necessary, but essential, for everyone to accept them. I firmly believe that they are achievable and that they reflect people's aspirations.

How will the strategy help to eradicate poverty? As Members are aware, the economy is a key aspect of the Executive's Programme for Government. Wealth creation and job creation must and will impact on all areas of social and physical development. Just as we want to share in the peace bonus, so, too, must economic regeneration benefit everyone in society. Successful economic development must include all sectors — Government, business, education, and the community and voluntary sector. A stable society is needed in which children can play together, people can work together and families can live happily side by side, regardless of their community, ethnic background or beliefs. That mutual acceptance and respect are the determining factors that will foster a stable, prosperous and growing economy.

During the past several years, a Cheann Comhairle, there has been economic growth and job creation. However, there are concerns that not all sections of the community have participated nor, indeed, benefited from that growth. People who live at interface areas must be able to see and feel on the ground the impact of the good-relations policy. It is not sufficient to say that the policy works: that must be seen and felt by people on the front line.

The anti-poverty strategy will be based on the life-cycle approach in order to tailor solutions to each group's particular needs. We are committed to actively target and deal with social need. We want that work to be taken forward by a new ministerial anti-poverty subcommittee. The core principal was made explicit by the Programme for Government's (PFG) commitment:

"to develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need."

The application of the principle of a shared and better future for all has a cross-cutting theme. The programme will ensure that Departments direct efforts and resources towards areas, groups and individuals in greatest objective need, including disabled people, children, families and older people who live in poverty.

The Executive already has a broad range of programmes that are aimed directly at targeting social need and patterns of disadvantage, for example, Sure Start, winter fuel payments and measures to tackle rural poverty. However, the concept of a better and shared future for all applies equally to high-level strategies, such as the investment strategy.

The Executive, in agreeing the PFG, have set challenging targets on poverty, and on child poverty in

particular. They are committed to eradicating child poverty by 2020 and halving the numbers of children in poverty by 2010. From an early stage, the Executive have sought to ensure that the concepts of equality and good relations are firmly embedded in the approach to developing the PFG and investment strategy. They wanted to ensure that, in the growth of the economy and creation of the shared and better future, no group would be left behind. That is a key aim; and it underpins the entire PFG. It is reflected in the priority they give to promotion of tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. In line with that, The Executive have set a range of ambitious targets to address the causes and consequences of inequality, intolerance and division, and to break the cycle of poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation.

The Executive are determined to support the most vulnerable and to ensure that everyone lives in a strong vibrant and sustainable way that enhances the quality of life and encourages everyone to realise his or her potential. That is why we will focus on building shared communities, regenerating communities, removing barriers to employment, removing physical barriers that divide communities and addressing significant inequalities in health and education outcomes.

I hope that I have addressed most of the issues raised by Members. In her party political broadcast, Carmel Hanna referred to separate and segregated housing. We recognise people's aspirations to live in unsegregated housing; we support the work of the Housing Executive, which is substantially funded by the International Fund for Ireland, and we are conscious of the primacy of need. We will work with the Housing Executive to balance need with the shared aspiration to build communities in all areas. It is also important that we work closely with the communities themselves.

Naomi Long spoke of the detailed action plans among other things. As I said already, the Executive's strategy emphasises that actions must be locally based, take account of local needs and identify local solutions. We agree that physical action is important, but it is also important that we do not impose plans on communities. Involving communities is vital.

Jim Shannon said that OFMDFM should publish the strategy only after consultation with the Committee: I have already addressed that point.

Martina Anderson said — not for the first time — that there should be no hierarchy of equality. We agree that equality and good relations are joint priorities and that they are mutually reinforcing. Contacts must result in substantial changes in attitudes and behaviours. We want to see the policy make a real difference to people's lives.

Danny Kennedy said that delay in publishing the strategy is destabilising the institutions and suggested that it is paying lip-service to the concept of a shared and better future. I have addressed those issues. Mr Kennedy's concern, that a shared and better future is no longer a priority, is misplaced. We need to focus on what we are doing. The rough and tumble of debate should not ignore the real action that is being taken: otherwise, we run the risk that those we support, and who work so diligently and effectively, may be discouraged.

Barry McElduff, Naomi Long and Tom Elliott mentioned the role of local government. We must recognise that many useful projects are being supported by all district councils. Difficult issues are being worked through by people in both communities, and it is important that we, the elected political representatives, lead by example.

Mark Durkan asked whether the introduction of a "programme", as opposed to a "strategy", signified a lesser commitment; Carmel Hanna also spoke about that. I assure both Members that that is not the Executive's view. The change of a word does not signal a reduction in priority. The response I gave earlier to Carmel Hanna's point should assure everyone that the housing issue is being dealt with in that manner.

Another issue was raised by Nelson McCausland. Every Member who spoke —

Mr Speaker: The junior Minister's time is almost up.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I will be brief. I welcome Nelson McCausland's statement that equality, diversity and interdependence are crucial.

I shall step out of my role as junior Minister to speak as a private Member for a moment. History is history — I was involved in the Maze escape, and I make no apologies for that. Mr McCausland's consistent verbal attacks on the GAA are not helping community relations either. Go raibh maith agat.

1.45 pm

Dr Farry: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council. I thank the Members who tabled the motion for accepting our amendment.

Looking back, 'A Shared Future' was a good start, but it was not a perfect document, particularly because there was a lack of political buy-in. However, much progress was made, and an action plan flowed from 'A Shared Future'. In the same light, the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, whenever it is published, is unlikely to be perfect. However, we must make a start. Like the Minister, I do not want to go into detail anticipating what may be in that document.

The community has a number of concerns. First, it is concerned that good community-relations issues will go back into the silo of OFMDFM. When that issue was part of 'A Shared Future', emphasis was placed on a cross-departmental strategy. Some people fear that we may lose that overarching framework.

Secondly, although the Minister said that a shared and better future is an underlying theme in the Programme for Government, the public service agreements (PSAs) associated with that document exhibit little joined-up action on community-relations issues. It is feared that local action will be overemphasised, at the expense of an overarching regional strategy.

Thirdly, there is concern about the lack of a concrete action plan and the lack of accountable bodies, be they Departments or agencies, to develop the proposals. Our amendment tries to emphasise those points.

Those visions cut across all public policy in Northern Ireland and affect all strands of society. When one talks about economics, one must look at the impact on labour mobility and the way in which investment is deterred. Frankly, we cannot prioritise economic development in the Assembly and the Executive if we do not acknowledge the impact of division. The Alliance Party has raised the issue of finance on many occasions.

Some Members, including Jim Shannon, spoke about the social aspects of a divided society and how those are linked to deprivation. Members are aware of the human aspect, in that, whenever people are not in contact with one another, they lose the ability to develop to their full potential, and, as a consequence, society loses out.

Environmentally, it is now clear that divided societies have larger carbon footprints. That point may go over the head of the Minister of the Environment.

Those points illustrate the need for joined-up action among Departments and stress the importance of having a coherent action plan.

I want to comment on some Members' contributions. It was a largely productive debate, with the exception of those Members whose contributions went down a few blind alleys.

Carmel Hanna raised the issue of housing. I acknowledge Margaret Ritchie's work on shared housing. She has been proactive, yet much more must be done.

Although we welcome the fact that the Department now talks about people's right to live in mixed areas, the other side of the coin is the right of people to live in a segregated neighbourhood — a single-identity area. In the strange world of Northern Ireland, it may seem perfectly reasonable, based on religious identity,

to live in a single-identity area. However, if a society were to introduce a policy whereby people had the right to live in single-identity areas based on race, there would be international outrage. We must look carefully at the real implications of our statements on the current housing policy.

Jim Shannon and Martina Anderson mentioned resources and that new funds are to go to OFMDFM. That the money is going to OFMDFM more or less makes my point for me. We must see what other Departments are spending on their good-relations strategies. Education is one area in which huge opportunities exist for sharing and, in the long run, saving resources.

Some Members mentioned the issue of equality and the good-relations function. In my intervention, I was trying to make the point that there is a distinction between the breadth of groups listed under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and those listed under the good-relations function, which applies to race and religion only. That must be broadened if there is to be a genuine, robust system of equality and good relations.

Danny Kennedy spoke of pluralism as the way forward. That is fine, but not if it means entrenching divisions in Northern Ireland. Pluralism, in a positive sense, must be about more than two communities, and must value diversity. I urge support for the amendment and the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Alliance Party for its support for the motion, and I commend all Members who have supported it.

If rhetoric were the measure of commitment to good relations and reconciliation in the community, we would have no problems. Every Member who has spoken has mentioned the necessity of the promotion of good relations and of reconciliation, as well as the need for the creation of a more equal society in Northern Ireland.

That is to be welcomed. However, a real commitment to that process is required on the part of the Executive. The unpardonable delay in the production of a document — whether it be a strategy or a programme — is deeply regrettable. The House has been assured by the junior Minister that the document will be produced by Halloween. He did not say which Halloween.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): This Halloween.

Mr A Maginness: He has clarified the position, Mr Speaker. We look forward to the production of that document by Halloween, because there have been many false dawns in reaching that stage.

The Assembly, the Executive and the other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement have one central purpose — to reconcile all our people, to create

partnership, and, through that partnership, to bring about a sustainable peace here for future generations. The Assembly must realise that this is a conflict resolution process, not a conflict substitution process. Unfortunately, some Members adhere to the latter.

It is clear that there is general goodwill towards moving in the right direction. I commend those who have spoken in those terms today. However, there is a problem in respect of equality in this society. One cannot exclude equality and have good community relations — both go together. Neither can economic opportunity be excluded; we must have that. That is why it is important that the document also tackles poverty in our society. My party and I recommend that the Executive take on board statutory targets to try to eliminate poverty.

The Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister purport to be dedicated to the elimination of poverty, particularly among children, and yet the Executive fund that was set up to tackle that very problem has been abolished. That is to be deeply regretted. That fund was pioneered by the first Executive, and it was of great value and importance.

Some of the remarks that were made by Tom Elliott about the system of local government and about the d'Hondt system, in particular, are regrettable. D'Hondt is a very important mechanism for bringing about power sharing in local councils — it is not superficial; it is a real sharing of power at local government level.

Mr Elliott: I wish to clarify my position. I did not criticise the method or the use of d'Hondt in the western council areas. I indicated that there is still an underlying sectarianism and division that must be tackled.

Mr A Maginness: I am glad that the Member clarified his point. D'Hondt is not the only mechanism — we can have others, we can improve on d'Hondt and we can improve on the sharing of power and the building of partnerships. I agree with the Member that there is an underlying sectarianism in all councils and throughout our society. Our central role must be —

Mr McElduff: During the course of my remarks, Mr Maginness asked me to clarify matters pertaining to the use of d'Hondt. With his legal background, he will know that the Act is paramount in this matter. When a new Department is established, which might necessitate the dissolution of an existing Department, section 17 of the 1998 Act takes effect. Subsection 4 of the Act states that:

“The number of Ministerial offices shall not exceed 10 or such greater number as the Secretary of State may by order provide.”

Subsection (5) states:

“A determination under subsection (1) shall not have effect unless it is approved by a resolution of the Assembly passed with cross-community support.”

The SDLP mantra that d'Hondt simply has to be triggered so that it can get its hands on the ministerial post for policing and justice is illegal under that 1998 Act, and I will arrange for a copy of it to be left in the Member's pigeonhole.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for belatedly replying to my point; it must have taken quite some time for the Sinn Féin office to work out that strategy, which he has very carefully read. Of course it is not illegal; d'Hondt is the proper system for the appointment of Ministers, and departing from that is to depart from a central aspect of the Good Friday Agreement. Unfortunately, that is what Sinn Féin has done — it has weakened the d'Hondt system. It is sad that the Member has to stand up and justify that instead of supporting the right of an SDLP member to be appointed as Minister for justice.

Mr Durkan: Mr McElduff addressed the issue of what happens regarding the first devolved justice Minister. However, the letter from Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson of 29 July states that at all times the Minister of justice is to be appointed by cross-community support — a complete departure from the agreement. We are talking about a veto that will be used not just against the SDLP now, but against Sinn Féin in the future. That is the significance of the mistakes that Sinn Féin is making.

Mr A Maginness: I will move on —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I think that you have made your point. If the Assembly has any task it is to tackle sectarianism, individually and collectively. It is important to say that publicly and to do that through our actions; that has always been my policy as a politician. I strongly reject any criticism, implied or explicit, made against me today. The SDLP remains committed to the promotion of good relations, to the ending of sectarianism and to the creation of reconciliation in our society, and that should be the task for us all. If this debate has done any good, it has been to highlight the importance of that commitment. That commitment should bring about agreement amongst those in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and that office should expedite a process whereby we can achieve that.

Good spirit was shown this morning through the condolences expressed by the First Minister to the deputy First Minister. That human touch was very moving and something to be genuinely welcomed.

2.00 pm

If Members could translate that into daily actions in the Assembly, it would act as a model and an example to the community for people, collectively and individually, to tackle the problem of sectarianism,

whether in sport, the workplace, housing, education, or elsewhere. That would be a marvellous contribution to peace.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the delayed publication of the Strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish their strategy without further delay and to detail how this strategy will promote reconciliation, the ideal of a truly shared future and how it will help the Executive's commitment to eradicate poverty; and calls on the Executive to meet immediately to commit to producing an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Comber Greenway

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

Ms Purvis: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway.

I am delighted that the motion has been selected. At a time when we are facing a difficult financial situation, there are important quality-of-life issues that need our attention, and we must keep in mind the whole picture with regard to quality of life. It is critical that we produce real solutions in order to keep homes warm this winter and to help to keep people in their homes in difficult times.

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

Today, we also have an opportunity to examine the quality of life and the health of the environment that we are offering to the people of Northern Ireland when they step outside their homes. At a time when the Executive are failing to meet the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, I am glad to have the chance to raise an important issue that affects the everyday lives of the citizens of East Belfast and all those who visit the area in order to use the Comber Greenway.

I acknowledge the important work that is being done by the Department for Regional Development and the sustainable transportation charity, Sustrans, in developing the Comber Greenway. Those organisations have created a remarkable resource and a vast improvement in the quality of life for those living along, and using, the Comber Greenway.

For Members who have not had the delightful opportunity of travelling along the path, the Comber Greenway is a seven-mile traffic-free stretch along the old Belfast to Comber railway line, which is being developed as part of the national cycle network. The greenway runs from the heart of East Belfast to Comber, with views along the route of Stormont and Scrabo Tower.

The completed trail will be opened formally in November, but stretches of the path have been made accessible to the public as they were being upgraded over the past five years. The walking and cycling route

provides a tranquil, traffic-free environment for leisure walking and cycling, and offers a safe, direct route to and from Belfast city centre for those commuting by bicycle or on foot.

The Comber Greenway is an oasis in what is otherwise a largely urban setting. It is the type of outdoor resource that urban planners everywhere dream of creating — an easily accessible, safe, attractive space for exercise, leisure, pushing a pram, outdoor exploration and adventures for children, chats among friends or teaching a child how to ride a bike.

Users are surrounded by green and are occasionally met by local wildlife, including birds and badgers. Since the first stretches of the improved greenway were opened, it has become hugely popular. User levels have shot up exponentially each year and grow consistently as new stretches of the path are opened. The Member for Strangford Mrs Iris Robinson has referred to the Comber Greenway as the jewel in the crown of East Belfast. That shows how badly residents needed and wanted such a facility — and why not?

The benefits of having and using such a resource are so significant that the people of Northern Ireland are constantly hearing from elected officials and Departments about how they should get out and use such facilities more often. People are told to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, to limit the time that children spend in front of the computer and television and to exercise for at least 30 minutes a day.

However, mixed messages are being sent. After spending in excess of £900,000 on the conversion of the greenway into a traffic-free haven, the Department for Regional Development now proposes to use five miles of the greenway from the Holywood Arches to Dundonald as part of a bus rapid-transit network, which will cost £147 million. The Minister for Regional Development has said that the new network will also preserve some form of path for pedestrians and cyclists, but how could it? What could the quality of that experience possibly be? How pleasant, safe and healthy could it possibly be to walk, play or cycle along a path next to a massive vehicle travelling at 60 miles an hour?

Undoubtedly, physical movement produces physical and mental-health benefits. The quality of the environment in which exercise takes place has a profound impact on wellness and on whether people feel motivated to take exercise. Physical activity reduces the risk of many major and chronic illnesses, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, colon cancer and obesity. Unequivocally, exercise and exposure to fresh air create benefits to the body.

Everyone has stories about when they were young, and when I was a child, being in the house was the exception. We played outside most of the time. Any

time that we did mope about the house, my granny was quick to point out how good the air was for us. However, recent research documents worrying trends about the overall health of society and, most importantly, children. The UK Fit Futures report identified the greater use of cars; parental reluctance to let children play outdoors due to concerns about traffic and stranger danger; and the popularity of, and increased access to, television, computers and other sedentary pastimes as threats to children's overall activity levels.

That report and similar Government reports refer to obesity as a health time bomb and a national epidemic. According to the Fit Futures report, obesity reduces life expectancy by approximately nine years. It is a killer, and it increases the risk of Northern Ireland's biggest killer diseases — coronary heart disease and cancer. Obesity is identified as a risk marker in the young for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. The financial implications that come with obesity are staggering. The estimated economic cost of treating obesity and its related effects is several billion pounds a year.

Children and young people from lower-income families are more likely to eat a poor diet and less likely to participate in sport. Part of the reason for that is their environment. Such families are less likely to live in areas in which facilities for physical activity are safe and easily accessible. The priorities that are set out in the Department of Health's fit futures strategy propose to address the conflicting policies that are sometimes promoted by Departments. The strategy proposes to address the disjointed approach to the promotion of physical activity and to ensure that opportunities for active play are available and accessible.

The Comber Greenway provides those facilities for residents of Tullycarnet, Beersbridge, Bloomfield, Orangefield and many other areas. Accessibility is a real consideration in encouraging children and young people to engage in physical activities and active play. The Comber Greenway provides an ideal solution for many families and local residents. It is safe, clean, inviting, accessible and free, and people do not have to get into a car to enjoy it.

Obesity can impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of young people, and exercise and physical activity not only reduce the risk of obesity but offer benefits for mental health. There are clear indications that exercise reduces the risk of suicide and self-harm and that it boosts psychological well-being and cognitive functioning as it improves self esteem. Suicide and self-harm rates are higher in economically deprived areas, which also tend to be the areas that lack accessible, tranquil, ample green space.

At a time when official targets have been set for a reduction in the incidence of suicide and self-harm,

Members must see the whole picture and ensure that all the necessary resources are in place to meet them. That includes creating facilities and amenities, such as the Comber Greenway, that enhance psychological well-being and are accessible to everyone.

The removal of more cars from the roads is a great idea. Improved public transport, which the Department for Regional Development identified as a strategic goal, would have the undeniable benefits of reduced congestion, an improvement in air quality and increased safety for pedestrians, cyclists and cars. I would support objectives to provide more affordable, accessible and sustainable forms of public transport.

However, many residents of east Belfast, particularly those living in the estates and densely populated pockets of the city, already use buses and other public transport. Car ownership in those areas is well below the UK average. Those are not the people who must switch to public transport, because they already hop on a bus to do their daily messages, take their children to school or get to work. They are being penalised to accommodate those who have not switched to public transport. The paving of the Comber Greenway means that they will lose the little green space that they have.

The report by Atkins and KPMG, commissioned by the Department to examine options for a rapid-transit system, stated that an average of only 22% of passengers on the new bus system will have switched from using their cars. The remaining 78% will comprise existing users of public transport who will simply switch from one form of public transport to another.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Purvis: I will.

It is important to mention that the same report provides options for the construction of a road. What good is a road when attempting to create sustainable public transport? The Comber Greenway should remain a safe, healthy and tranquil green space.

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

Ms Purvis: I ask my colleagues to support the motion and join me in preventing the Comber Greenway from becoming the Comber "Greyway".

Lord Browne: I am in broad agreement with the objectives expressed in the motion; walking and cycling are major contributors to a healthy lifestyle. However, I also recognise the importance of a good public transport system in Belfast, particularly in East Belfast.

As all Members know, the Comber Greenway was previously a railway line that ran from Belfast to Comber. I remember as a boy — a very young boy, I might add — standing at Barnett's Bridge and watching the steam trains go past on their way to Downpatrick and Newcastle. Indeed, I could claim to be one of the original railway children. Unfortunately, previous Administrations made the rather short-sighted decision that a railway was not economically viable.

In today's climate of rising fuel prices and concern for the environment, it is essential to get people out of their cars and on to public transport by providing an efficient, reliable and low-cost public transport system.

Mrs Long: The Member drew attention to the need for reliable public transport in East Belfast. Perhaps the Member will take on board that when the new service is available, many of those who use it will simply be transferring from the existing bus service. The Department stated that it could not conceive that the 4A service will disappear, but neither could it commit to retaining the current format whereby buses run every 10 minutes. Perhaps the Minister will provide Members with more information on that today.

Lord Browne: I thank the Member for that information. I have faith in the consultants who are producing the report, and I am sure that the Minister will be able to address the problems that the Member raised.

The route provides a great opportunity to develop an efficient transport link in the form of a rapid-bus network or light railway system. Such a system would not necessarily impinge on the existing amenities for walking and cycling.

2.15 pm

In 1986, I suggested to Northern Ireland Railways that a light tramway be provided on that route. Since then, car ownership has increased dramatically, and the consequent rise in pollution levels has vindicated my original argument.

On 3 June 2008, the Minister provided a useful synopsis on the history of the amenity. He said:

"In 2003, work was undertaken to build a new sewer along parts of the old railway line. That presented my Department with an opportunity to create a walking and cycling route along the corridor while plans for rapid transit were being progressed. That work was undertaken in the full knowledge that the line would be used for rapid transit in the future". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 31, p159, col 1*].

Furthermore, he explained that many people had expressed concern about the future of the Comber Greenway for walking and cycling. As a representative for East Belfast, I have received numerous letters and emails from constituents — and individuals from further afield — expressing similar concerns. On 3 June 2008, the Minister said:

"I am conscious of the needs of walkers and cyclists and I am keen to support both. I intend to retain a walking and cycling amenity on that route. However, I will further consider the issues that have been raised". — [*Official Report Bound Volume 31, p159, col 1*].

In his summing-up speech, he expressed confidence that the proposed rapid-transit system would:

"not push cyclists and walkers off the route." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 31, p169, col 1*].

What further consideration has the Minister given to health and safety? In particular, how can the existing environmentally friendly amenity for cyclists and walkers be preserved? In conclusion, I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that, when a rapid-transport system is developed, he will ensure that the valuable amenity that the Comber Greenway provides for cyclists and walkers is not damaged. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I hope that the Minister will not propose that I cycle to work from the border. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I thank the Members who proposed it. Sinn Féin understands the importance of public health and the need to reduce the number of cars on the roads and to promote the use of public transport.

The motion asks the House to acknowledge the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Exercise — such as walking and cycling in a safe environment — is a significant and positive aspect of such a lifestyle. Sinn Féin supports that concept, and I hope that all Members will welcome that common-sense approach.

As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I am aware of public concerns about the Comber Greenway. When the Committee took evidence from those who support the retention of the Comber Greenway, it was conscious that people support its preservation. Moreover, it was conscious that the Comber Greenway — which is situated along the old Comber railway line — has been, for a long time, earmarked as a rapid-transit route into and out of East Belfast.

Sinn Féin believes that any proposed plans for a rapid-transport system should cater for a safe pedestrian and cyclist route that enables people to partake in exercise. Furthermore, we support the use of green open space for shared recreational, environmentally friendly purposes. The matter can be resolved through the retention of the cycle and walkway facility, which will provide future economic, social and environmental benefits for Belfast. Sinn Féin supports the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: This issue poses a dilemma for the Minister. He has a responsibility to ensure high-quality public transport. However, there is a clash between two worthy aims. I declare an interest as a local resident

who uses the Comber Greenway regularly. The popularity of that walkway is immense and increasing.

Lord Browne referred to the period in 2003 when the route was dug up to lay a sewer. People in the area were concerned, as they wondered whether it would be restored to its previous state. In the event, it was even better after being restored and it grew substantially.

Along with the health issues to which other Members referred, there are wildlife and amenity issues that need to be considered. It must be remembered that the impact of what happens to that stretch of railway line is not confined to East Belfast. It is a potential transport route that affects how Comber and Newtownards could be involved in a rapid-transit system.

Some concerns have been drawn to my attention. In broad terms, people are aware of the Minister's intention to retain a cycling and walking facility on the route. Many people do not see how those amenities could be retained while having a rapid-transit system in parallel because the site is narrow in places. That is something that the Minister could address in his remarks.

Another issue concerns displacement. Will people simply be moved from the Newtownards Road onto the railway route? What are the economic consequences if that happens? For commercial reasons, areas such as Ballyhackamore very often depend on people travelling by bus. Will those areas be severely disadvantaged? Another question that has not been satisfactorily answered is what happens when the rapid-transit vehicles reach the end of the walkway at what used to be the Holywood Arches. Do they simply join the line of traffic? How will that be addressed in a satisfactory manner?

In her opening speech, Dawn Purvis quoted figures from the KPMG report concerning the number of people who are likely to be new users of the facility. It seemed like a very low figure for such an investment. It is planned that approximately 3,000 dwellings will be built at the Comber end of the route, but if that sort of money will be invested, I expected that it was envisaged that a very substantial number of transfers and new customers would use the route. I do not see where those people will come from.

Ms Purvis: There has been an extrapolation of the figures from the KPMG report, and it might help the debate. Many of the cars come into Belfast from Dundonald. I am told that the rapid-transit system will reduce the number of cars per minute from 66 to 62 at peak times. The system will effectively take only four cars per minute off the road.

Sir Reg Empey: I am indebted to the Member for that information. It illustrates the point that although we understand that that has been a long-term transport link, the fact is that it has become a very significant amenity for local people. There is not much green

space in this city. The Comber Greenway has become very popular for all the reasons that Members mentioned. When the Minister addresses the major policy issues concerning this matter, I hope that he takes that fact into account.

Where is the evidence of a real paradigm shift, with people leaving their vehicles and using public transport? I do not see where that will come from, and yet we could lose a type of amenity that is in very short supply in the Belfast area. If there are major housing developments in Dundonald, what evidence is there that people who occupy those dwellings would use that amenity? Those are the sorts of issues that need to be addressed —

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Sir Reg Empey: My time is almost up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute, as he has already given way.

Sir Reg Empey: OK.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that he agrees that any developers should make a financial contribution if they were to benefit from the introduction of a rapid-transit system.

Sir Reg Empey: I do not object to that, because planning gain is something for which we are all pushing. I certainly hope that that would be the case. I still do not understand how a wildlife-friendly leisure facility could be compatible with a major transport link. I do not see how those go together.

I have a major concern about displacement. What will happen when one reaches the bottom of the walkway? How will the proposed rapid-transit system link with the existing transport system? Those matters are of grave concern to the local community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Dr Alasdair McDonnell.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Cheap Alcohol

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he next intends to meet with representatives of the main supermarkets about the availability of cheap alcohol. (AQO 482/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Over the summer, I met representatives of all the main supermarkets — including Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's — and I am encouraged by the work that they are undertaking on the issues relating to alcohol misuse and underage drinking. However, more remains to be done. I am keen to meet key representatives from the alcohol and drinks industry again, in the near future, to see what further actions the industry can take to deal with those issues, particularly in relation to access, availability and price.

Mr K Robinson: I commend the Minister on his two recent, positive announcements; namely, the abolition of prescription charges and the modernisation of the ambulance fleet. Perhaps the Minister would now like to get his hat-trick by tackling the issue of alcohol abuse. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the pilot scheme that Sainsbury's has — in response to the Minister's direct engagement — introduced today, which I believe is being rolled out across Northern Ireland? Will the Minister consider the issue of supermarkets and price controls in particular? That situation is completely unacceptable at the moment, because a tin of beer costs 24p in some areas, while a bottle of water can cost more than £1.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I welcome the Sainsbury's initiative, which is a step in the right direction. During the summer, I met with Justin King, the chief executive of Sainsbury's, as part of my engagement with supermarkets on what I consider to be the three key issues — availability, access and, in particular, price.

As a result of the new initiative, Sainsbury's now label alcohol products to show, for example, the

number of units of alcohol in each drink. The label also provides other information that people understand, such as the daily recommended unit intake. Therefore, when people buy or consume alcohol, they will know exactly how much of it they will be able to take. As Members know, one of the problems that exist here is that three quarters of the adult population consume alcohol, and an alarming number of those people binge drink; that is, drink unsafely. It is important that when people choose their tipple — whatever it may be — they understand its alcoholic strength and can, therefore, compute the damage that it will do.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comments and his response. Challenge 25 is one initiative that some companies have introduced — Asda, for example. According to that scheme, someone buying alcohol must appear to be, or be able to prove that he or she is, 25 years of age or more. Many people consider that to be a worthwhile scheme because it prevents anyone who looks younger than 25 from buying alcohol. It is especially important in the light of the fact that it is possible to buy four tins of beer for £1 in some stores. That price indicates how easy alcohol is to obtain and that, therefore, some kind of scheme is needed. Given that, will the Minister state his opinion of Challenge 25?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with the Member's point, although I assume that he is talking about Challenge 21.

Mr Shannon: The Asda scheme is Challenge 25.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member's point is important. The issue is about age at point of sale and ensuring that alcohol does not reach people who it should not — that is, the younger generation — although the fact is that they appear to be able to access alcohol routinely. Ken Robinson raised an important point about the price of alcohol. The fact is that most children who receive pocket money can afford to consume alcohol, even to the point where they are falling down.

A couple of weeks ago, I was out with the Ambulance Service and I have, therefore, personally experienced the situation that exists in the university area and at the Odyssey Arena. Anyone who saw the UTV and BBC news reports will know that pictures do not tell lies and that those reports showed many empty bottles scattered around the Odyssey Arena, coupled with many young people milling around at approximately 2.30 am.

I personally witnessed a number of fights when I was at the Odyssey complex. Furthermore, on that same night, a drunken young person leaving Queen's University students' union walked out in front of a car.

Those are graphic examples witnessed by me on just one night. Those types of incidents are routinely faced

by Health Service and accident and emergency staff in ambulances and in hospitals. However, that is only part of the problem of alcohol. The other part is the long-term physical and mental damage being done to our population.

Dr Farry: There is a sense of market failure when people seem to be more readily able to go out drinking than indulging in other leisure activities. Can the Minister tell the House what representations his Department has made to the Treasury with respect to a UK-wide strategy to address the pricing of alcohol? Furthermore, what discussions has the Minister had with other Departments — for example, the Department for Social Development — in relation to licensing policy in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department for Social Development (DSD) is currently undertaking a review of licensing policy. That Department is responsible for how licences are awarded, licensing hours et cetera. My Department has a drugs and alcohol strategy, on which all Departments have been consulted. Furthermore, I am currently developing a young people's drinking action plan that will be released shortly. Again, there has been consultation on that.

The pricing of alcohol is a Treasury matter. Arguments have been made time and again on that issue. However, the big supermarkets do not generally sell alcohol to persons under 18. Indeed, there have only been three or four prosecutions made against the supermarkets in the UK in recent years. They are very successful in policing their customers.

However, they do sell alcohol at very low prices that the average publican in Northern Ireland cannot afford to match. That highlights the issue of young people drinking in the home before they go out to enjoy a night out.

That is one issue. There is also the issue of young people being able to access alcohol, and there is the issue of availability. Those are all issues that Margaret Ritchie can examine and they are all issues that result from our present licensing laws, which, in my view, are far too liberal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Heart Disease/Poor Dental Care

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is investigating links between heart disease and poor dental care. (AQO 475/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety does not undertake research. However, the Department has, through the research and development office, recently funded research into the link between periodontal gum disease and coronary heart disease and strokes. The research is being undertaken by Professor Gerry Linden at the Queen's University school of dentistry.

That research project will take five years to complete and its results will not be known until 2011. At present, there is no strong evidence to suggest that gum disease causes heart disease.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware that there is a correlation between poor dental health and deprivation, and between deprivation and general ill health and, indeed, heart disease. As the report will take five years to complete — I assume to allow the researchers to monitor health across that period — will there be an interim reporting measure? That would mean that if a correlation between gum disease and heart disease is discovered earlier than 2011, a mechanism will be in place to report back to the Department.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can arrange for that to be in place and I will ensure that it happens. However, there is a distinction between gum disease and oral health, which refers to dental health. Northern Ireland has poor dental health, but our record on gum disease is no worse than any other part of the UK.

Furthermore, there is no cause and effect between gum disease and heart disease and strokes. There is an association, and we are trying to determine whether that association can be proved as a cause and effect. For example, one of the primary contributory factors to heart disease is smoking, and that is also the case with gum disease. Ergo, can we say that smoking causes poor gum disease or that gum disease causes heart disease? That is the step that we are not in a position to take at the moment.

There are other common risk factors, and they will be determined by the research. I am happy to report to the Assembly as we proceed.

Mr Gardiner: Given the high level of heart disease and poor dental care in Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree that the role of the new public health agency will be to tackle those and other important health issues? Is it not, therefore, critical that a stand-alone public health agency is established? Furthermore, does he agree that any attempt to dilute the role of public health in the new structures will be seen as defeatist and narrow-minded?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with the sentiments behind the Member's comments. The strategy for health states that we must have investment, be efficient, and engage

the local population in their own health. That, uniquely, is where the public health agency will be instrumental. It will address such areas as alcohol — that I mentioned previously — and its associated risks, such as poor mental and physical health and teenage pregnancies. The public health agency will also address the need to get messages and support into the areas of disadvantage where one is more likely to die younger than one's counterparts who live in more affluent areas. In carrying out those roles, the public health agency will work closely with local government — one of the key deliverers in the process. It is for that reason that I received unanimous support from the Executive at one of their, what are now rare, meetings for the proposed public health agency model.

Acute Hospital: South-West

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new acute hospital for the South West. (AQO 485/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recently, I announced the Northern Ireland Health Group as the successful tenderer for the development of the new acute hospital in the south-west. The project will be the first Health Service development of its size to be procured through the private-finance initiative, and it represents the best value for money for the taxpayer.

The major investment will provide the people of the south-west with a modern, state-of-the-art healthcare facility that will be fit for the twenty-first century. Delivery of the new hospital is on schedule for 2012.

Mr Elliott: I commend the Minister on the recent announcement that a successful tenderer has been appointed for the acute services hospital in the south-west. Does the Minister agree that now is the time for everyone to get behind the projects in the south-west? Furthermore, does he agree that now is the time for Omagh District Council to join the liaison group to ensure that the building of the new enhanced hospital in Omagh can proceed?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with that, and I commend the unanimous — and expected — support afforded to the investment from Fermanagh District Council. The investment of some £260 million in Enniskillen, at a time of recession and when the construction industry is in poor shape and reporting major redundancies, is important.

Unfortunately, I cannot report the same tale about Omagh, where the proposal is in the teeth of unstinting opposition from Omagh District Council. It is a matter for Omagh district councillors to determine whether the town wants the investment to be made. I have

serious decisions to make around capital priorities, and, in light of Omagh District Council's adamant and steadfast refusal to support the project, it is difficult for me to proceed. I have set up a steering group that will permit all bodies — including Omagh District Council — to get involved, determine the services that will go into the local enhanced hospital and that will allow the building to commence.

The issue is becoming extremely urgent because of the capital priorities and the review that I have conducted into them and, not least, the time frames under which we operate.

Mr Buchanan: I do not turn a blind eye to investment in the west; I welcome any investment that comes there. Is the Minister aware of the growing concern among senior medical staff and consultants at Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and at Erne Hospital in Enniskillen that the new flagship project will become — in their words — a white elephant?

Is he also aware that they have requested an urgent meeting with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to highlight those concerns and their growing anxiety at the declining service delivery in the area? What action does the Minister propose to take to ensure that those concerns are addressed and that acute services will continue to be delivered in Omagh and Enniskillen? Will he give a guarantee to the House that that flagship project will be sustainable?

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, pick any question or all of them.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can do no more than reiterate what I have just said. The hospital at Enniskillen is going ahead with the full support of the medical and nursing profession, trade unions and — not least and most importantly — the local community as represented by the local council.

I cannot say the same for Omagh. As far as I can see, Omagh District Council has put every obstacle in the way. I have been in post for 18 months and during that time the Department has taken several steps to reassure people in Omagh. Nevertheless, there has been a campaign of downright opposition — no matter what I do. Mr Buchanan talks about acute services in Omagh when he knows that the new acute hospital is going to Enniskillen. He is fighting an old battle. If Mr Buchanan does not want the hospital, that is fine. I know of other areas that require the investment. An investment of £190 million would be the biggest that Omagh has ever seen. However, I am getting absolute opposition from Omagh District Council. Frankly, that is not sustainable. If the project is getting that sort of

opposition before it is started, where will we be if and when we go ahead?

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the good news, and I assure the Minister that people in Fermanagh are encouraged to hear about the hospital. People from the Omagh area are also encouraged about it.

Will the Minister confirm that the model Developing Better Services is being used for delivering services at the new hospitals? Has his Department any means of monitoring what is going on in the Western Health and Social Care Trust so that when the new hospitals are in place the services will be available and that nothing that has been planned to be delivered at Omagh or Enniskillen will be whittled away in favour of Altnagelvin Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the Department is working to the model Delivering Better Services, which determines, to a large extent, what services will be in the new hospitals. For example, Enniskillen will have a full range of hospital services including 24/7 accident and emergency; inpatient services, including medicine surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics, gynaecology and critical care; day-case surgery; diagnostics; and a comprehensive range of outpatient services — the full range to be expected in an acute hospital.

An enhanced local hospital has been planned for Omagh — which Omagh District Council does not need. Mr Gallagher said that people in Omagh are encouraged: they need to tell their councillors that, so that the councillors can tell me that they are encouraged. Nevertheless, a full range of services has been planned for Omagh, including a 24/7 urgent care and treatment centre; outpatient services; diagnostics; day procedures; day-case surgery; ambulatory-care services; an acute inpatient mental-health facility; a new health and care centre; and full renal services. The hospital will provide between 70% and 80% of all of the Omagh population's hospital needs — and I am being told not to build it.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I had hoped that the Minister would strike a more reconciliatory tone about the community in Omagh, which is standing up for its rights for a proper health service. Will the Minister respond positively to my invitation as an MLA for West Tyrone — and I hope that I will have the support of other MLAs, including Mr Buchanan — to come to Omagh in October as a matter of urgency and put his money where his mouth is and meet local MLAs, the hospital campaign steering executive in Omagh and representatives from Omagh District Council?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been to Omagh on more than

one occasion and done all that Mr McElduff has asked me to do.

Ambulances in the North-West

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the incident where an ambulance has broken down, while on an emergency call, for the second time in two weeks in the North West region. (AQO 494/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have received the Northern Ireland Ambulance Services Trust's full report on the matter. The causes of the two breakdowns were unrelated. The ambulance that broke down has been serviced regularly, and its last routine service was carried out in February 2008. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Services Trust confirmed that there was no impact on the safety of the patients or crew on either occasion. Both times, a replacement ambulance was on the scene quickly to transport the patients that were involved to their destinations.

Last week, I announced a major investment package for the Ambulance Service totalling almost £100 million over the next 10 years, including £17.4 million over the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That significant investment will allow the service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáilím cinnte roimh an infheistíocht a d'fhógair an tAire an tseachtain seo caite sa tseirbhís otharchairr.

I welcome the investment in the Ambulance Service that the Minister announced last week. However, given that the fleet is ageing and there are new shift proposals, what will happen in the interim? For example, in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, Newry will lose three eight-hour shifts on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and there will be similar losses in the Armagh City and District Council area. The matter is literally one of life and death and has huge repercussions for many communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is Question Time, Mr Bradley. We do not need a statement after the question. I ask you to put your question to the Minister so that other Members have an opportunity to ask their questions.

Mr D Bradley: I am in the process of asking my question. You allowed other Members much more latitude when they were asking questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your asking a question has been an elongated process, and I ask you to shorten it.

Mr D Bradley: I will take my lead from the time that was allowed for other Members. *[Laughter.]*

As I was saying, the matter is too serious for Members to be laughing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to respond to the question.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The investment that I announced last week — £100 million over the next 10 years including £17.4 million over the three-year CSR period — will facilitate full capital replacement in the Ambulance Service. The investment will allow me to replace the entire ambulance fleet over the next five years, and that will happen regularly.

Parts of the ambulance fleet that I inherited have aged considerably. Those ambulances continue to do the job that they are required to do, their servicing is second to none, and they are extremely well looked after. Everyone will remember the incidence of two breakdowns because they are such rare events. The investment in running costs is far above the level of inflation, and investment in capital will also increase. The needs of the Ambulance Service will be in good stead in the foreseeable future because of that investment.

Indeed, the number of planned hours of ambulance cover in Northern Ireland will rise considerably over the next three years — from the current 538,000 hours per annum to 600,000 hours per annum. The investment in resources will rise from £46.6 million to £57 million. We will buy 60 accident-and-emergency ambulances, 60 patient-care vehicles and 26 rapid-response vehicles, in addition to the satellite-navigation systems, geographic-information systems and digital-mapping systems that I have mentioned previously. All of that will make the Ambulance Service more efficient.

I do not anticipate any reduction in staff numbers: there are currently 1,076 staff, and there will be 1,076 staff three years from now.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. I warmly commend and congratulate him on yet another positive announcement — the second in one week. Such announcements clearly demonstrate yet again that, whatever the other parties in the House might be at, the Ulster Unionist Party is delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, and it will continue to do so.

What steps has the Minister taken to improve ambulance response times across Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank Mr Kennedy for those remarks. As far as ambulance response times are concerned, 70% of all life-threatening calls must be responded to

within eight minutes, and we are on target in that respect. From April 2009, that figure will increase to 75% of all calls. We must bear in mind that, each year, the Ambulance Service receives a total of 125,000 emergency calls, and 253,000 non-emergency calls — that gives some idea of the sheer volume of business with which the organisation deals.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome last week's announcement about the investment in new ambulances. Does the Minister agree that the majority of ambulances that are currently being used are probably clapped out and in need of urgent repair? It is only for the grace of God, and the skill of the Ambulance Service's maintenance department, that there have not been more incidents like those that occurred last week.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not agree that the ambulances are clapped out. They are very well maintained and looked after, and, as I said, we all remember the two breakdowns because they are rare events. However, I agree that the fleet is too old, which is why I have invested money in changing the entire fleet over the next five years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that Question Time is an opportunity for Members to ask questions — not to make statements.

Middletown Centre for Autism

8. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many meetings have taken place between the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and the management of the Middletown Centre for Autism. (AQO 480/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Senior Southern Health and Social Care Trust staff met individual staff at the Middletown Centre for Autism on two occasions: 26 November 2007 and 21 February 2008. Both meetings were held at the request of the centre. Those were informal meetings during which staff talked about the way in which the centre was likely to operate. No further discussions have taken place on the specific health and social care services that the Middletown centre expects the health trust to provide.

Mr McCallister: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his announcements about the Ambulance Service and prescription charges — both are good news for patients.

The Minister will be aware of my concerns — and, indeed, the concerns of many — about the plans for the autism centre at Middletown. Does he share my disbelief that the Minister of Education has ploughed ahead with those plans despite the fact that

Middletown is miles from the nearest acute setting? Is it not a disgrace that the Minister is attempting to play politics with the issue? I know that the Minister has concerns about the project, so will he raise the matter urgently with the Minister of Education?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As Mr McCallister pointed out, the Middletown centre is entirely a matter for the Department of Education, and it would not be proper for me to give my opinion on it. However, I can say that I commissioned a report on autism, and that the independent review team that was established has produced an action plan, which has now been put out for consultation. The key issues are: earlier detection and recognition; assessment and diagnosis; appropriate and timely intervention; and support for individuals and families.

I have also allocated an extra £2.02 million, on top of the Budget allocation, specifically for autism because it has not had the serious attention that it deserves. As far as Middletown Centre for Autism is concerned, my Department has never been involved in discussions on details of medical provision.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Organic Farming

1. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown of the funding available to the different land types for organic farming in the rural development programme.

(AQO 455/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Organic farming is funded under two different schemes in the rural development programme.

The organic farming scheme (OFS) is available to farmers who are in the process of converting their land to organic production. Payments are made over five years, totalling £470 per hectare for improved and semi-improved grassland; £570 per hectare for arable land; and £670 per hectare for horticultural land. Under EU rules, payment can be made only to compensate for income foregone or losses incurred in converting to organic production. Most unimproved land, such as heather moorland, does not receive significant input to fertiliser or pesticide applications, so converting that land to organic management incurs no additional cost or income reduction when compared

with conventional approaches. For that reason, no payment is made for unimproved land in the OFS.

Funding is also available to organic farmers entering the new countryside management scheme who fully converted organic land under agreement. Improved and semi-improved land in the scheme will receive a payment of £30 per hectare per year.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. What is the role of the organic action plan group, and will it be restructured?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The organic action plan group, which is made up of a wide range of representatives from the organic sector, was consulted in relation to the design of the organic farming scheme. The group provided guidance to my Department, inclusive of all aspects of the organic sector. The current group's term ends in December 2008, and my Department will consider how future development of the sector should be progressed.

Mr Savage: What assessments or research have been carried out on farms to establish a fair payment for different land types? How many organic farmers who farm land that is categorised as unimproved serve on Northern Ireland's organic action plan group?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not have the information on the second part of the Member's question, but I will provide it to him in writing. However, the organic action plan group was involved, and there was a wide range of consultation on the organic farming scheme.

Mr P J Bradley: I thought that question 1 might have been withdrawn, in view of the fact that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development was told last week that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) had withdrawn finances from farmers who are working on unimproved land. In view of the Minister's support for organic production, will she now reinstate that money to those farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The difficulty about that issue is that an EU regulation was introduced that governed grants under the previous scheme. That was replaced in 2005 by a new regulation, the terms of which were considerably stricter. Under the previous regulation, member states were allowed to include small incentives to encourage organic farming. However, the new regulation does not allow any incentive element in the payment calculation. No economic data were available to justify any payment for unimproved land on the only basis available — that is, additional costs incurred or income foregone. If new evidence shows significant income foregone or costs incurred in converting unimproved land from conventional to organic

management, the Department will review the scheme's payment structures at the 2010 mid-term review of the rural development programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Bluetongue

3. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to prevent the spread of bluetongue. (AQO 415/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Bluetongue emerged in northern Europe in August 2006 and in England in September 2007. This year, the disease has re-emerged in much of northern Europe. In view of the risk to our livestock industry, all susceptible animals imported from outside this island continue to be isolated, housed and restricted on the farm of destination. The animals are post-import tested twice, and restrictions are lifted only when the Department is satisfied that they do not present a bluetongue risk. In recent weeks, at least seven separate consignments of imports from the Continent to England and Wales have contained bluetongue-infected animals.

As a result, I re-emphasised my message to the industry that it must consider carefully the risks before importing. Everyone involved must consider the possible cost to their own businesses and to the wider industry of importing bluetongue.

My officials have been working with Merial, the vaccine manufacturer, to supply almost two million doses of vaccine as part of our contingency plan. That vaccine will be available shortly. However, under EU rules, vaccine can only be used in an area that is part of a protection zone. I reiterate that it is essential that farmers do not become complacent. The best preventive measure is to not purchase animals that may have been exposed to the bluetongue virus. I am pleased that, to date, the industry has heeded my appeals not to import livestock from high-risk areas.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she outline her policy in the event of an outbreak of bluetongue in the Republic of Ireland, and will she confirm that in the event of such an outbreak she will adopt a fortress-Northern Ireland strategy?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The disease is borne by midges, which do not have any respect for borders, so it would depend on where the outbreak occurs. If an outbreak occurred in Cork, for example, and the protection zone was limited so that it effectively cut the island in half, we might either decide to remain a free area or consider a means to extend that protection zone to

cover the North and allow us to vaccinate. That would require an assessment of the relative risks and benefits.

In the event of an outbreak in which the protection zone extends to the border, we might very well decide to extend the protection zone into the North to allow us to vaccinate. However, no decisions can be taken prior to the facts of an outbreak being known. Furthermore, factors such as the time of year will have an impact on the veterinary risk assessment and the Department's decision. Obviously, we have a contingency plan for that scenario.

Mr McElduff: What information has the Department provided to farmers and the farming unions NIAPA (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association) and the Ulster Farmers' Union?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For more than a year, my Department has been working in partnership with the key stakeholders, including both farmers' unions, through the bluetongue working group. That group has discussed preparedness to deal with the threat of bluetongue and will continue to do so. In conjunction with key stakeholders, the Department has also provided advice to the industry about bluetongue, including information about clinical signs. Leaflets are available, and the information is also on the DARD website. The Department has also issued advice to local importers, highlighting the potential risks of importing susceptible animals from bluetongue-infected areas, and the measures that those importers must take if they move livestock to shows in Britain.

I have stressed repeatedly to the industry here that the best preventive measure is not to purchase animals from high-risk areas. There is absolutely no room for complacency. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I wish the Minister well with her imminent new delivery. I hope that it is not too imminent. *[Laughter.]*

How much has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development spent on the bluetongue vaccine to date?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has submitted a bid for 1.9 million doses of vaccine. I do not have the figures to hand, but I will be happy to forward information about the cost of the vaccines to the Member. We had to make a managed risk assessment on whether to buy vaccine in advance or to stockpile it. However, the vaccine has a limited shelf life, as I have previously explained in the House. We have purchased a number of doses of vaccine, but we have not yet received them; they will not be available until late October or November. The contingency plan was put in place so that we are prepared for anything.

I thank the Member for his comments. If it happens today, it is good to know that the Member will be on hand to give me a wee shove out. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will be on his own. *[Laughter.]*

Question 4 has been withdrawn.

DARD Direct/DARD Connect

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration her Department has given to the siting of a new DARD Direct office in the Ards/North Down area.

(AQO 397/09)

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on office closures under the DARD Connect scheme.

(AQO 450/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 9 together.

DARD Direct is a new service delivery method aimed at improving the quality of service that the Department provides to its customers. A pilot of DARD Direct was set up in Inniskeen House in Enniskillen; an independent evaluation of the pilot was positive, and customer feedback was very good. Based on that positive feedback, I have agreed that the model should be rolled out across the North.

The proposed roll-out of DARD Direct is undergoing an equality impact assessment (EQIA). Officials from my Department carried out the public consultation phase during the summer. The key issues arising from that were accessibility of offices, for both staff and customers; quality and flexibility of service; and disruption to staff and customers. We are in the process of preparing a final EQIA report, which includes the findings of that consultation exercise and appropriate recommendations for mitigating actions for the emerging issues. The final EQIA report is scheduled to be discussed by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in the first week of December.

No decisions on the final number and locations of DARD Direct offices will be taken until after that report has been fully considered. Given that situation, I cannot provide any specific information in relation to the siting of a new office in the Ards or north Down area at present.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's confirmation that no final decision has been taken in respect of siting. However, given that north Down and Ards are significant agricultural areas, and that the area in particular around Comber and Newtownards is known as the "market garden of Ulster", does she agree with

me that it would be unforgivable and unacceptable not to site a DARD office in that area, particularly given that it is well-served by DARD offices in Newtownards?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of that report; it would be more unforgivable of me to make a recommendation or decision when I do not have all the information available to me. I will carefully scrutinise all the reports that are received. Comments have been very positive, and I want to take cognisance of everything before I make a final decision.

Mr McCarthy: In view of the Minister's response to last week's announcement about the relocation of Civil Service jobs — when she supported the location of jobs in the rural community — would it not be a bit contradictory if, at the end of the consultation process, the Minister were to agree to relocate away from Ards, which is in a rural constituency?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Professor Bain's report recommends that public-sector jobs should be located where they can best enhance the sustainable economic and social development of the North. That review was commissioned by the Executive, so any recommendations will have to be examined carefully before Ministers make any decision on how best to proceed. However, enhanced service delivery and improved access for customers and stakeholders are key outcomes of the proposed approach. That is exactly what I hope to achieve with the roll-out of DARD Direct, and my officials will take into consideration the decisions made on the Bain Review when they are known.

Mr McKay: Will the Minister indicate some of the main issues that arose from the consultation on this matter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The consensus from those responding was very supportive of the concept of DARD Direct, and a number of main issues arose. The issue of accessibility for both customers and staff was mentioned, although, from a customer perspective, the number of offices is less important than the provision of good coverage and a more joined-up approach to delivery, with competent, knowledgeable and professional front-line staff. There is also a need for adequate accessible customer parking, and for the offices to be at a reasonable travelling distance. The office design must be customer-friendly, staff-friendly, disabled-friendly and child-friendly, and public transport links should be considered when identifying locations.

Also mentioned was flexibility of service delivery. Flexible service provision in relation to opening hours was requested by customer groups, and although nine-to-five opening is welcome, the need for out-of-hours opening should be assessed at each location.

Alternative channels of service delivery must be well-promoted, and appropriate training could increase the uptake of online services. There is also the issue of the quality of service delivery; it is very important to maintain good relationships between customers and staff and high levels of customer service.

The issue of disruption to staff was also mentioned, particularly the potential impact of relocating staff to new offices. It is important to note that that would have a greater effect on administration grades, and that female staff make up the greater percentage of non-mobile administrative assistants, administrative officers and part-time staff, and are also likely to have dependants and caring responsibilities. All of that will be taken into consideration when making a final decision.

Mr Gallagher: I want to ask the Minister about accessibility, which is a very important issue. Does she understand that the accessibility criteria are Northern Ireland-wide, and if they are applied, there will be considerable areas of north and south Fermanagh that will fall outside those criteria? It is, therefore, very important for her Department to carefully consider Fermanagh.

Will the Minister put her plans to move many of her Department's offices to Omagh on hold while the Bain Report is being considered?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No final decision on the Department's location has been made, so the reference to Omagh is very premature. Furthermore, Inniskeen House, which was the initial pilot project that opened about three years ago, has been hugely successful. We are working closely with the focus group in Fermanagh on how they feel about the project, and those who live closer to Omagh are travelling to Fermanagh because there is a wider range of services at Inniskeen House.

We have examined accessibility issues carefully, and I am all too aware of them, particularly in south and west Fermanagh. Good decisions must be made that reflect where people live and how they do business. However, the comments about Inniskeen House, in general, are hugely supportive and very encouraging, and I am happy with how that project is progressing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Countryside Management Scheme

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the time frame for new applicants to be approved into the Countryside

Management Scheme and to allow associated work to commence on-farm. (AQO 435/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The new countryside management scheme agreements for successful applicants between 30 June and 29 August will commence on 1 January 2009. Farmers can commence works in the scheme once their agreement has received approval. It is important to note that no one should commence any works under a countryside management scheme unless he or she has received, signed and returned the agreements and received confirmation that they have been approved. During the application period, 4,430 eligible applications were received.

Mr Gardiner: Due to the payment rates differential, has the Minister made any plans to review the payment rates for those farmers who are engaged in work from previous countryside management schemes. Also, will she review payments in the scheme in future years?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The issue of payment rates is something that we have had to consider. We accept that there is a different ratio this time and that farmers who enter the new countryside management scheme will be asked to deliver more environmental benefits. Therefore, many farmers who are in the old scheme are content to stay at that level of compliance and are not interested with more involvement. However, we must also manage the situation; there have been over 4,000 applications, and we want to see the best possible environmental impact, so we will have to manage how we roll those out over a period of time. Although we have thought about it, it is not practical for us to review payment rates mid way, and we want to get more people into the scheme as soon as possible. Therefore, the issue is management of human and financial resources in the Department.

Dr W McCrea: How many of the 4,430 applications are successful, because it has been acknowledged that not all who have applied will be admitted to the scheme? Why do we have to wait until 1 January 2009 before successful countryside management scheme agreements for this application period will commence?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Due to EU regulations, all claims for payment in the new scheme must be made using the integrated administrations and control system (IACS) single application form, which must normally be submitted by May each year. Following validation and eligibility checks, payments will be issued on or around completion of the scheme year, which runs from 1 January until 31 December. Due to the high level of interest, and to maximise environmental benefit, we must also give priority to farmers who have land in special areas of conservation, special protection areas, areas of special scientific interest,

Ramsar areas, geopark areas and environmentally sensitive areas. We will try to manage admissions to the scheme as best we can to ensure that we get a good outcome from the countryside management scheme.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will all the applicants receive a farm visit and be offered an agreement?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Unfortunately, not all farmers will receive a visit — certainly, not during the first round. Applicants will be visited according to environmental priorities and budgetary constraints that have been identified for the new countryside management scheme.

The Department anticipates that it will carry out 1,300 farm visits to enable successful applicants to commence their agreements for the claim year from 1 January to 31 December 2009. As I said, those visits will concentrate on applicants whose sites have been designated as having special environmental importance. The Department's target in 2008 is to reach approximately 1,000 agreements, with approximately 2,000 entering the scheme in the subsequent years of the rural development programme's duration.

Mr McNarry: I am sure that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The question number will suffice, Mr McNarry.

Better Regulation and Simplification Review

8. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the Better Regulation and Simplification Review.
(AQO 438/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh míle maith agat. In November 2007, the former Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, and I launched the better regulation and simplification review. Since then, work has progressed under the direction of an independent panel, chaired by Mr Michael Dowling. The panel has been active. It has met representatives from the industry and environmental groups on various occasions to consider evidence from previous reviews and studies. It has visited the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to learn from its experience of better regulation.

Officials who work with the panel have analysed current DARD and Department of the Environment (DOE) regulations to identify where the most significant burdens exist. A consultative exercise with stakeholders, which aims to agree baseline estimates of the administrative burden and to generate simplification proposals, is well advanced. The panel

provided the Environment Minister and me with an interim report at the end of May 2008. It also presented the report to the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and Environment Committee. It briefed both Committees on the review's progress in June 2008.

In its interim report, the panel asked for more time to complete its work because the exercise is more complex than had been anticipated. The original expectation that estimates of administrative burden and simplification proposals for England would provide most of the information that was required proved not to be the case. As a result, officials who support the panel have had to scrutinise legislation, identify the administrative burden that it creates, estimate the time and cost of compliance for business, and agree those estimates with stakeholders. The detailed information generated by those baseline exercises has then been used to identify the most burdensome regulations and activities, and is a starting point for discussion of simplification proposals.

Agribusiness and environmental stakeholders were consulted on the need to extend the project. They agreed that the additional time required was fully justified by the importance of the exercise to the long-term delivery of the better-regulation agenda. The review is now expected to be completed by the end of 2008.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful to the Minister for her detailed answer. I am sure that she is reassured, as, indeed, all Members were — you included, Mr Deputy Speaker — by the Health Minister's assurances on ambulances. I thought that we might have needed to call one for the Minister had her answer been any longer.

How will the review's final results be measured to ensure that overall reduction of 25% in the cost of regulation will be achieved? Can the Minister confirm that she has cut through red tape on that issue?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Obviously, the Department must await the panel's recommendations. However, as the panel carries out its work, the Department has done its best to improve simplification and to cut bureaucracy.

For example, the countryside management scheme was discussed, and applications for that scheme could be made by phone call. The Department strives to make such processes much easier, and it wants to ensure that whatever it introduces during the interim will have gone through the prism to cut red tape and bureaucracy and to make matters easier for farmers. Furthermore, the Department is also rolling out a pilot scheme in which farmers can notify officials by phone of animals' births and movements. Therefore, people who, traditionally, would have had to send that information in writing to the Department can now

provide it over the phone. The Department is keen to be as accessible and customer-friendly as possible to the farming community.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister believe that the review's terms of reference are wide enough to allow the panel to make any recommendations that will significantly reduce red tape and bureaucracy?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The terms of reference are certainly wide enough. The fact that the panel has asked for additional time means that it, too, has accepted that the terms are wide enough. It is a complex and complicated process. The right people are in place to examine all those issues. They have been given additional time. It is hoped, therefore, that they will produce solid recommendations.

It has been difficult and a challenge. However, that will not deter us from striving to achieve the targets that we have set.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 was grouped with question 5 and has already been answered.

Farm Diversification

10. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers have diversified from farming in the past three years. (AQO 406/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is important to note that diversification is not always about farmers moving out of farming, but rather about providing the farmer and farm-family members with additional incomes that can help to make the overall farm business more sustainable.

Not every farmer who wants to diversify necessarily approaches my Department, but we encourage farmers and farm-family members to engage with us. To help them, we have implemented several methods of helping farm families to diversify and supported them with capital grants under various funding programmes.

From April 2003 to March this year, 1,223 people have completed the diversification challenge programme run by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). Some 295 of them are known to have started a diversified farm business. Under the LEADER+ programme, 26 farm diversification projects were able to draw down £400,000 of EU funds. Axis 1 of the regional development programme has Farm-Family Options built into it, including reskilling, which will help farm families to decide on an option for diversifying — and what reskilling support they need — and provide them with mentoring throughout the process.

Under axis 3, we have included a specific farm-diversification measure, with £20 million ring-fenced for farmers and members of farm families who wish to diversify on-farm. They will also be eligible to apply for funds under the micro-business creation and support measure for off-farm diversification.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. What is the Minister's Department doing to encourage diversification in the farming community, especially in East Londonderry?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department encourages farmers to diversify and to try to find ways to supplement their farm income. We have a wide range of schemes. Axis 3 of the rural development programme will be widely publicised, and we will ensure that not just the farmer, but members of the farm family, know that that money is available to them.

A tender process is under way to find a delivery agent for axis 1. Over the next few months, Farm Family Options, including reskilling, will open for calls. Work is progressing well on axis 3, and I hope that we will be able to complete the strategies and enter into contracts for the initial allocations of funding that have been previously announced, including the farm-diversification measure. We are working hard to publicise the fact that the programme is open and available and to encourage take-up.

When I am out and about, meeting people, I am encouraged to see the wide range of diversification projects that have been set up across the North. Some people have taken the skills that they have learned on the farm and put them to use in innovative businesses. We have very creative and entrepreneurial people in the rural community, and they are well placed to take advantage of those grants.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When will this funding be available to farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I covered many aspects of that in my answer to the previous question. It will all come on board over the next few months. I look forward to that funding being rolled out across the North.

Mr Elliott: I am sure that, when the Minister is off for a few weeks of well-earned rest, she will not miss her attendance at meetings of the Executive.

Does the Minister accept that diversification should not just be about diversification from farming, but should take place in conjunction with ongoing farming activities?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Farm diversification is about providing the farmer and farm-family members with additional

incomes that will help to make the overall farming business more sustainable and will, I hope, keep them in farming. Diversification is not about alternatives to farming and getting people off the land. Rather, it is a way of supplementing and enhancing the farm business and ensuring that the farmer and farm-family members have a better quality of life as a result.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No one is more relieved than me that we got through that half hour without incident, and without an increase of one in Sinn Féin's membership in the Chamber.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Voluntary and Community Sector: Development

1. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her strategy for the future development of the voluntary and community sector. (AQO 429/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): First, I wish to offer my condolences and sympathy to the deputy First Minister on the death, earlier today, of his mother.

I have the highest regard for the work carried out by the voluntary and community sector throughout Northern Ireland. My Department is implementing a number of key strategies in support of the future development of the voluntary and community sector. Those measures are as follows: I have introduced the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which represents a major change for the charities sector in Northern Ireland; for the first time, charities will be regulated by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland; and the appointment of the new charity commissioners is under way.

Last year, I published 'Opening Doors', a strategy for the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community. Later this autumn, I intend to launch a public consultation on the location of voluntary advice services to identify where services are best located and how provision of services might be better regularised.

The Department is also developing a support-services strategy to help to ensure that voluntary and community organisations have access to support services to make their work more effective. It is likely that the strategy will place a new emphasis on the commissioning of services under contract. Ahead of full consultation later this year, I will introduce a new

volunteering strategy, the objective of which is to increase awareness and levels of volunteering. That strategy will shortly go before the Committee for Social Development.

The 'Positive Steps' strategy, which is also cross-departmental, is aimed at implementing a series of commitments arising from the report of the task force on resourcing the sector. Good progress has been made on the majority of actions, and my officials are working with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office to examine the more complex actions that remain outstanding.

Finally, my Department published the Partners for Change 2006-08 strategy, which is aimed at supporting the voluntary and community sector. That strategy has now run its course, and I have asked my officials to examine options for future strategic support and development of the sector, including a review of the compact.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she confirm what role the local community fund will have within her Department's community development strategy?

The Minister for Social Development: As the Member will be aware, the local community fund operates directly in many areas throughout Northern Ireland. This year and last year, I was happy to launch and to support extensions to the local community fund in areas where there are levels of disadvantage.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In her support for the voluntary and community sector, will the Minister explain why she has requested to individually sign off on each neighbourhood renewal project in Belfast? Does she accept that such political interference has the potential to put jobs and services at risk in areas of multiple deprivation?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member's point about political interference is absolute rubbish, and I refute it.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Social Development: Given the pressure on funds across the Department, I want to be sure that best use is being made of available resources. Therefore, I have asked for some headline information on current neighbourhood renewal applications, including the nature of project proposals, the neighbourhood renewal area, and the funding requirements in the context of budgetary resources.

I shall be absolutely clear: officials will make decisions about funding individual projects and groups based on preset criteria. I again emphasise that, as Minister, I will set the budget and the policy but — to avoid any suggestion of political interference — I will

take no part in individual decisions. That constitutes political vetting and to do that would be a contravention of the ministerial Pledge of Office, which I do not countenance.

I note that the Member has tabled a series of questions to various Ministers on the role of neighbourhood renewal, stating that there must be buy-in. I welcome those types of questions, because they show that the Member is seeking information from other Departments, which clearly emphasises that she recognises that other Departments and other Ministers have a clear role in delivering neighbourhood renewal.

Mr Armstrong: How much consultation has the Minister had with the Minister for the Third Sector in Westminster?

The Minister for Social Development: I have corresponded with the Minister for the Third Sector over the last year, but, as Members will appreciate, responsibility for the voluntary and community sector within the Department for Social Development lies with the Minister and the devolved institutions. I am happy to conduct further discussions if I think that they are appropriate. Naturally, if the Member wishes me to investigate a particular area, I will be happy to do so.

Housing Association Purchases

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the benefits of Housing Associations purchasing units directly from developers outside of pre-planned schemes.

(AQO 398/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My aim, first and foremost, is to deliver 5,250 new social houses over the three-year period 2008-11. Plans have been put in place to ensure that that will happen. The new housing agenda calls for innovative ways in which to achieve best value for money. Where appropriate, the purchase of units directly from developers at lower prices than in recent times allows me to maximise the resources available to the social housing development programme.

Traditionally, building new houses has been the most cost-effective way of delivering social housing. However, due to the recent change in the market, many houses that were previously beyond the financial reach of housing associations have become available for purchase. If those properties are in areas of greatest need, represent good value for money and are design compliant, they can be included in the social-housing development programme. However, establishing that there is a housing need in an area is a prerequisite before approval can be given to any housing association to buy houses directly from developers.

The purchase of such units remains only a small percentage of the overall programme. To further emphasise my commitment, I have already embarked on several innovative partnerships that bring developers, lenders and housing associations together in a unique way in order to help people to get onto the first rung of the property ladder.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. Having listened to what she has said, I wonder whether she has any concerns about that procedure. I want to emphasise that I do not think that it is totally incorrect, but I certainly have concerns about that procedure. It could be construed that those houses are being purchased purely because they cannot be sold on the open market, and maybe the Housing Executive and housing associations are good agencies to go to go to get rid of them. Does the Minister have any concerns about that happening?

The Minister for Social Development: I understand the concerns outlined by the Member, but I emphasise again that buying off the shelf can happen only in areas where there is highest housing need, where the Housing Executive does not have locally available land, where it represents good value for money, and where the properties are design compliant. There are several conditions that have to be adhered to before purchase takes place.

Mr K Robinson: In the light of increasing demand for social housing, has the Minister made further representations to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for increased funding? If so, what level of funding is she seeking?

The Minister for Social Development: I assure the Member that I have already done so. I made a submission in the June monitoring round, and the Member will be aware that very little money came out of that. I replicated the request through the September monitoring round, which is currently being finalised by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I will be furnishing him with a further response later today.

Naturally, that paper is due for discussion by the Executive when they meet. With all due courtesy to my colleagues in the Executive, I should discuss the details of that paper with them before I bring it to the Chamber. I do not wish to be discourteous to anybody.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister commit to purchasing further off-the-shelf houses for social housing and in so doing help local builders who are so hard pressed at the moment?

The Minister for Social Development: I am prepared to consider all offers that come forward. There will be a requirement for off-the-shelf purchases in every year of the five year social housing development programme provided — and again I emphasise the point — that they are in areas of highest

need where the Housing Executive does not have available land, represent good value for money, and are design compliant. My priority is always to meet housing need at the right cost, and if that helps builders at the same time, then it is a win-win situation.

I sympathise with the plumbers, joiners, electricians, bricklayers, and other construction workers whose employment is at risk in the current downturn. However, it is worth remembering that although private-sector house building has declined sharply, I am increasing public-sector house building significantly. Hopefully, that will help builders all over Northern Ireland. I have met with representatives of the construction industry on many occasions. Coincidentally, a few weeks ago, other MLAs and I met with representatives of the construction property group: they know that I am sympathetic to their situation.

Fuel Poverty

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development when she will bring forward proposals to assist people living in social housing who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty. (AQO 528/09)

4. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the work of the fuel poverty task force. (AQO 513/09)

5. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Social Development what actions she is taking to alleviate fuel poverty. (AQO 527/09)

The Minister for Social Development: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, given the similarity of questions 3, 4 and 5, I will respond to them together. Fuel poverty is a cross-departmental issue. Earlier this year, I anticipated the looming fuel-poverty crisis, and in May 2008 I established the fuel poverty task force, which brought together representatives from Government and the wider energy sector. The task force was asked to identify measures to tackle fuel poverty and, in particular, to identify short-term recommendations that could be developed to assist people who will be in need this winter.

I developed a set of practical proposals from the task force's report, which were circulated to Ministers as a draft Executive paper aimed at the meeting scheduled for 18 September. Unfortunately, that meeting did not take place. Between that time and the next scheduled meeting of the Executive, I received responses from a number of Ministers and had discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Health. Those Ministers recognised the importance of the proposals as regards resource requirements, the general implications for health, and the need to progress the work urgently. When the Executive failed to meet yet again, I revised the paper,

taking into account other Ministers' views, and produced a final Executive paper, which I have sought clearance for via the urgent procedure route.

I need clearance for the package, because although the benefits of the proposals may not reach people until January 2009, the work — including possible legislation — needs to start immediately. Obviously, the package includes direct help for those most vulnerable to fuel poverty, but it also includes a series of other actions aimed at bringing more resources to bear on the problem. However, the issue merits a full response from the Executive as a whole.

Mr Neeson: Like the majority of Members, I share the Minister's frustration. It is an absolute disgrace that decisions are not being taken because the Executive will not meet. *[Interruption.]* Does the Minister agree that because of the fuel hike thousands of people across Northern Ireland are also suffering from frustration as a result of an Executive that will not meet? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Social Development: I fully agree with Mr Neeson's comments: people will ask why that is the case.

It is absolutely time-critical that an Executive meeting takes place in order that the urgent proposals to alleviate fuel poverty can be discussed. Owing to the fact that an Executive meeting could not take place, not to mention the matter's urgency — there is a compelling need to keep people warm this winter — I immediately resubmitted my paper for urgent procedure.

3.45 pm

Mrs Hanna: All Members share the Minister's concern. Is there anything in the Minister's fuel-poverty package to help the working poor, who miss out because they are just above benefits level?

The Minister for Social Development: The full measures have yet to be discussed with my Executive colleagues, so, with due courtesy to them, suffice it to say that measures are contained in that package that would assist the working poor. However, I emphasise again to Mrs Hanna that the matter is now time-critical, and I hope that it can be approved through use of urgent procedure.

Notwithstanding all that, all my ministerial colleagues should, and must, discuss the issues in that paper, because they have an impact on various Departments. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has responsibility for tackling poverty; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for energy prices and social tariffs; my Department has responsibility for energy efficiency in the home; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has

responsibility for the health and well-being of all our citizens, and that includes those who are above the benefits level — the working poor.

I want to get on with the work, and I hope that the aspiration of everyone in the House is to ensure that people stay warm this winter.

Mrs Long: Bearing in mind that recent increases in energy costs have led to expectations that up to 43% of people in Northern Ireland could be vulnerable to fuel poverty, does the Minister agree that tackling that issue could be top of the agenda at any future Executive meeting, given that setting an agenda seems to be difficult? That would allow the Executive to respond to this crisis with more than hot air and heated comments.

The Minister for Social Development: I could not agree more with Mrs Long. I say yet again that this is a time-critical issue, because the most important consideration is delivering for people and ensuring that all the people of Northern Ireland are kept warm this winter at a time when fuel prices have witnessed their highest increases for many years.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister feel that the emergency procedure is an adequate way in which to deal with the issue? Will she advise the House as to who is to blame for the hold-up? Some of my constituents have asked me whether consideration has been given to installing Watchman electronic oil-tank gauges in order to help the elderly and vulnerable?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr McCrea's questions raise several issues. Due to the time-critical nature of the matter, and because Executive meetings did not take place, I revised the paper to reflect comments that I had received from Ministers across the four parties, and I submitted that revised version to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on Thursday evening.

I also had a discussion with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who recognises that substantial resources are required. I say, in order to be helpful, that the final Executive paper does not impose a specific amount of money, although the scheme that I have in mind will bring significant assistance to many thousands of people. Delivering for people in order that they can keep warm is paramount, because I am sure that the major issue raised in all constituency offices is fuel poverty — how we work collectively to alleviate it and how we deal with the issues that affect people daily.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that the more than 11,000 Housing Executive tenants who use the Economy 7 electric heating system will be sorely hit by the rise in electricity prices, when will the Department for Social Development replace those systems with other heating systems?

The Minister for Social Development: I am aware of the concern that many people throughout Northern Ireland have with Economy 7. I will investigate that issue directly with the Housing Executive, and I will come back to Ms McCann in writing.

My officials are currently finalising changes to the warm homes scheme, which is specifically dedicated to insulation measures. Those changes will take account of the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendations, and a consultation paper will be published later this month. The warm homes scheme has been a huge success, and it has benefited approximately 65,000 households in Northern Ireland to date. However, it has perhaps now captured most of the quick wins, and it must be refocused so that the maximum energy efficiency gains can be achieved and that the people who are most in need of help get that help.

I am sure that some of Ms McCann's constituents who have Economy 7 heating might benefit from the revised warm homes scheme. After the revised scheme comes out for consultation, I hope that those people will benefit from the implementation of the new scheme.

Ms Purvis: I know that the Minister is reviewing the criteria for the warm homes scheme. However, the current criteria for the warm homes scheme excludes working single-person households and other working households on low income that do not qualify for passport benefits. Those households are the least-energy-efficient homes, and 70% of them use oil as their only means of heating. What measures does the Minister propose to alleviate fuel poverty for the working fuel poor?

The Minister for Social Development: That issue was also raised by Mrs Hanna. The purpose of refocusing the warm homes scheme is to ensure that the people who are most in need, particularly the working poor, will have their requirements and needs tackled. I ask Members to bide with me for a little longer. The consultation paper will be published later this month. Members and their constituents will have the opportunity to comment on that consultation paper, and I hope that the combined comments will better inform the final production. The final outcome is to keep people warm, and that is a longer-term measure than keeping people warm this winter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 were grouped with question 3. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Laganside Community Activity Grants

7. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development how many groups have applied for Laganside community activity grants since 1 April 2007.
(AQO 421/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The aim of the Laganside community activity grant is to support activities that are directly related to the Laganside area and that address the needs of, and provide benefit to, the Laganside local community from the rejuvenated river front. Since 1 April 2007, 44 groups have applied for Laganside community activity grants.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for her reply. I also congratulate her for her answers to questions 3, 4 and 5; her tenacity was inspirational.

What potential do the grants offer for the capacity of local communities to build entrepreneurialism? What businesses have been involved with events that are linked with the Laganside community activity grant?

The Minister for Social Development: Perhaps further background information will be helpful: the total amount of grants expended in 2007-08 was £11,638; and in this financial year the figure is £1,430 to date, with an estimated total for the year of £17,700. Last year, 19 groups applied for grants, and 25 groups have applied so far in this financial year. The total number of applications is 48, because several of the 44 groups made multiple applications for various community activities.

The Member asked about the different types of application. Much potential exists for the local community in the Laganside area to benefit. The activity grants provide the community with opportunities to express itself, undertake activities that can help to regenerate the area and engage in joined-up working, which I particularly welcome. Community activity also acts as a fillip for tourism by attracting visitors to the Laganside area. As the Member knows, my Department inherited responsibility for regeneration in the area when it took over from the Laganside Development Corporation in April 2007.

Dr McDonnell: What further larger-scale regeneration around the river Lagan is being considered? I am not alone in regretting the demise of the Laganside Development Corporation that did tremendous work on resuscitating activity along the Lagan; many share my view. I am keen for the same type of regeneration to continue.

The Minister for Social Development: Laganside has, undoubtedly, been a great success story. More than £1 billion has been invested in the area, and, by 2007, some 15,000 jobs, 231,000 sq m of office space and 803 homes had been created. I am delighted to add that my Department will oversee a further £500 million of investment between now and 2012. That investment is part of the Laganside legacy; developments such as the landmark Obel building, The Boat, Lanyon Towers, the Soloist, the Four Corners and St Anne's Square will bring further prosperity and jobs to Northern Ireland.

Recently, I announced two new regeneration initiatives for the riverfront. I commissioned a study to make recommendations on the redevelopment of the Lagan Lookout and the riverside area around the Lagan Weir towards Lanyon Place. Potential improvements include the transformation of the Lagan Lookout into a multi-use visitors' centre and the provision of a mini marina at the weir to encourage small craft to moor alongside it.

I commissioned a second study to recommend how to improve pedestrian and bicycle access across the river from the east bank to the city centre. Previous studies highlighted the potential for new footbridges from Donegall Quay to Queen's Quay or from the Gasworks to Ormeau Park, and for an enhancement of the existing footbridge at the Lagan Weir. Within the next six months, I hope to announce the results of the studies and reveal how and when the riverside projects will proceed.

Eco Homes Good Rating Standards

8. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place to build more social housing that conforms to the Eco Homes 'good' rating standards. (AQO 425/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the new housing agenda earlier this year, I announced that all new social housing built from 1 April 2008 would conform to level 3 of the new code on sustainable housing. Social housing will, therefore, be built to a higher standard than the eco-home rating of good. The new code requires houses to be 25% more energy efficient than ever before. At a time of significant increases in energy prices, not only will those new homes benefit the environment, but their tenants will have greater protection against struggling to meet their future energy costs.

4.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Comber Greenway

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway. — [*Ms Purvis.*]

Dr McDonnell: When I first examined the motion, I considered it sensible. However, after further assessment, I am worried that it might exclude the full and proper use of the old Comber railway line for the development of a rapid-transit line. Although I favour a light-rail line, some form of rapid transit is essential to allow people from the south and east of the city quick, easy access to Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland recognised the important role that a rapid-transit system would play in providing a step change in public transportation. A commitment was made to start work on the first rapid-transit line before 2011. That commitment must be honoured, and regardless of whatever may happen to the old Comber railway line, rapid transit must be the priority. I hope that pedestrian and cyclist access can be integrated. However, the policy context for the development of a rapid-transit network is well defined, and there is widespread recognition — in all Departments — that a good rapid-transit system is a key element in the economic and infrastructural regeneration of Belfast and the greater Belfast metropolitan area.

I cannot overstress the importance of a comprehensive, cross-departmental approach to urban regeneration and infrastructural development. The development of a rapid-transit system must not be addressed as a single issue; it should, rather, be considered in the wider context of economic growth, regeneration and future prosperity — that should not be sacrificed easily. Therefore, I am protective of the opportunity provided by the Comber Greenway. However, I will not elaborate. A report produced by Atkins — which the House debated on 3 June — assessed several options. However, at least two of the options outlined therein — options 2 and 3 — would have required the use of the space afforded by the Comber railway line.

Belfast needs space to breathe and to enable people to enter and exit the city easily and quickly. Belfast is reinventing itself as one of Europe's most vibrant and progressive business locations, and the recent establishment of the Victoria Square complex dramatically increased retail capacity. Furthermore,

Belfast has become one of the 10 largest retail centres in the United Kingdom. The regeneration of the Cathedral Quarter, the Titanic Quarter and various other ambitious projects will contribute to that revitalisation. However, the downside is the increasing congestion on our roads, the serious access problems in Belfast and the difficulty of finding available car-parking spaces. Much of the present congestion is a direct result of dependence on an inadequate car- and bus-based public transport system.

Belfast has, historically, been at the cutting edge of technological advances. One hundred years ago, the world's largest ship was built in Belfast. Furthermore, the City Hall was built in Belfast, and it introduced one of the earliest street-lighting systems. From 1905, Belfast had an extensive electric tram system, which succeeded the horse-drawn tram system. In 1908, a significant expansion of the system incorporated Queen's Island, which is not far from the Comber railway line under discussion today. That system existed until 1953 and, at its peak, stretched for more than 40 miles of track. In 1936, electrically driven trolleybuses were introduced, and the tram system was abandoned in 1954.

We must preserve the space that is required to build an adequate rapid-transport system. My preference is for a light-rail system. In time, we can prove that that is the better system, and the old Comber railway line's disused track is vital to that project. I support the broad thrust of the motion, but —

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

Dr McDonnell: It would be better if a rapid-transit system could safely operate alongside access for pedestrians and walkers, but the rapid-transit system should be the priority.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Assembly colleagues for bringing the motion to the House. As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I fully support every effort to promote a good, healthy, fresh outdoor life, and the Comber Greenway provides just that. Every effort must be made to ensure that the Comber Greenway is preserved and expanded, because it is an excellent provision for everyone.

Congratulations go to all the agencies that supported the creation of the Comber Greenway. It is a perfect example of joined-up thinking. It was not too long ago that I walked along part of that old railway track near Comber. It was simply a pathway then, with soil, weeds, grass and, unfortunately, some dog foul, which I avoided. Even so, many walkers, cyclists and others were using it.

The peacefulness of that entire area is truly magnificent, unparalleled and unspoilt. One can see wildlife, birds and wild flowers, and take in basic fresh

air. One could describe the area as a bit of heaven on earth, and it must be retained as such. It would be a total shame if the Comber Greenway were to be compromised.

Money was spent on upgrading that excellent facility, and that initiative was very much welcomed and supported by everyone in the locality and by people further afield. If there is any chance that the Comber Greenway will be interfered with — as has been suggested — a full consultation exercise must be undertaken so that everyone in our community is provided with an opportunity to contribute to the debate. At the end of that consultation, everything will have been investigated and the right decision will be made for the right reasons.

I sincerely hope that the present wonderful environment that is the Comber Greenway will remain and will continue to be enjoyed by everyone. I support the motion.

Mr Newton: I also support the motion. Although I welcome the debate, I find it difficult to understand how this motion was accepted as private Members' business. Many Members see it as a more suitable topic for an Adjournment debate. Mr Deputy Speaker, must I declare an interest as a regular user of the walkway?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have done so by mentioning that fact.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a regular user of the Comber Greenway to walk my dogs, I do not see the massive number of people that some Members would have us believe make use of the route. Like many other Members, I fully appreciate the route and the pleasant environment that has been created. I also welcome the £32 million Connswater Community Greenway project that will be developed in close proximity, and will provide other recreation and walking areas for the people of east Belfast and beyond.

Other Members referred to the previous debate about this issue that took place on 3 June 2008. At that time, the Minister gave assurances that the Comber Greenway would be retained as a walking and cycling facility alongside the creation of the rapid-transport system. One of the proposers of today's motion did not participate in that debate, and having listened to her speech, I am not sure whether Ms Purvis is in favour of the rapid-transport project or is opposed to it.

In 2003, essential work started along parts of the old Comber railway line to lay a new sewer, and that resulted in the emergence of health and recreation opportunities for people of the area and, indeed, further afield. A walking and cycling route was created along what was always intended to be a route for a rapid-transit system.

The facility was completed in the full knowledge that the route would be used for a rapid-transit system in the foreseeable future, and the development of such a route was debated, and supported, in Castlereagh Borough Council by councillors from all the political parties that were represented.

In a previous debate on the matter, the Minister for Regional Development told the Assembly:

"I am confident that proposals can be developed that will not push cyclists and walkers off the route." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 31, p169, col 1*].

In the Department for Regional Development's 'Corporate Plan 2008-2011: Business Plan 2008-2009', on targeting specific audiences, the section on transport infrastructure, confirms:

"These will include the promotion of walking, cycling, public transport, car sharing, personal travel planning as well as Park & Ride and Park & Share facilities."

I am confident that the Committee for Regional Development will hold the Department to those objectives.

I only wanted to make a few points about the matter, and I shall finish with the following. The rapid-transport project is important not only to the east of the city but, holistically, to the Belfast economy. A healthy environment is also important. Furthermore, as the project is developed, communication with the public — especially with those who live in close proximity to the project — will be vital. The benefits to the economy are obvious; however, they must be clearly explained and conveyed to the wider public. The system's specification must be to a high level; private-sector investment should be encouraged; and in order to attract people off current public transport and out of their cars, passenger service should be of the highest quality.

Mr McCallister: This matter is relevant to both of the Committees of which I am a member. The benefits of safe walking and cycling routes cannot be overestimated to individuals, Government and society at large. The health benefits of outdoor exercise are manifold. Exercise helps individuals and families to live more healthy and contented lives, from reducing the risk of developing heart disease to reducing the likelihood of depression, which affects health and social services by reducing the number of patients in the NHS. Walking and cycling also help to reduce congestion on the roads, reducing carbon emissions and, in turn, helping us to meet our carbon-reduction targets. Therefore, it is regrettable that Northern Ireland has a limited number of dedicated walking and cycling routes in urban and rural areas. I urge the Minister to further develop such routes, as well as developing more cycle paths on the road network.

The Committee for Regional Development has received representations from residents who are concerned that the proposed E-way route from Belfast city centre to Dundonald — included in the 'Strategic Outline Case for Rapid Transit in Belfast' — will damage the existing facility that the Department has helped to develop along the old Belfast to Dundonald rail line. In addition, campaigners to save the greenway have made strong representations to the Committee for Regional Development, outlining their concerns that the route will be degraded or threatened.

Nevertheless, the Ulster Unionist Party has expressed its support, in principle, for developing the rapid-transit system in Belfast, which it believes will bring positive environmental, social and economic benefits. The Department has stated that both the rapid-transit system and the cycle way can be accommodated on the relevant section of the route that is planned to run along the old Belfast to Comber rail line, which I and the Committee have inspected.

4.15 pm

My Committee colleagues and I have received a further technical report, undertaken for the Department by independent consultants, on the potential use of the Upper Newtownards Road as an alternative route. We require time to consider that and to compare the costs and benefits of the routes. Although I recognise the benefits of walking and cycling and of the development of the rapid-transit system in Belfast, I urge the Minister to continue his engagement with stakeholders and user groups to ensure that the views of current greenway users are utilised to secure the best possible walking and cycling route. We support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support the general thrust of the motion, although I do not support all the comments that have been made in support of it. I want to concentrate — as have most Members — on the latter part of the motion that concentrates on the greenway, rather than the “motherhood and apple pie” bit at the start of it that no one in their right mind would disagree with. I welcome all the references to Comber, my home town — probably more than have been made in any debate in the House — and I am sure that they will be well received by the people of that area.

I have always been a strong supporter of having a cycle path and dedicated walkway between Belfast and Comber for many obvious reasons, including the potential that they would have for developing tourism and providing that area with a unique selling point. They have been successful in that regard and beyond. As all Members who have spoken in the debate have said, I want to see the retention of safe pedestrian and cyclist access to the greenway. However, I do not want that comment or my support for the motion to be misconstrued as my being opposed to a rapid-transit

scheme being developed along the line, or as my being opposed to the E-way.

If anything, I have two regrets about the E-way proposals. The first is that the E-way does not extend as far as Comber. The second is that it is to be a guided-bus system and not a light-rail system; however, I hope that, as Belfast develops, that kind of system will be introduced.

I understand some of the concerns that have been expressed by members of the public who live along the Comber Greenway; however, the tone of the campaign opposing the E-way has been regrettable at times. Some misleading language was used in a poster that I saw in a shop in Comber — it seemed to suggest that the entire greenway would be used for the E-way. As I said, I regret that that is not the case. However, I believe that, unfortunately, that misleading language was an attempt to inflame the situation. When I brought that to the attention of the campaigners, they accepted that they had made a mistake.

Also doing the rounds currently is a flyer with a depiction of four power-plant cooling towers alongside what I suppose is a picture of the Comber Greenway — I do not know what the former image has to do with the situation. That sort of outright rejection of the E-way along the Comber Greenway line, as manifested in the language and imagery that is used in the publicity, is aimed at inflaming the situation and is unhelpful to the debate.

As I said, I understand some of the concerns about the future of the greenway. It has been an immensely successful line, but, as others have pointed out, it was always designated as a rapid-transit route — indeed, it has widespread support among the political parties in the Chamber. Therefore, it was always known that the E-way would be developed along that line at some stage, and it was always going to be the case that the E-way route would have to be accommodated alongside the cycle path and walkway.

One of the arguments that has been used as outright opposition to the establishment of the E-way rapid-transit route is the environmental impact that it will have on the Comber Greenway. In response, I ask people to consider the environmental impact of continuing with the current level of commuting to Belfast that occurs on a daily basis and its impact in the production of pollution, emissions and traffic congestion on the Newtownards Road, the Comber Road, the Kings Road, and other roads leading into Belfast from that direction. I have no doubt that the E-way will contribute to cutting the emissions, congestion and pollution along that route.

I accept that a cycle path and walking route alongside the E-way from Belfast to Dundonald is the second-best option at best, and that it will change the

existing amenity. However, a rapid-transit system in conjunction with a dedicated and safe cycle path could provide the best of both worlds for everyone in that part of Belfast and beyond.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion.

A hae gat a clatter o' screeds fae consairned constituents about the Comber Greenway an' A was sarious gled when the chanst cum ap fer me tae shaire thon wi' the members o' this 'Semmellie. The Comber Greenway bes a waakin an' bicycle route at rins fae Comber tae aist Bilfawst. Lately a clatter o catter was spent oan thon airt wi' the hope o' heftin' mair fowk tae waak an' bicycle an thon was successful.

I have received many letters from concerned constituents about the Comber Greenway, and so I was pleased when the opportunity arose for me to share them with the Assembly. The Comber Greenway is a walking and cycling route, extending from Comber to east Belfast. Recently, a large amount of money was spent in the area in the hope of encouraging more people to walk and cycle; an enterprise that has been successful.

I recently received a communication from Sustrans, telling me that the Comber Greenway is already popular. Based on its research of similar routes, it estimated that usage will increase steadily on completion of the linear route in November 2008.

The development of the greenway has been a successful partnership, uniting the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Roads Service, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Sustrans. It has also united Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Ards Borough Council, which is a feat in itself

The greenway is much more than a transport corridor. It provides a wide range of community facilities, such as exercise, play and social interaction, with an estimated 20% of its users being under 16. Indeed, not that far from the greenway — towards the playing fields in Dundonald and the Ballyrainey Road — I used to shoot pigeons and magpies. However, that was a long time ago.

The greenway offers a very good cost benefit for walking and cycling, particularly for health and well-being. Therefore, I agree with the proposal made by Sustrans for a public consultation, led by the Department for Regional Development, with local communities along the route of the Comber Greenway.

However, a rapid-transport system is also an important part of the vision for that area. It will provide relief from congested roads, allowing people to avoid the long queues. It is more than possible — it is desirable — that a rapid-transport system co-exist

with the Comber Greenway. It can and should be done. The financial and environmental savings will be great, and keeping the greenway intact will also ensure that people retain the option to walk, cycle or use the bus — all the things that we are trying to promote.

As I said, many of my constituents have written to me on this issue, and I would like to provide the House with some examples of what they have told me. One constituent — a car commuter from Newtownards to Belfast — would welcome a quality park-and-ride scheme that reduced traffic on the Upper Newtownards Road and that provided him and other users with a swift and convenient bus ride into Belfast. They said that traffic queues from the Ards area are horrific at present, and any Members who travel on that road regularly can vouch for that.

I received a letter from a motorcyclist who told me that not gender-specific would welcome a new bus lane, with motorcycle access into Belfast, providing a safer route, away from larger vehicles. That constituent also felt that it would be absurd to destroy the old railway, as it has received so much Government money recently. Therefore, they would welcome something to add to the existing facilities offered by the greenway

The Comber Greenway, which is part of national cycle route 99, is a fantastic and unique facility providing a safe, traffic-free route for sustainable transport, both cycling and walking. My colleague Robin Newton told the House that he walks it regularly; he is not the only person to do so. Many people use the facility to walk their dogs, to go for a stroll or to keep fit. Many children also use it as an area in which to play.

It is the only dedicated cycle route into Ards from Belfast — the main point of tourist entry into Northern Ireland. Therefore, it has tremendous potential as a tourist attraction, drawing low-impact, high-spending cyclists into the area.

Last summer, I was delighted to be able to show off the route to some visiting Belgian cyclists. They enjoyed the wonderful route — and they know a thing or two about quality cycling routes.

The constituents in the area — and the DUP — have made clear that they want to see the rapid-transport system in operation. I believe that that system can coexist with the Comber Greenway. The funding to enhance this beautiful section of Ards and east Belfast should be made available alongside the incorporation of the rapid-transport system into the area.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Dawn Purvis and Naomi Long for tabling the motion, and I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. Despite some differences of emphasis, it has been a constructive debate. Support

for the motion has been expressed on all sides of the Chamber, which is encouraging.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I will try to pick up on as many Members' comments as possible, but I have also asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report so that I can write to Members after the debate with a response to anything that I might miss.

The motion proposes that the Assembly acknowledges the benefits to all of providing safe pedestrian and cycling routes. The promotion of walking and cycling is a key ingredient of the Department for Regional Development's regional transportation strategy. Cycling, in particular, can play a bigger role in our future transport strategies, and it has the potential to contribute to reversing current trends in traffic congestion and carbon emissions. Importantly, it can also have a positive impact on people's health by giving them the opportunity to exercise regularly.

I am pleased to say that cycle-usage figures published in 2008 show that overall cycle usage has increased by 37% across the North and by 87% in Belfast. However, I accept that the Government must continue to develop and improve sustainable transport modes to meet the challenges ahead. The Department for Regional Development is playing its part in trying to encourage more people to use sustainable modes of transport, such as cycling, walking and public transport. Those forms of transport are healthy, carbon efficient and environmentally friendly.

The various transport plans have proposed cycle facilities for areas in which it is considered that they are most needed and most likely to be used. The provision of continuous cycle networks is considered most beneficial in towns that have significant numbers of existing cyclists or where large student populations and flat cycling conditions suggest greatest potential.

The Belfast metropolitan transport plan was developed to address the long-term transport infrastructure for the city. It included proposals for walking, cycling, bus, rail and rapid transit, and it is the current basis for the development of transport infrastructure in the city. We have made a significant contribution towards the development of the national cycle network in the North. It comprises 983 kms of on-road cycle routes and 162 kms of off-road cycle track. That equates to a total of 1,145 kms — some 716 miles. However, I accept John McCallister's comments, and that is something that the Department wishes to develop, given that it is important to the Department.

One of the Department's key commitments is to contribute to safer roads by using a range of initiatives, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and

further enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. Total spend on cycling facilities during the period 2002-09 will be some £6.6 million.

The cycling forum brings together the major organisations that have an interest in cycling: DRD, Roads Service, Sustrans, Translink, the Health Promotion Agency, district councils and voluntary groups.

The Department for Regional Development, in conjunction with the cycling forum, published a cycling strategy for the North in June 2000. That strategy identified a range of measures to improve conditions for cyclists, with a view to establishing a pro-cycling culture.

I recognise the importance of cycling and to further explore its potential, we will soon organise a conference to focus on how we can get more people on to their bikes and out of their cars.

The Department's Travelwise initiative encourages the use of sustainable transport options, such as walking and cycling. That initiative is delivered in partnership with the Department of Education, DOE's road safety branch, Sustrans, the Health Promotion Agency and Translink. Its aim is to help people to understand the problem and to be aware of how they can be part of the solution. It promotes the use of sustainable transport, which leads to better personal health, and it introduces walking and cycling to schools. It also provides useful safety information.

The Department is working closely with the east Belfast partnership boards, which are developing plans for the Connswater Community Greenway following a successful bid to the Big Lottery Fund. I, therefore, welcome the motion's objective to acknowledge the health benefits that outdoor exercise, through walking and cycling, offers children and adults.

In June this year, I introduced to the House proposals to introduce a rapid-transit network for Belfast. I was encouraged by the constructive nature of the debate on that day and on how Members focused on the benefits that rapid transit would bring. During that debate, I reminded Members that rapid transit for Belfast was not a new concept, but one that had been included in all relevant land-use and transport policies and plans for many years.

I stated that proposals for a rapid-transit system in Belfast had been talked about for many years, but that the time for talking was coming to an end. It is now time to deliver. At that time, several Members highlighted their concerns about the use of the Comber Greenway for a rapid-transit system, which I have visited since then.

4.30 pm

I have received correspondence from members of the public who use the Comber Greenway, and I have

had discussions with elected representatives who are concerned with the proposals for a rapid-transit system. It has been suggested that taxpayers' money has been wasted in developing the route for walking and cycling if it is to be changed in the near future. Indeed, there have been rumours in the community — which Dawn Purvis referred to — that my Department intends to replace the Comber Greenway with a four-lane motorway. I assure the House that that is not the case.

Although I appreciate fully the genuine concerns expressed about the proposed changes to the Comber Greenway, the reality is very different. In 2003, Water Service undertook work to build a new sewer along parts of the former railway line, and that has already been referred to by Members opposite. That work presented my Department with an opportunity to create a cost-effective temporary walking and cycling route along the corridor while plans for a rapid-transit system were being progressed. That was recognised by Sustrans at the time, who suggested that, as and when the rapid-transit plans were developed further, the walking and cycling path could be incorporated alongside the E-way scheme. That pathway would provide a short-term opportunity to encourage walking and cycling on the route before a decision was taken on a rapid-transit system. All those who were developing the route were fully aware of that decision.

It is also important to note that the plans for a rapid-transit system are for only sections of the Comber Greenway — from Dundonald to Belfast, as has already been said. Several campaigners have stated that they were disappointed that the proposals for a rapid-transit system did not undertake an assessment of the use of the Upper Newtownards Road. After listening to the concerns expressed, we asked the consultants to reconsider that option. They found that using the Upper Newtownards Road for a rapid-transit system would not work, as it would mean taking two lanes out of an already busy road, which would also have to be widened. All parking on the road would have to be banned and that would be unpopular with residents, shoppers and shopkeepers. Traffic congestion would increase, leading to rat-running traffic through residential areas. Despite such measures, the consultants forecast lower passenger numbers, due to the fact that the service would be slower.

My vision for the corridor has not changed. It is a vision of a world-class rapid-transit system alongside a high-quality walking and cycling route.

The benefits of a rapid-transit system are in danger of being forgotten in this debate. Belfast is the economic driver of the region, and people need to be able to move about the city quickly for it to operate efficiently. The rapid-transit system will allow for that. It will offer vehicles at five-minute intervals, with

journey times from Dundonald to the city centre of between 16 and 20 minutes. Over 2·1 million people will use the service each year, and over 20% of its rush-hour traffic will come from current car users. That figure has been derided as not sufficiently high to justify interference with the Comber Greenway. However, I assure Members that those are good projection figures for the first few years of a new transport system. If 20% of current car users switched to the rapid-transit system, there would be over 400,000 fewer car trips, and the 750 cars that use the park-and-ride facility at Ballybeen would also be taken off that stretch of road.

The House should be aware that the issues surrounding the use of the Comber Greenway were discussed recently at the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan public inquiry. The draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) designates the Comber Greenway as a rapid-transit walking and cycling route.

Reg Empey, who is not in the Chamber, raised issues about the Hollywood Arches. I assure him that those issues were addressed in the report. The preferred route beyond the Hollywood Arches was identified, and consultation is ongoing with residents in that area about the preferred route.

I am fully aware of the sensitivity of developing the Comber Greenway for walking, cycling and rapid transit. The Committee for Regional Development raised that issue following its examination of the strategic outline case. Some Members have questioned whether there is enough room to develop a rapid-transit system alongside the walking and cycling track. I have twice asked the consultants to consider the issue, and they have assured me that there is enough room to develop both systems side by side. I would not for one minute try to mislead the House and say that the current nature of the Comber Greenway will not change — obviously it will change if a rapid-transit system uses it. However, I have asked the consultants to consider carefully the matter, and they have assured me that there is the ability to fit both systems side by side, and to retain cycling and walking along the Comber Greenway.

As our plans develop, my officials will continue to meet a range of key stakeholders including representatives of the greenway to Stay group, Sustrans, Mersey Street residents' association and the East Belfast Partnership.

I assure Members that we have already secured developer contributions for the rapid-transit system, and we will continue to seek other developer contributions when the possibility arises. I am establishing a dedicated rapid-transit delivery team. Following Executive approval, I intend to proceed to

the detailed design of the network, which will allow us to examine its full particulars.

I will work with a range of individuals, including local communities, during the design of the network, and I hope to convince people who are sceptical about the plans. I will not try to mislead the House by saying that the Comber Greenway will remain unaltered. However, throughout the design process and our consultation with elected representatives and the local community, I hope that we can convince people that the plans can work and that the Comber Greenway can be retained.

After representations were made to me about the nature of the greenway, I took the opportunity to walk along parts of it and, indeed, it is a very nice and popular facility. I intend to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway, both before and after the introduction of the rapid-transit system.

Mrs Long: I am glad that we have had the opportunity to discuss the proposals for the Comber Greenway this afternoon. Robin Newton asked why the debate was not an Adjournment debate. The motion was forwarded to the Business Committee as an Adjournment debate, but the Business Committee rejected it in that format on the basis that the issue is part of the Executive's Programme for Government and concerns more than one constituency. Indeed, it is more appropriate for the matter to be discussed as Private Members' Business, as it has given the Minister an opportunity to give a detailed response and allowed Members from outside East Belfast to participate.

It is very important for the future of the city and the entire region that we achieve a modal shift and increase the use of public transport. Irrespective of swiftness, the key factor that determines whether people use public transport is its frequency and cost.

The Comber Greenway has been a huge success, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) must be commended for that. Indeed, the difficulty has arisen because the success of the greenway has been far beyond what could have been anticipated when it was put in place as a temporary walkway. Prior to the works that were undertaken by DRD after the pipeline project, the walkway had largely fallen into disrepair. That situation was great for the wildlife, but it did not encourage the widespread usage of the facility that we had hoped for. However, the greenway has become incredibly successful among people who commute by bicycle and those who use it for leisure walking and cycling.

The local community has bought into the greenway massively. In addition to using it as a cycle path, the local community's sense of ownership has been hugely important. Local people have worked with statutory

agencies and the council to maintain and develop the area. For example, a campaign was driven by the public for the police to open land at Brooklyn and enable the development of the greenway's last section. The level of public enthusiasm for the greenway makes the proposals more contentious than they would otherwise have been.

Dawn Purvis outlined the health and well-being benefits of what is a quiet and safe oasis in the densely urban fabric of East Belfast. People in the city have the right to enjoy the outdoors safely. Although I accept what the Minister said about the Connswater Greenway, that was a different prospect in a different locality. The Connswater Greenway was seen as an additional project rather than as a replacement for the Comber Greenway.

There are competing tensions between the significant number of commuters who wish to move quickly to the city centre and the people who wish to access East Belfast's shops, schools, and healthcare facilities. If anyone needs proof of the huge amount of traffic generated by the latter group, they should try to travel through East Belfast during the school holidays.

I am not convinced that the proposals will address the traffic concerns of the people who access those facilities in East Belfast. Indeed, in my intervention during Lord Browne's speech, I expressed concern that the 4A bus service — which operates along the Upper Newtownards Road — will be undermined or diminished. Lord Browne may be happy to leave that matter to departmental consultants, but I am concerned about that — other constituents of mine in Tullycarnet, Braniel and Cregagh have lost bus services as a result of consultants' reports. Ultimately, whether the service can wash its own face is a financial decision. We must be cautious about the impact that such an approach could have on those shops and schools on main arterial routes that our public transport currently accesses.

Cathal Boylan and other Members said that the Comber Greenway has been earmarked for rapid transit for a long time. We all acknowledge that that is true. It was also previously earmarked for a four-lane highway. Thankfully, that was one hare-brained scheme that did not come to fruition, something for which we are all grateful. The combination of repeated delay and inactivity lulled people into a false sense of security. More importantly, the quality of the new provision and its popularity has meant that it is much more valued than it was previously.

Reg Empey asked what is to happen at the end of the walkway, and there still seems to be a question mark over that. I understand that the preferred route is now to head towards the Titanic Quarter, which represents a change in direction. Robin Newton said that he rarely sees large numbers of people on the

Comber Greenway. I can only suggest that that is because they know that he is coming, because most of us see many people using it — Robin knows that I am only joking.

I accept that a rapid-transit system may remove cars from the main arterial route. However, my concern is that the effect would be temporary — when people see traffic flowing more freely on the Upper Newtownards Road, they will, as they have done in the past, simply revert to using their cars. They may choose to use their cars to access many of the facilities along those main arterial routes, so I have my doubts about how successful that approach would be. I accept that the rapid-transit system, in and of itself, may be successful in bringing people to the city centre, but those who have used the walkway for its amenity and for leisure will be less attracted to it than those who use the walkway to commute, cycle or walk. Those who use the walkway with their families, and so on, may find their experience to be quite different.

Simon Hamilton talked about how a rapid-transit system would benefit the environment. I accept that that is a balanced argument. However, when people talk about the degradation of the environment, they are not talking about the global environment; rather, they are talking about the local environment and its amenity. That valid concern has been expressed. To be fair, the Minister has been open and honest in saying that the proposals may degrade the quality of that particular environment.

I am at least assured that if a rapid-transit system is introduced, Jim Shannon will not be out taking potshots at some of the wildlife. I imagine that that would be a public hazard, so, if nothing else, we can be thankful for that.

I appreciate the Minister's presence and his participation in all the debates on the matter. He has constructively addressed the issues that have been raised. The BMAP process identified the route, but it is an incredibly unwieldy process. Everyone would concede that it is not a process in which most members of the public feel they can actively and fully participate. It creates quite an intimidating environment in which to make representations. The specific proposal for the Comber Greenway really requires a separate consultation process in which the public can engage.

I remain concerned about the plans for the Comber Greenway, but I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to engage with local representatives and residents. Many may be disappointed that it appears that plans for a rapid-transit system will proceed regardless of their concerns. However, I hope that through discussions with Sustrans, residents and others,

it will be possible to find some way in which to maintain the environment to as high a standard as possible.

I return to the key point — the Comber Greenway is a valued piece of ground for the people who use it. Use of the greenway has increased, and it has increased cycling levels by more than it is anticipated use of public-transport will increase, so it is more successful in those terms. The greenway has made a huge difference to people's health and well-being. I hope that we can continue negotiation and discussion on the future of the greenway in order to ensure that the amenity of the greenway, as well as its environmental impact, is fully protected.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway.

4.45 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Primary School Education in South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue, and I thank the Minister for attending today. We could all achieve positive outcomes as a result of debates such as this.

In recent months, I have been engaged in a specific outreach programme with all primary schools across South Belfast; I visited most of the schools and had lengthy and frank discussions with principals, teachers and support staff. I witnessed at first hand the deep passion that principals, teachers and support staff have for the job in hand and also their unswerving dedication and commitment to their profession and to the pupils whom they teach.

I brought the issue to the House today, because many teachers are being put under increasingly tremendous pressure; however, I do not blame anyone in particular for that. Some of that pressure is historic, and I am not for one moment accusing the Minister, lest it appear that way, as she has been in position for only a year or 15 months. I am merely bringing those issues to her attention. Much of the pressure is historic and has been around for years as a result of inadequate support from us, as public representatives, from education and library boards and from the Department. Nevertheless, staff in many primary schools are being forced to work under very difficult and trying circumstances.

I thank the principals of Botanic Primary School, St Bernard's Primary School and Rosetta Primary School for taking the time to be with us to listen to the debate. I apologise if I have missed anyone out.

Every school has specific issues, which I do not intend to go into in any great detail today; however, there are common issues of concern that unite many primary schools across south Belfast. I will follow up on the details of those issues with the Minister in due course, but I do not wish to enter into undue discussion on them today.

It is no secret that each principal, teacher and parent to whom I have spoken is deeply anxious about the lack of certainty around the transfer procedure, but I do not want to get into that debate at any length. However, I wish to raise the biggest issue — underfunding. Time and again, people have raised with me the issue of the age-weighted pupil unit. Pupils in primary schools in Britain have a much better funding ratio compared with secondary schools, which places many principals under considerable pressure. We discussed the matter in the Assembly before the summer recess, and we will come back to it, but I urge the Minister to relieve some of that tight financial pressure if possible. The demands placed on principals and teachers are ever growing, yet the funding, resources and support levels seem to be shrinking. The reality — and I have seen it for myself — is that an increasing number of primary schools have been forced to rely on private fundraising efforts by parents to ensure their survival and to ensure that they can maintain the standards that they have built up over many years.

Rocketing energy costs are a big issue, and schools are being placed in a frightful position. Electricity bills have more than doubled in the past year, and oil and gas prices have risen dramatically. Some primary schools are paying up to £1,000 on heating bills alone. I know that the Minister has made a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel, but we must find a mechanism to get money released to pay those fuel bills. School principals have had to divert money away from staff and other much-needed resources just to meet their fuel bills, and they need that financial support now.

There is a lack of resources to help the growing number of children with special needs. That increase in numbers is happening in every school in South Belfast. Early intervention is best practice worldwide, yet the heightened criteria for reading units means that some children have to wait years for admission.

The statementing process is another cause for concern. According to the Department's figures, statementing costs £3,000 a child. I urge the Minister to simplify the overly bureaucratic and costly statementing process. It is not beyond the wit of man to come up with a simpler — yet every bit as effective — process that could achieve the same ends.

The increasing number of immigrant children is a big issue for many schools in South Belfast, and presents massive challenges to school principals. In Botanic Primary School, for example, 29 different mother tongues are spoken. In other words, there are children from 29 different countries across the world in that school. Children from 25 or 26 different countries attend Fane Street Primary School. Without extra support for teaching English, that is a difficult situation

for teachers to operate in and meet their vocational commitment to teaching and supporting those children.

Child protection is also an important issue. We must have a cohesive cross-departmental strategy between the areas of education and health in order to assist schools such as Botanic Primary School and Fane Street Primary School. In many respects, they hit a brick wall when it comes to obtaining help and support. The principal of Botanic Primary School told me that children were arriving at the school — some of whom were 11 years of age — who had never been to school before. That causes massive disruption. The teachers are compelled to try to meet the needs of those children. How can they meet the needs of an 11-year-old Romanian child who has never been to school and balance that with the needs of the other 11-year-olds?

There are other challenges that concern me. Many children across South Belfast are sitting in schools that are not fit for purpose. Building and redeveloping schools, providing new schools and amalgamating others are serious issues. Taughmonagh Primary School, St Anne's Primary School, St Bride's Primary School and St Bernard's Primary School are all eagerly awaiting promised newbuilds, but they still have no idea when the building will start because of an excruciatingly slow decision-making process.

I am aware that there are staff and skills shortages in the Department's development and infrastructure division, but we must find ways, through private finance or other means, to provide those newbuild projects. It is not acceptable for children to sit in substandard schools that are long past their sell-by date. We must do whatever is necessary to procure decent accommodation that is fit for purpose — that children can be taught in. We must put the required procurement arrangements in place.

Not only are the newbuild projects that have been committed for several schools not going ahead, basic levels of repair and maintenance are not being sustained. I could give Belvoir Park Primary School as an example. The annual maintenance budgets that are allocated to the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board — both of which bite into South Belfast — lag so far behind the level of need and demand that the schools that are covered by those boards are never reached. Given that the amount of money that is available never matches need, schools can wait for years before basic maintenance and repairs are carried out. In many cases, those schools are unhealthy, unsafe and unfit for human habitation.

In light of the current economic climate, now would be a good time to perhaps make some cost-effective investments in the schools estate and to release funding in order to break open and initiate some of the projects

that have been planned. We have a dramatic opportunity to consider amalgamations. Without wishing to be prescriptive, I know that there is a need for some kind of amalgamation in the catchment areas of Rosetta, Newtownbreda and Knockbreda Primary Schools. I know that the primary schools in Sandy Row, Donegall Road and Fane Street are crying out for a single new school that would cover all three existing schools. As well as giving a much-needed boost to the education system, such a move would help the construction industry and open up opportunities for that industry at this very difficult time.

Education, I admit, is difficult and challenging at the best of times. The current debate and crisis on selection adds to the problems, but that issue will have to be dealt with in due course. I therefore urge the Minister to do what she can as soon as possible to get that sorted out. However, many of the other problems that I have discussed could be eased with some repairs, amalgamations and new building as well as support for immigrant children and for those with special needs. Action is also necessary. As I said earlier, although I do not blame the Minister for the dysfunctional Department that she has inherited, there is a need to ensure that that Department has a mechanism to approve the building of a school. I have been involved in the redevelopment of Taughmonagh Primary School, resources for which were promised some two or three years ago and on which no progress has been made.

On this occasion, if the Minister can get things moving to ensure that the schools are built, we should be rallying around her and supporting her. I am sure that the issues that I have mentioned in relation to South Belfast apply to constituencies and schools right across the country. It breaks my heart to see schools that are not fit for purpose, with toilets that are dysfunctional and that are a health and safety risk. The issue must be tackled, and it must be tackled soon.

I am delighted that the Health Minister is also present, as certain issues are cross-cutting and within the remit of both Departments. I plead with both Ministers to ensure that the education system is made a priority both in the Chamber and by the Executive. It must be made a priority because my heart bleeds when I see the circumstances in which some children have to survive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that several Members have indicated that they wish to speak, I ask Members to limit their contributions to eight minutes.

Mr Spratt: I thank Dr McDonnell for securing the debate. The education of our children is a matter that every parent takes very seriously, and it is only right for the parents in South Belfast that the education of their children is at centre stage today. When I saw the Adjournment debate scheduled for today, I thought that the topic covered a broad area. Many issues that face

specific schools could be raised, a few of which I have decided to discuss. Indeed, Dr McDonnell has raised already some of the issues that affect the South Belfast area in particular.

In recent visits that I have made to schools in South Belfast, I have been struck by the ethnic diversity of the constituency. Our primary-school sector must rise to the challenge of embracing and educating many children from many different backgrounds. On a recent visit to Fane Street Primary School off the Lisburn Road, the principal, Mr Orr, pointed out a display on the wall of a corridor to me, which highlighted the many different nationalities across the pupil profile. It struck me how challenging that must be for the principal and the teachers because of pupils' varying standards of English and their cultural differences, all of which must be dealt with in the classroom.

5.00 pm

Some children from ethnic minority backgrounds receive specialist support from tutors from the inclusion and diversity service, which is based at the Antrim Board Centre and provides advice on pastoral and language requirements as well as assessing children's progress. It is important that children are welcomed to our schools and that they receive every assistance in adapting not only to the school but to their new environment. Support must also be given to teachers and principals in that area.

We must also examine the schools estate in South Belfast and recognise that, although great work has been done, much investment is required to bring our schools up to the necessary standard required for twenty-first-century education. Newbuilds, such as the one that is planned for Taughmonagh Primary School, are welcome, and the sooner they happen the better, for teachers and pupils. A new primary-school facility to serve the Donegall Road area must also be brought to fruition to meet the requirements of local children. We want greater educational attainment in such areas, and a pupil-friendly school building is important in achieving that.

Mr Storey: I commend the honourable Member for South Belfast for securing the debate. Alasdair McDonnell referred to the problem of the transfer procedure, but a plethora of policies is also being introduced, such as a proposal to revamp the governance arrangements for schools. Does the Member agree that too much is going on and that no priority is being given, at any stage, to phase in any of those proposals, which is adding to the pressure and problems in our education system? The education system is in meltdown.

Mr Spratt: I agree with my honourable friend's comments. As I listen to boards of governors, particularly of primary schools, I think that there is no

doubt that the transfer procedure, the education policies and the governance are putting additional pressure on teachers and head teachers. A way must be found to phase in those policies gradually.

Dr McDonnell mentioned some areas of concern — the “pressures” — such as underfunding, which is a major issue for schools across Northern Ireland. I am a member of a board of governors of a primary school outside Belfast. At one recent meeting that I attended, parents were painting the doors of the classrooms. That primary school is well run, but that incident tells its own story. Through their amazing fund-raising efforts, parent-teacher associations are picking up the slack in many areas by supplying equipment that education and library boards should be supplying to schools for out-of-school activities, and so forth.

The particular school to which I referred had damp spots, and the parent-teacher association supplied replacement tiles for ceilings in two or three classrooms because the board was not providing them.

In Fane Street Primary School, which I visited recently, window frames are being allowed to rot simply because they have not been given a lick of paint. It is a tragedy that boards are allowing such things to happen. Instead of painting the frames, boards are going to the expense of replacing windows or fascia boards in schools at great cost when simple repairs could have been undertaken for a small amount of money as part of routine maintenance. That probably affects every school in South Belfast. The Minister must examine that.

Academic selection was also covered. I have learnt the depth of feeling that exists on the issue from surveys that I have carried out in the Finaghy and Saintfield Road areas and beyond. Of the responses I received, 96% indicated support for academic selection. When asked what issue MLAs should be prioritising, 84% of responses stated that transfer must be sorted out as matter of urgency. If the Assembly is debating primary education in South Belfast, it cannot ignore what is, undoubtedly, the biggest issue at present. The Minister must listen to the 96% of respondents in my area — and I have no doubt that similar surveys have been carried out in other areas — who want academic selection to remain. Why is the Minister trying to advance a programme of change, as she puts it, when the people of Northern Ireland have clearly rejected her notions of change? I could discuss that subject for a long time.

Greater funding is needed for extended-schools programmes, particularly for special-needs provision. Members are aware of the problems that exist in that area. Provision is, certainly, being drastically underfunded by some boards, and that is causing schools, particularly primary schools, major concern. I

ask the Minister to take all of those issues into account and to deal with them as soon as possible.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join with Jimmy Spratt in thanking Alasdair McDonnell for raising the issue of primary school education in South Belfast in the Assembly. It is an important issue. Dr McDonnell has covered a range of points, with which I do not believe anyone would disagree, in considerable detail. In particular, the tone and manner with which he has raised the topic and made his contribution are welcome and helpful.

It was worthwhile and helpful that Dr McDonnell undertook an outreach programme and visited schools. I am sure that those schools appreciated that particular outreach exercise, which allowed them to voice their views at first hand. I, therefore, commend Dr McDonnell for that. However, I want to say at the outset of my remarks that I have heard nothing in the debate that the Minister has not already dealt with in forthright terms during her time as Minister and, indeed, has often done before that in other capacities. For example, the need to ensure that all children are treated equally, properly and fairly has been to the forefront of the Minister's mind in her work, certainly during all of the years that I have known her as a political activist.

The Member, justifiably, brings to the Assembly's attention the substantial financial pressures that are being brought to bear on schools. The Minister has addressed that issue repeatedly. The condition of the school estate is another issue that many Members have raised during the past several years. I want to put on record my appreciation, and that of my colleagues, for schools' staff, teachers, parents and all of the people who are involved and who often work in difficult circumstances to make schools viable and sustainable in children's interests.

The topic for debate makes no reference to academic selection. That subject has been mentioned, but I do not wish to take the debate in that negative direction. However, I support the push for fundamental change throughout the school system. We do not have the perfect school system, as some would have us believe. I passed the 11-plus far too many years ago to remember. I do not want a system that tells most of our children that they are failures at 11 years of age; rather, I support radical change throughout the school system. In the fullness of time, people involved in the education sector, and primarily parents and children, will welcome the benefits which will and should accrue to the system as we make the necessary changes.

Those changes have to be underpinned with the necessary and appropriate level of resources; of that I have no doubt. As many Members have already said, it is unacceptable that children are educated in schools

that are not up to standard or fit for purpose and which should be condemned. We all want to ensure that children are given the best opportunities and taught in schools that are warm, dry and in a good state of repair. In those conditions, the teaching staff can get on with their job of delivering a proper education.

Alasdair has made the point that we must rally round the Minister to ensure that she gets the necessary support, including considerable additional funding, to ensure that schools are of a proper standard and that all our children are given the best opportunities.

Will the Minister tell us how the funding will impact on the area under discussion, South Belfast? The proposed education and skills authority will have a central role in modernising the schools estate. I am keen to know how that will be done in South Belfast. What of the additional finance that is proposed for, or may have been allocated to, delivery of the revised curriculum? What of the money to be made available to principals of small primary schools, to enable them to get out of full-time teaching and devote themselves to leadership and management? Those are important issues that we cannot lose sight of.

I concur with virtually all the remarks made by Members about the need to provide adequate support for schools. Many Members have lobbied previous Ministers of Education and their officials for financial support for, to take an example, English as an additional language. One of the most positive developments in recent years has been the arrival in schools of newcomers who contribute to diversity. In the fullness of time, we will all recognise that. However, it has brought new challenges, some of which, I am glad to say, have been met, while much more needs to be done. We need to provide a welcoming environment. I know, from first hand, that many schools do so: however, they need the appropriate level of support from the Department and relevant boards to carry out that work.

I thank the Member who raised this topic for discussion. I endorse most of the remarks made in the debate and commend all those involved in the delivery of education to our children for their tremendous work.

5.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I speak in the debate as a Member for South Belfast, not as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I also declare an interest as a governor of Stranmillis Primary School. I am grateful to Dr McDonnell for proposing this topic for debate on an issue that goes right to the heart of many families in South Belfast.

I will begin by talking about some of the challenges that we face. Mr Spratt and Dr McDonnell mentioned Taughmonagh Primary School. For some years, I had campaigned for the school's replacement. However, in

June 2007, I was disappointed to discover that the new Taughmonagh Primary School was not on the procurement list. I lobbied the Minister and her office on the issue, and I was delighted that, within a matter of weeks, Taughmonagh Primary School found its rightful place on the procurement list, around this time last year. I am grateful to the Minister for her intervention.

The procurement process for Taughmonagh Primary School is under way, and I anticipate that builders will be on site in approximately 12 months' time. As a result, the families and the parents of pupils who attend the school, as well as people living in Taughmonagh estate, which is a severely disadvantaged area in South Belfast, have had their confidence boosted.

Another issue that goes right to the heart of the matter is the situation in three inner South Belfast primary schools — Blythefield, Donegall Road and Fane Street — which are long past their sell-by date. Dr McDonnell's remarks about pupils being taught in seriously substandard accommodation apply to those three schools. We are working with parents and groups to decide how to proceed. One proposal is to examine the possibility of amalgamation. None of the schools is close to enrolling maximum pupil numbers, because of the flight of population out of the city, and in particular, out of the inner city.

One big challenge that we face is to find and to identify a site. A site search is ongoing, and is, I believe, close to conclusion. It is difficult to get agreement among the various parents' groups from the three primary schools about which site to select.

If we identify a site, I would like the Minister to indicate whether the new primary school will have to go through another process or whether the Belfast Education and Library Board will be able to enter into the procurement process. That is a key issue for the communities of Sandy Row, Donegall Road and Lisburn Road.

If we can get the type of investment that we seek in that area, I anticipate that we can get a similar response to that experienced by Finaghy Primary School, which was built and opened about three years ago. It has a tremendous track record as regards success and support.

Another issue is the plight of Newtownbreda Primary School. As Dr McDonnell said, there is a problem where we hit the division between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Belfast Education and Library Board. As Members are probably aware, the primary school is effectively surrounded by two major roads — the Knock dual carriageway and the Saintfield Road. The number of pupils attending Newtownbreda Primary School has decreased; therefore, any amalgamation that is being

proposed will mean that the school's pupils will have to travel across one of the busiest roads in Belfast.

We must try to find a way forward to give comfort to parents of pupils at the school. However, the South Eastern Education and Library Board's announcement about the strong possibility of the amalgamation of Rosetta and Newtownbreda primary schools has had an effect on pupil numbers at Newtownbreda. I understand that the number of P1 pupils enrolled at Newtownbreda is dramatically down this year.

That is one of those unfortunate responses: if there is a question mark over a school, that school immediately becomes unviable. There must be a clear indication of the way forward on what is happening with Rosetta and Newtownbreda schools. The South Eastern Board is looking at amalgamation around the Knockbreda area, and I understand that one of the proposals is the amalgamation of Knockbreda and Lisnasharragh schools. That is not logical to me; however, it is one of the issues that I would be interested in receiving further information on.

Those are the schools that are under the worst threat, not least because of investment but also because of the fabric of the buildings. The post-primary schools in South Belfast — Malone College, Aquinas Grammar School, Hunterhouse College, Methodist College, Victoria College — on the other hand are fully subscribed, if not oversubscribed.

One of the greatest needs of inner South Belfast is for a secondary school that is within reach of the local population — children are being bussed to and from school all the time. One of the problems with bussing was that if one were to go over a certain distance — three miles from one's home — one would not get transport. Ironically, that was one of the reasons that the new school on Blacks Road failed: its core catchment areas in inner South Belfast were just outside the three-mile limit. All those pupils — whose parents came from the most disadvantaged homes — had to pay for their transport. That was one of the contributory factors in the closure of that school. I argued at the time, along with others, that the school was being built in the wrong place; it should have been built in inner south Belfast.

Communities in inner South Belfast need a new secondary school; that is a constant. Taughmonagh school is a model for the way forward; I am not sure what is happening with Newtownbreda and Rosetta schools or what the way forward is for them. The way forward for inner South Belfast — for the Donegall Road, Blythefield and Taughmonagh — will be in identifying a suitable site. That can be done through the redevelopment of the Village area, which we support through the Greater Village Regeneration Trust. Once we have identified a site and reached

agreement among parents, I would hate for there to be a delay in the procurement. I would be grateful for an indication from the Minister as to the likelihood of that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo ar chúrsaí oideachais i ndeisceart Bhéal Feirste.

I am glad to participate in this debate on education matters in South Belfast, and I have listened carefully to Members' points. It seems that many proposals for new buildings and renovations in South Belfast are stuck in the morass of antiquated procedures of the Department of Education's building section, awaiting final approval. They may not see the light of day during this financial year, which means that the money earmarked for those projects may not be spent. It would be regrettable if millions of pounds were to go back to the Department of Finance and Personnel at the end of this financial year. That money could be lost to education if delays in processing proposals are not eradicated. The Department of Education may have to bid to recover that money, but there is no guarantee that the money will return to education.

Delays are causing untold frustration in schools and communities in South Belfast and elsewhere, as we have heard, where communities have been waiting for years for newbuilds and renovations to begin. That difficulty is not confined to one particular sector; it is experienced in the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors. All sectors agree that those procedures must be changed without delay.

The Department of Education has told the Education Committee that it is working on streamlining procurement procedures; however, I think that more needs to be done. Some proposals have been in the system for over four years and have still not emerged at the other end. Take, for example, the new Holy Cross College in Strabane; it took seven years to develop that proposal and only 22 months to build the school — in my view, that is totally crazy. The Minister has been made aware of the problem by the Education Committee and, I am sure, by those whose projects are stuck in the system. I ask her to address that problem as a matter of urgency and to ensure that the processing of proposals proceeds at pace without the long delays now inherent in the system. That is something that ought to be done, and can be done, without the investment of huge — if any — extra resources; it is a matter of organisational change.

My colleague Dr McDonnell referred to the condition of the schools estate in South Belfast. Quite honestly, the point he made was hardly surprising when I recall that there is a £217 million backlog in schools' maintenance. That is not my figure; three weeks ago that figure was given to the Education

Committee by departmental officials. A huge backlog in high-priority school maintenance must be affecting the standard of accommodation in which our children are being taught, and their health and safety. The Department has put in a bid for £10 million in the monitoring round because that would:

“slow down the deterioration of the schools estate and reduce health and safety risks”.

If the health and safety of children is at risk, the Department of Education must have that money this year. I have sought more detailed information on that, which I will no doubt receive in the future. However, I am sure that Member's will agree; £217 million of maintenance is a huge figure, the equivalent in maintenance to the building of six large secondary schools or 10 new primary schools. What does that say about the fabric of our schools estate, not only in South Belfast, but overall? Given that huge backlog, I ask the Minister to assure us that children are being taught in buildings that are fit for purpose and in conditions that are healthy and safe. The Department of Finance and Personnel needs to come up with that £10 million, and more if there are issues of health and safety to be brought into the equation. Education needs extra funding to meet the spiralling costs of heating oil and school meals. Without that extra funding — £17 million — education and library boards will be faced with making cuts. I am sure that we all agree that the last thing that we want is cuts in education that will affect front-line services.

The primary-school principals who are here today are no doubt aware that in South Belfast, and, indeed, elsewhere, a primary-school pupil attracts £2,045 of funding per annum. In that same constituency, and every other constituency, secondary-school pupils attract £3,303 of funding and sixth-form pupils attract £5,000 of funding.

5.30 pm

There are five reasons that secondary school pupils in South Belfast attract more funding than primary school pupils in that constituency. Secondary schools need smaller classes for certain subjects; their teachers are afforded 10% preparation, planning and assessment time; and, in some subjects, secondary school pupils need specialist accommodation, as well as specialist equipment and support staff.

Primary school pupils in South Belfast do not attract the same level of funding as their secondary school counterparts because they are taught in large class groups; their teachers do not get 10% preparation, planning and assessment time; and, in many cases, they do not have the specialist accommodation or equipment needed in order to implement the revised curriculum —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr D Bradley: I agree with previous speakers that huge issues in South Belfast need to be addressed. Many of those issues are, however, replicated across the education system. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Alasdair McDonnell's bringing forward this very useful Adjournment debate, and the tone of his contribution. There was a marked difference in tone between the proposer and seconder, but that is par for the course and is probably part of a familiar pattern.

I want to thank the principals of different schools in South Belfast that I have visited and who have invited me to visit. I will be going to some of those schools in the near future, and I look forward to that. I want to pay tribute to the principals, parents, boards of governors, teachers and classroom assistants who do tremendous work. Alasdair McDonnell has kindly asked me to meet some of them to have a chat after the debate. I am happy to do that, and I hope that other MLAs from South Belfast will join me in meeting them.

I am on record as recognising fully the problems with the conditions and facilities at a number of schools, and not in just South Belfast but right across the North. That is a legacy of underinvestment in the schools estate in earlier decades, which we inherited and need to address. I will not deal today with every query that Members raised about every school. However, I will ask my officials to go through the Hansard report and to write to Members regarding the schools that they mentioned. I share Members' concerns about the situation, and I am committed to dealing with it.

The Programme for Government includes the objective:

"To provide modern school facilities which meet the needs for teaching and learning".

The investment strategy for the next 10 years sets out ambitious plans for new investment in the schools estate, to create modern infrastructure for schools and youth services to tackle the backlog of underinvestment, and to provide facilities appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Under the investment strategy, some £3.5 billion worth of investment over the next 10 years has been identified for education, with approximately 100 major work schemes to be advanced in the next three years alone. That reflects the recognition by me, and by the Executive, of the importance of modern, fit-for-purpose facilities for teaching and learning. I have ensured that equality and social inclusion will be part of those procurement processes.

The Irish-medium sector faces particular problems, with many of its schools in poor-quality, temporary accommodation. That, too, is the case in the South

Belfast constituency. That was highlighted during the Irish-medium education-policy review, which is soon to be released. Urgent steps must be taken to address that sector's accommodation difficulties.

In delivering significant investment in sustainable schools in the coming years, appropriate planning, procurement and delivery arrangements must be in place.

A more strategic approach to estate planning, through area-based plans, will help to identify more fully educational needs in local areas, and how they might best be met. The policy for area-based planning is the subject of consultation. Modern, stream-lined procurement arrangements that can efficiently and effectively deliver the required capital investment must also be established. As I have said, equality and social inclusion will be part of that capital investment.

The Department has taken steps with the education sector to improve the processes. A new education and skills authority would have the central role in modernising the estate in future and would work with all education sectors to assess needs and deliver approved schemes. I look forward to my colleagues in all parties working with me to fast-track the review of public administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority.

The planned capital investment will help to address the major infrastructure deficiencies and improve facilities in the coming year. Pressing maintenance requirements must also be addressed. Under the local management of schools funding arrangements, the relevant education and library board has responsibility for landlord maintenance — structural-type repairs and maintenance — of controlled and maintained schools in its area. Individual schools are responsible for tenant maintenance, which includes internal decoration, heating and lighting, cleaning and caretaking, and the upkeep of grounds.

As part of the education and library boards' block grant, they receive funding specifically for high-priority maintenance pressures. In the current financial year, some £18 million has been allocated for that. In order to provide boards with the flexibility to manage their budgets and to respond to local needs and priorities, the maintenance budget is one of several budgets that are not earmarked by the Department. As a consequence of other emerging pressures, the amount of funding that is spent on maintenance has not been sufficient to make inroads into the backlog that exists in the education estate. It is important that priority is given to maintenance work to reduce the deterioration of the estate and to reduce health and safety risks. We must ensure that sufficient resources are available to do that.

The common funding formula allocations, which are delegated to each school, are designed to cover all

essential expenditure on items that must be met from the school's budget. The premises factor allocates resources to schools to enable them to meet their tenant-maintenance obligations for the management of school buildings. In 2008-09, the total formula funding that was allocated to controlled and maintained schools in the South Belfast area was just over £16.7 million, an increase of 7.3% over the 2007-08 funding levels. That amounts to an increase of 6.1% per capita, after an increase in funded-pupil numbers for schools in the area of 1.1% is taken into account.

The allocation of a school's budget is determined by its board of governors and principal, who are best placed to make decisions on relevant priorities and the most effective use of resources in accordance with the school's needs. It is, therefore, for the schools to determine the level of expenditure that they wish to make on tenant maintenance. I recognise the challenges facing primary-school principals, and I fully accept the value and vital role of early intervention in preventing or reducing later difficulties.

My officials and I have had several meetings with representative bodies about the funding of primary schools. From my visits to schools and correspondence that I have received, I am aware of the feelings about the resources that are provided to primary schools, particularly in comparison with post-primary schools. It must also be recognised, however, that the Department is working with finite overall resources. I welcome the fact that some Members have said that they will support me in looking for additional resources.

Of the £20.4 million uplift to schools' budgets between 2008-09 and 2007-08, some £12.7 million was directed to primary schools, representing an overall cash uplift of over 3%, and over 4% for each pupil. The average increase per pupil for primary schools for 2008-09 is £102, which is higher than the average increase per pupil for post-primary schools. Significant resources are also being made available to primary schools outside the current funding formula arrangements.

Over the next three years, an additional £32 million, including £7 million in the financial year 2008-09, will be made available to support primary schools in their delivery of the foundation stage of the revised curriculum. That additional funding will provide, for the first time, access to classroom assistants for every pupil in year 1 and year 2. In the same period, a further £12 million will be available specifically to help to ensure that, from September 2008, principals of smaller primary schools will be released from teaching duties for at least two days each week.

I welcome the fact that academic selection and the transfer procedure were mentioned today. People will see that the House is divided on the issue. I welcome

the support from this side of the House for the abolition of academic selection. From my many meetings with primary-school teachers, I know that they support the new arrangements. They are glad to know that the curriculum will no longer be distorted. Primary-school principals from all sectors told me how it broke their hearts to see how the transfer test affected all children, and particularly those who were told that they had failed. Failure can be dressed up in fancy words, but the children understand the message that the exam sends.

I welcome the recent report from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recommends the end of academic selection. I also welcome the input of the Children's Commissioner in the North and of those in England, Scotland and Wales. As Members know, the South of Ireland does not, fortunately, have a system of academic selection.

The changes are under way, and progress is being made. The revised primary curriculum is in operation and will no longer be distorted. The transitional arrangements that I will introduce do not require pupils to sit a test in primary schools. Therefore, 2008 is, fortunately, the last year of the 11-plus, and many principals and educationalists across the board welcome that.

I also welcome the fact that Alasdair McDonnell, and others, raised the issue of newcomer children. According to the 2007 school census, 592 newcomer children attended schools in South Belfast, which is 10% of the pupils throughout the North. In recent years, my Department has taken specific action to ensure that schools have the necessary support to teach newcomer children. Specifically, resources are provided to schools and, for South Belfast, those amounted to more than £500,000.

Schools also received support from the inclusion and diversity service that was established in April 2007. Its diversity co-ordinators provide direct help to cluster groups of schools. In conjunction with one of my counterparts in the South of Ireland, Conor Lenihan, the Minister with responsibility for integration policy, I launched a diversity toolkit that was sent to primary schools across the island. I also launched a parents' website on the education sector in the North that is available in 16 languages. The Catholic maintained sector also launched a valuable website.

I am conscious that I am approaching the end of my allotted time, but I have a couple of final comments. In recent years, two primary schools in South Belfast, Cranmore Integrated Primary School and Finaghy Primary School, received new school buildings, and St Ita's at Carryduff on the edge of South Belfast is a new school that opened in 2006. As Michael McGimpsey mentioned, building at Taughmonagh Primary School

is expected to start next year, and targeting social need in all communities is one of my Department's key strategic objectives. Minor works were recently completed, or are under way, at several other schools in the area. Earlier this year, I approved a nursery unit with 26 full-time places for Scoil an Droichid.

Go raibh maith agat as an díospóireacht seo. I thank all Members who contributed today, particularly Alasdair McDonnell, who secured the debate.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 7 October 2008

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Cuts in Ambulance Services

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 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 McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the proposals to reduce the level of ambulance service provision and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to find savings elsewhere and to agree not to reduce the ambulance cover.

I express my gratitude to Members for agreeing that the Assembly should debate this vital issue. I hope that our worst fears can be allayed.

I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland. Its staff continue to save lives, and the Assembly is grateful for their work during the difficult years of the Troubles. Furthermore, more recently, crews on duty have been attacked by stupid, callous individuals. I hope that such behaviour is in the past.

I hope that the motion will trigger a positive response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey. I remind Members that, despite the doom and gloom that some commentators offer, the Assembly has achieved positive outcomes for constituents. As the Alliance Party health spokesman, I want major improvements to be made to the ambit of health provision in Northern Ireland. That said, progress is being made.

On 15 May 2007, I proposed a motion that called for free prescriptions for all patients. The Assembly unanimously supported that proposal, and, on 29 September 2008, Minister McGimpsey agreed a time frame for the introduction of free prescriptions. That is progress.

On 17 September 2007, I proposed a motion to promote equality for all through the introduction of free public transport for women from the age of 60. That was introduced last week, and that is progress.

Many other positive health initiatives have been brought to the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, only yesterday in the Long Gallery, the Minister launched the Lifeline scheme. That scheme is an extension of the mental-health provision and investment in the prevention of suicide and self-harm. That is also progress. Let us give credit to the Assembly and to Ministers for the positive new measures that benefit us all.

Given those steps forward, I hope that we do not back-pedal when it comes to good provision for our Ambulance Service. We are extremely concerned about the proposed cuts in ambulance cover across Northern Ireland. I welcome Michael McGimpsey's announcement last week that £17 million will be invested to purchase 60 new ambulances and 26 rapid-response vehicles over the next three years. However, real concerns exist about rapid-response vehicles as they cannot transport patients to hospital. Real concern is also being expressed about the proposed number of ambulance hours to be covered in all areas.

We are all too aware of the current unavailability of ambulances when required, and we have all experienced that deficiency. On some occasions, patients have had to wait far too long for an ambulance to arrive — and that has put lives at risk. We are also aware of difficulties in getting ambulances to move patients from one hospital to another — and that is before ambulance hours are cut. Furthermore, we are being told that the Ambulance Service will be cutting 15,000 hours, or more, from front-line ambulance cover in order to comply with 3% efficiency savings. That is horrendous and incomprehensible, and it will definitely leave more patients in real danger. I appeal to Minister McGimpsey to not put lives at risk by introducing the proposed cutbacks.

In my own constituency, patients have been deprived of ambulance provision in places such as Portaferry, Killyleagh and Saintfield, which is totally disgraceful. In other areas, there have been recent incidents in which ambulances have broken down simply because they were clapped out in the first place.

The Assembly wants an Ambulance Service in which constituents are confident. When there is a need for an ambulance, that need should be met; and patients should be transported to hospital where they should receive immediate, first-class treatment. In my own part of the Strangford constituency, we have been campaigning for an out-stationed ambulance for rural areas at the tip of the Ards Peninsula. Unfortunately, the campaign has not been successful to date, but we are determined to continue with it. Perhaps Minister McGimpsey will revisit that request.

Scepticism remains about the rapid-response vehicle (RRV) proposal in that both the RRV and the ambulance will be required to reach the patient early. That might not always be the case, leaving patients and relatives at risk.

The motion urges the Minister to make savings, if they need to be made, in areas where the lives of patients will not be put in danger. The major investment of £17 million announced last week is very welcome, but we have heard similar proposals in the past that were never delivered. How can we expect to have a first-class Ambulance Service when staff are not properly equipped, and when there is not the sufficient manpower to properly carry out the duties? Ambulance staff are unhappy about current management demands about working with greatly reduced ambulance-cover hours.

In conclusion, I am grateful that Minister McGimpsey is present to hear the many worries and concerns about the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. No Member can doubt the invaluable service that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has provided over the decades. I commend the paramedics and staff who, through difficult and dangerous times and circumstances, when they came under fierce attack, did not waver in providing a service and demonstrated their professionalism and dedication to the Northern Ireland people. Many people owe their lives to the professionalism and skills of the Ambulance Service's paramedics and staff.

Ambulance provision is a lifeline for people in isolated, rural communities who live some way from the nearest hospital. I come from a rural community in County Tyrone. Tyrone is the largest county in Northern Ireland, containing approximately 166,000 people, yet the Minister has stripped it of all acute hospital services. Consequently, the Ambulance Service is the only lifeline for the residents of west Tyrone, and that concerns people throughout the county.

Tyrone is the only county in Northern Ireland without an acute-hospital facility, and that concerns not just medical staff, consultants and patients but also elected representatives. Tyrone people must now depend only on the Ambulance Service.

People in Omagh were assured that a proper ambulance service would be put in place before the removal of acute-hospital services. Sadly, that assurance was put on paper but not into action. Without the necessary life-saving services, people in west Tyrone, and further afield, will be vulnerable.

I know that I am not popular with the Health Minister because I highlight health disparities and inequalities in County Tyrone; I know that I am a thorn in his side; however, I will continue to highlight such matters.

Given that my rural constituency is now so dependent on its much-needed ambulance service, I urge the Minister not to cut it any further. I note the Minister's announcement last week about the provision of a new ambulance fleet and about the finances that will be put into it; however, I am concerned that using rapid-response vehicles will put people's lives at risk. I am not convinced that that is the way forward.

At the scene of an accident in a rural community, a rapid-response vehicle would offer no more than a large box of medical equipment — it would not be able to move a patient from the scene. Another ambulance would have to attend in order to move a person who might be severely injured. Therefore, it would be better if fully equipped ambulances were put in place rather than rapid-response vehicles.

Perhaps providing rapid-response vehicles, which do not serve the same purpose as ambulances, is part of a money-saving exercise, which may result in people losing their lives. I urge the Minister to resist cutting ambulance services and to ensure that the required service is in place for people in rural communities.

10.45 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Minister would disagree that you are a thorn in his side, Mr Buchanan.

Ms S Ramsey: He is the thorn and I am the rose.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Mr McCarthy for tabling the motion, which is especially relevant on the day that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is hosting an all-day event for the emergency services in Parliament Buildings. Although that event is aimed at promoting the positive work that the emergency services do, it is important that we debate the negative aspects of the emergency services in order to rectify those, so that, together, we can achieve a positive outcome.

In supporting the motion, I commend the good work that the Ambulance Service carries out. Ambulance Service personnel are on the front line in dealing with healthcare issues. Those people have a difficult job to do at possibly every emergency that they are called out to deal with, and we must recognise the difficult circumstances that they face. I am glad that the Minister is present, because genuine concerns about emergency-services provision exist, especially over ambulance cover. That has generated concern among individuals, families and communities, who are worried about their safety in the unfortunate event of their having to call for an ambulance.

Over the past few weeks, as the previous two Members to speak have said, ambulances have broken down on their way to an emergency call. With that in mind, I welcome the commitment that the Minister gave last week to make available additional money to

replace the ambulance fleet over the next few years. However, I am concerned as to whether replacing the fleet will deal with the issue of availability of Ambulance Service cover for our communities — that balance must be struck. I do not want to come across as negative, because additional money for the Ambulance Service is welcome, but we must send out the clear message that, although we are replacing its fleet, we are not attacking the service that it provides.

We heard earlier about the problems with Ambulance Service cover and about the issue of efficiency savings. However, it is important that all Members, including the Minister, send out the clear message that, although we are considering efficiency savings — no one is being negative about doing that — all Departments must make such savings. We must make it clear that we will not attack front-line services, because such a commitment will go some way to reassuring our communities about those services.

When proposing the motion, Kieran McCarthy said that people have a genuine concern about the rapid-response proposal, and I agree with him. Thomas Buchanan raised the issue of rural communities having additional concerns, and I agree with Thomas on that. The Minister must reassure the unions —

Lord Morrow: [*Inaudible.*]

Ms S Ramsey: I am agreeing with everyone today, Maurice; I will agree with you later.

The Minister must reassure the House, unions, communities, Ambulance Service personnel and those who live in rural communities that his proposed changes will stabilise the service for rural communities and will result in a positive outcome.

It is important that we do not get confused or be negative about the additional money that was given to the Ambulance Service last week. We must find out whether renewing its fleet will make a positive difference to the service and the cover that it provides, whether that be in rural or urban communities or for rapid response. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: It is regrettable that today's motion has been tabled, because it is based on rumour as opposed to hard fact. The Minister has made it clear that he will bring any proposed changes before the Health Committee; therefore, some perspective must be introduced into the debate.

The Health Service in Northern Ireland is undergoing a substantial period of change, reform and modernisation. Given his concerns about the rapid-response vehicles, Mr Buchanan should speak to health professionals and listen to their views on them.

It is undeniable that those changes are linked to the 3% efficiency savings that all parties and the Executive —including Sinn Féin and the DUP — have agreed to

and which all Departments are required to achieve. However, those changes also represent a goal of developing a more efficient and effective Health Service.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is an integral part of the Health Service, and is, therefore, at the forefront of many of those necessary changes. All Members in the Chamber will accept that we have a Health Minister who is fully committed to the NHS and that he has already shown that devolution can have a significant, beneficial impact for the people of Northern Ireland.

Changes occur because they are necessary. We must work with the Minister to deliver those changes and achieve the best possible outcomes. The modernisation and investment that the Minister has announced to date has been necessary and will result in better ambulance service provision.

In July 2008, changes to the ambulance service provision were announced. That process of change was part of the 3% efficiency savings that all Departments are required to meet. As a result of those changes, the Ambulance Service was able to allocate £2.5 million for rapid-response vehicles, additional coverage at weekends and a new pilot scheme that uses doctors and control rooms to provide advice to patients. That modernisation process will enable the Ambulance Service to respond more quickly and appropriately to emergency calls, and, most importantly, patients will be put first.

In May 2008, the Minister opened the new regional dispatch centre at the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's Belfast headquarters. That new centre uses modern command and control systems to assign clinical priority to emergency calls. Furthermore, it uses geographical information systems to dispatch the nearest ambulance available to a particular emergency. Moreover, the Minister recently announced that up to 60 new accident and emergency ambulances, 60 non-emergency vehicles and 26 rapid-response vehicles will be purchased over the next three years, amounting to a £17 million capital investment. The Minister also plans to invest some £100 million over the next 10 years in the fleet, the estate and vital equipment, such as defibrillators.

That amounts to the largest single investment in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's history, and it has been welcomed across the Health Service and the Assembly. With it, the Minister has given the service the ability to plan more effectively for the future and to regularly replace the ambulance fleet.

The reform package for the Ambulance Service must be viewed in its entirety, and the Minister's decision will create an improved service. Ambulance Service staff are some of the most highly skilled people working in the Health Service. They are at the front line of the provision of patient care, and they now have the vehicles

and command and control systems to match their skill and dedication.

It is widely recognised that the budget that was given to the Minister — even after he had fought for extra funding — was inadequate to deliver all of the desired improvements. That, together with inflationary pressures, which have led to the Ambulance Service's fuel costs increasing by £220,000 over six months, makes those achievements and the changes that the Minister has made all the more welcome and notable.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No. I have very little time left.

The Minister is fully committed to involving the Health Committee, the Assembly and the Health Service in all of the changes that he is making. I urge Members to recognise that and to direct any concerns that they have to their colleagues on the Health Committee and to the Minister himself.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. As other Members have said, the Ambulance Service is highly regarded, and its personnel carry out valuable work in difficult circumstances. Often, they must put up with abuse and, in some instances, physical attack when they attend scenes in areas where rowdy mobs congregate at the weekends. There is public outrage that those attacks are still taking place.

The Ambulance Service is an integral part of the Health Service, and, as such, it requires major investment to bring it up to standard. I welcome the Minister's recent announcement to put additional resources into the updating of the Ambulance Service, as have some of the Members who spoke. The plans to purchase 60 accident and emergency ambulances over the next three years, as well as the non-emergency vehicles and the 26 rapid-response vehicles, are encouraging, because, as Members will know from the well-documented examples that have been cited, the fleet of ambulances in some parts of Northern Ireland has not been up to the job.

Can the Minister provide the House with more details on how the new fleet will be rolled out? Will the areas in greatest need be assigned vehicles in order of priority? Tom Buchanan informed the House of the concerns that exist in Tyrone, and the same applies in Fermanagh. Those are vast rural areas. Will those areas be given priority when the new vehicles are being distributed?

Sue Ramsey mentioned efficiency savings. I would be grateful if the Department could provide us with information on how efficiency savings and the Minister's recent announcement sit with the reductions in staff cover that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service announced some time ago. Those reductions were particularly severe in Newry, in the Southern Health and Social Services Board, and they also raised concerns for people living in the west. In view of those proposed

staff reductions and the ambulance cover in the west, the Minister's recent announcement is important, welcome and encouraging.

It is also important that the future need for an air ambulance to serve all of Northern Ireland, particularly the remote areas, be kept on the agenda. Members accept that that need goes beyond Northern Ireland. If an air ambulance is ever to be in place, it will have to be implemented with the co-operation of the health authorities in the rest of Ireland. Therefore it should be raised at some of the North/South meetings. Does the Minister accept that? Has he had an opportunity to put that issue on the agenda?

Mr Easton: Members are aware that we live in a world of finite resources. It would be wonderful to have the unlimited means to finance all the schemes and programmes that we could devise for the Health Service. However, we must establish priorities for our spending, and it is imperative that we do not take chances or cut services without serious consideration of the consequences.

In the present financial context, the Minister is required to make efficiency savings as part of the most recent comprehensive spending review. Cuts in the health budget of 3% per annum for a three-year period amount to serious challenges for a Health Service that many regard as being already underfunded to meet the demands that are placed on it.

The Ambulance Service has been set targets of savings of £1.2 million for 2008-09; £2.7 million for 2009-10; and £4.4 million for 2010-11. That amounts to a staggering reduction in resources of £8.3 million over the next three years.

11.00 am

Dr Farry: I agree with the Member's analysis of the health budget. His party celebrated when the Budget was passed — and celebrated particularly the settlement for health. He seems to be telling a different story today, damning what he describes as "cuts" rather than efficiency savings and saying that the Budget was inadequate. Will he explain the DUP's change of heart?

Mr Easton: Those are efficiency savings. The Health Service received an injection of an extra £500 million from our Minister, so the Member needs to get his facts right.

To allay our fears, the Minister tells us that we have an overall planned net investment of £12 million for the next three years and that funding of the service will not be cut. We are also advised that an additional £5 million will be spent on replacing our ageing ambulance fleet, defibrillators and estate. Replacing clapped-out ambulances is, of course, a priority, and savings can be made by rationalisation, the management of the response system and the Health Service estates. The recent

announcement that several new ambulances will soon come on stream is welcome, and it is good to see that a DUP Minister supplied the extra money for that purpose.

However, we are told that one element of efficiency savings this year will come from a re-profiling of ambulance cover, with 17,520 hours of current planned ambulance cover replaced by 43,800 hours of paramedic cover using rapid-response vehicles. Around 35,000 hours will be cut by 2009-10 and 70,000 hours of ambulance cover will also disappear by 2011, which should concern us deeply.

To the man or woman in the street, such information seems to amount to smoke, mirrors and political spin. People want to be sure that if they require an emergency admission to hospital, an ambulance will arrive quickly for them or their loved one. First-responding schemes, serviced by volunteer groups and rapid-response paramedics, have a part to play in many emergency situations. However, people know that in any emergency situation the first hour is vital. In that golden hour, critically ill people or those seriously injured in road accidents must be delivered to hospital without delay, whether they live in east Belfast, Enniskillen, south Down or Londonderry. We need to provide all the people of the Province — both in rural and urban areas — with the security that Members of the Assembly put people first. We want for them what we want for our own families in an emergency — the knowledge that an ambulance will take them as quickly as possible to hospital, where specialists will be on hand to deal with them.

In this response-target environment we have the incredible situation of an eight-minute target. If a medical response reaches a patient in 10 minutes and the patient lives, it is registered as a failure; if a medical response reaches a patient in eight minutes, even if the patient dies, it is registered as meeting the response target. Everyone connected with the delivery of the Ambulance Service is worried about those changes. The target mentality will cost lives, which seems to be the evidence emerging from similar reforms in England.

Solutions for urban problems are not always applicable in the mainly rural environment of Northern Ireland. We need a fully resourced, fully staffed, modernised ambulance service, supported by rapid-response paramedics and well-organised volunteer first-responder groups to give taxpayers, who fund the service, the reassurance that they need.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I share the deep concerns of the Members who have spoken, and I thank the Member who proposed the motion.

The underinvestment in ambulance services in my constituency of Derry was exposed in the most dramatic fashion recently when the same ambulance broke down twice in as many weeks while answering call-outs.

Both of those incidents could have easily led to a tragedy, and the fact that they did not was due only to sheer good fortune.

On 13 September, the 'Derry Journal' reported that the city was without adequate ambulance cover for several hours on a Thursday night because there were simply not enough vehicles available. That situation has occurred time and time again. We are aware of those incidences and, despite the assurances given by the Minister yesterday, some have had association with fatalities because ambulances have had to attend from as far away as Fermanagh when not enough ambulances, or none, were available in the city of Derry. That is a shocking situation, and it is intolerable that any area — let alone a city the size of Derry — should be left without adequate ambulance cover for any period of time.

Instead of providing the kind of major investment in the Ambulance Service that is so clearly needed, the Minister is planning to slash the service. He wants to cut 15,000 staffing hours and replace traditional ambulances with rapid-response vehicles. That is a genuine concern for many people who may find themselves in need of a fully equipped ambulance that can transfer them to a hospital. Those RRVs will be unable to do that, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the proposals could end up costing lives. The proposals will have a huge effect right across the North, and no area or person will be left unaffected. Rural communities will become even more isolated, as Tom Buchanan said, and our health workers, who already feel so undervalued, will become even more demoralised.

In July, the Minister claimed that there would be no cuts to the Ambulance Service, but that is clearly not the case. Although I welcome the recent plan to replace old ambulances, ultimately, that will simply leave us at a standstill: the plan will not improve the service, it will merely replace the vehicles that are no longer fit for purpose. It is clear, therefore, that much more needs to be done, and the Minister must address people's concerns and abandon plans to make cuts to the service.

I am also keen to hear his plans for greater co-operation with the health authorities in the Twenty-six Counties, particularly in the border areas of Derry and Letterkenny. To be blunt, the issue of adequate ambulance cover boils down to a matter of life and death. Some Members in this Chamber may laugh, but the matter is certainly not funny. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms Anderson: Those cuts will devastate people right across the Six Counties. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Lord Morrow: Looking again at the motion, I must say that it could have been better put. It was incumbent on the Alliance Party to do a bit better, particularly given that it has taken on the mantle of opposition to everything that happens in the Assembly. The motion

calls on the Minister to “find savings elsewhere”. It is very original thinking, indeed, to ask the Minister to go out and get the money from wherever he likes. I have little doubt that the Alliance Party member who makes the winding-up speech will want to suggest where the money should come from. Money does not normally come from “elsewhere”; it is the responsibility of the proposer of the motion to suggest where the money should come from.

Dr Farry: I plan to do that.

Lord Morrow: That is very good; we look forward to listening to what our colleague will say later. The DUP will not divide the House on the matter, despite the motion’s ineffectiveness. Party members will allow it to pass because we agree with its broad thrust, even though it is light on detail.

I speak as a representative of a rural constituency, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which others have mentioned this morning. It seems that when cuts are made in any area, rural dwellers are always hurt the most. I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of the comments made in today’s debate — I am certain that he will — and re-examine the Ambulance Service. He recently, and rightly, announced plans to introduce free prescriptions. I hope that the Ambulance Service will not have to pay for that proposal, and that there will be no other reduction in services as a result of it. We will await the Minister’s response — no doubt he will reassure us that that will not be the case.

Mr Buchanan and others have already pointed out that those of us from the west of Northern Ireland are concerned about the future of health services in general. For example, there are no longer any acute services in the South Tyrone Hospital; the status of the hospital in Omagh has changed or is changing; and a new hospital has been prescribed for Fermanagh.

It would be interesting to know how plans for that new hospital are progressing, because all those matters are interlinked and important. In May, I asked the Minister for his comments on ambulance services in Dungannon, bearing in mind that that area has the oldest ambulance on the road. In one incident in Tyrone, the back door fell off an ambulance as it was transferring a very ill patient from one hospital to another. That is not the type of service that instils confidence in the community. That is not a criticism of Ambulance Service crews, because they provide a valuable service, which is much appreciated.

I take this opportunity to condemn attacks on our Ambulance Service and other emergency services, and I condemn the irresponsible people who are involved in that activity. Such action is intolerable in this age.

The Minister declared that he was satisfied that the vehicles were roadworthy, but is it acceptable for ambulances of a certain age to be on the road? The

Minister made his recent announcement, and that was very welcome, but we want to ensure that ambulance services in rural areas will be fit for purpose and that will be as effective and efficient as that which is being provided for urban areas. I hope that the Minister will take time to address those issues, because they concern rural dwellers. At times, we feel that we are very much second-class citizens, and that we do not get the same treatment as people who live in urban areas.

I see that you are looking at the clock, Mr Deputy Speaker. I could say much more about this issue, but perhaps there will be an opportunity to do that in the future. We will propose a better motion next time, Mr McCarthy.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. This debate is very important, and it provides an opportunity to hear the Minister’s thoughts on this issue. Hopefully, the Minister will clarify that the threat is not as great as it first seems.

I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service for its work over the years in providing a service that takes the place of the health service that should exist in rural areas. When maternity and medical beds were closed, and acute services across Tyrone were closed, we were promised that there would be adequate ambulance services to ensure that patients’ safety was in no way endangered. However, that was simply a bluff to get people over the initial bed closures. It seems that every service is being transferred to the greater Belfast area and that whatever happens in rural areas is no one’s concern, but it is a concern to residents and representatives from rural areas.

The South Tyrone Hospital has closed, as have acute services in Mid Ulster, Omagh and Tyrone. Therefore, the promises that have been made must be fulfilled. Those were not simply promises to get over the media hype in the short term — they were promises to provide adequate cover for rural dwellers in those areas.

During the suspension of the Assembly, Ulster Unionist MLAs, MPs and party leaders, and other parties, promised that if they took the health portfolio in the future, acute services would be restored immediately and new hospitals would be built. However, the Minister has been in post for more than 12 months, but there have been no proposals for acute services to be replaced or for new hospitals to be built, as his party promised. It is important that those promises be fulfilled, along with the promises of investment in the Ambulance Service and other medical services. There is a proposal to replace the ambulance fleet with a smaller fleet, but that is not adequate to provide the essential cover that is required.

I welcome the fact that the Ambulance Service’s vehicles are to be replaced, but we must also ensure that adequate cover is provided across the North —

including rapid-response cover where required — so that patients can be delivered to hospitals quickly.

11.15 am

We were led to believe that none of us would need new hospitals at all, because the massive new building at the Royal Victoria Hospital was supposed to cater for the whole of the North and provide the rest of us with all the necessary services. Last Friday, I dealt with a constituent who had been in the Mid-Ulster Hospital for a few days receiving treatment for a number of broken bones, but who could not be transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital. That patient could not be treated in the new building. If a patient lives in the greater Belfast area, he or she can be taken to the Royal Victoria Hospital within 10 minutes, but a patient from a rural area might have to wait a few days before an ambulance can take him or her to Belfast. Even last Friday, when my constituent was told that the transfer would take place, no ambulance could be found to take the patient from the Mid-Ulster Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. It took several phone calls to obtain a response, and, in the end, a different vehicle had to be found. People in the rural community are concerned about those issues.

The Minister's announcement that prescription charges would be done away with was welcome. However, he accompanied that important statement by saying that there would be no reduction in other services. I hope that the Minister lives up to those commitments, and that they were not just PR stunts. I hope that services will be maintained and enhanced, and that the benefit of those services will be felt, particularly in rural communities.

Ambulances are the only lifeline available to those communities. It is important that the Minister reviews the decisions that were made by the Health Service and ensures that the promises that were made about ambulance cover to the people of Mid Ulster, Fermanagh, Omagh and across Tyrone are kept in future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I pay tribute to the staff of the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland, who over the years, and particularly in the dark days of our past, carried out a most demanding duty in a way that was a credit to their professionalism as they attended many incidents which were horrific to say the least. Ambulance Service personnel attend road traffic accidents and other incidents daily, reflecting their sheer determination and continued professionalism.

I concur with the comments of my party's chairman and Whip, Lord Morrow, who highlighted the deficiencies in the Alliance Party motion. We look forward to hearing that party put some meat on the bones, because it has failed to do so to date. To anyone who has suffered in an emergency, and who has

required Ambulance Service support to reach hospital and receive life-saving care, the prospect of cutting that most important link must sound like insanity.

Despite its ineffectiveness because of a lack of detail, the motion raises the prospect of a significant threat to the health and well-being of any of us who might at some time in the future need an ambulance in an emergency. The Minister is not excluded from that, even if it were only to remove the thorn from his side that was referred to earlier in the debate.

I wish to highlight to the Minister the particular needs of my constituency. Obviously, the debate gives Members the opportunity to raise specific issues. For some time now, fears have been expressed in Ballymena, in my North Antrim constituency, about the risks that local people might face as a result in the reduction in ambulance cover. Those fears are on the verge of being realised. One of my party colleagues on Ballymena Borough Council, Councillor Tommy Nicholl, articulated the problem that is facing Ballymena when he pointed out that Ballymena's ambulance cover must continue if local people are to be offered top-quality care.

I wonder what excuse the Minister will give if Ballymena loses one third of its daily cover. How much confidence in the Minister will the people of Ballymena have if he tells them that that cut is the result of efficiency savings, when he should be making ambulance cover a priority? Rather than carry out a cost analysis, the Minister should conduct a "care analysis". That analysis should be central to any decisions that he makes on ambulance cover.

I remind the Minister that there are currently three fully staffed ambulances serving Ballymena daily. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's proposed cuts in order to meet his Department's budget strategy will mean that the people of Ballymena will see one of those ambulances shed. That equates to 2,685 hours — or 112 days, 16 weeks or four months — of cover. That is the situation that my constituents in Ballymena are facing. Although much praise has been heaped on the head of the Minister this morning after his welcome announcement that new ambulances are to be provided and that money is being spent, we must seriously consider whether those developments are being implemented in a manner that is to the best possible advantage of the people who use the service.

Can the Minister confirm that his plans to purchase rapid-response vehicles and other ambulances for the fleet have the full confidence of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service staff? In discussions that I held with its staff in my constituency, they raised, and continue to raise, serious concerns about the future of the Ambulance Service.

Will the Minister clarify his position on obtaining public service vehicle licences for ambulances? Will

he perform due diligence and ensure that care is taken of the existing ambulance fleet? Lord Morrow referred to an incident recently in which a door fell off the back of an ambulance. I want the Minister to state his position on that incident —

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

Mr Storey: — and give assurances that he will continue to provide a top-class Ambulance Service for Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Will I have extra time added to my speech? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Sinn Féin admires the men and women of the Ambulance Service for their commitment and dedication to their work, especially in difficult circumstances. I come from a rural community, so I am aware of people in isolated areas' concerns about any cutbacks in services, especially cutbacks in critical services, of which ambulance services are one. Public concerns have also been raised in recent weeks about incidences of vehicles breaking down.

The Minister's initial announcement of his plans to replace fully equipped ambulances with rapid-response vehicles has, on reflection, raised the question of whether those vehicles will be able to satisfy all patients' needs. I ask the Minister to satisfy the public's concerns, as well as those of Ambulance Service personnel, particularly over the transportation of patients to their nearest facility.

Rural communities in particular feel that they need a greater degree of Health Service investment and increased ambulance provision. Ambulance Service personnel say that a system based on rapid-response vehicles is not suited to rural areas, considering that the Ambulance Service, by its own admission, treats everywhere outside Belfast as rural. That is a concern. Can the Minister assure people from the vast rural community that any changes to the Ambulance Service will not have a detrimental effect on them?

That issue, as I am sure the Minister is aware, has been a major concern in south Armagh. Whether ambulance services from Daisy Hill Hospital are to be retained is a concern. Indeed, the prospect of all that hospital's services being diluted is a concern. People in the area have asked for a review of the service. Most people in south Armagh live outside of areas that ambulances can reach within the stated 20-minute response time. When one considers that all medical evidence states that a stroke victim has a greater chance of recovery if reached within eight minutes, it is clear that many people fall outside that critical response time. Sinn Féin has consistently lobbied for action on that matter.

Is the Minister saying that his welcome announcement about the abolition of prescription charges a few weeks ago has forced him to make cuts in other areas, which will affect the overall quality of the Health

Service? If so, the Chamber and the general public would appreciate an honest answer. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I said recently in the Chamber that one ambulance station to cover the whole of Strangford is not enough. Strangford is in severe need of at least one more new ambulance, because four of the five ambulances in the constituency are five years old. The mileage of those four ambulances is 167,000, 172,000, 174,000 and 192,000 respectively. The six-year-old ambulance has only 106,000 miles on its clock — perhaps it is being nursed because of its age.

Ye dinnae hae tae bae a car sales man tae bae fit tae wrocht oot at thae ambulances ir neir done. Thon isnae onie a wie fer me tae get mae spoke in aboot hoo mich we hae need fer new ambulances — bit hit shews hoo mich thae ambulances ir used an' hoo they ir allus in uise. Tae gie less cover wil hae the ootcum at simboadie at bes in an emergency an leukin fer an ambulance wulnae get yin es fast es they wud hae done.

One does not have to be a car salesman to work out that those ambulances are on their last legs. I am not quoting those figures to get the spoke in for how much we need new ambulances, but they illustrate how much those ambulances are used. Therefore, lessening cover will mean that someone who calls for an ambulance in an emergency will not receive one as quickly as they should. Newtownards is in the top 20 out of over 60 areas in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service table of response origins by priority. Therefore, we require a fully functional and dedicated service. I pay tribute, as other Members have, to the Ambulance Service personnel; they do an excellent job and need the correct equipment to do it even better.

The statistics that I quoted are from the response to a question for written answer that was asked by my DUP colleague Jim Wells because an ambulance in his area had broken down when it was on an emergency call. The figures in the response are very worrying. Why are the emergency services in Strangford using vehicles that have nearly 200,000 miles on the clock and should have long since been replaced? Strangford requires several new ambulance vehicles and cannot afford any lessening of cover, lest it mean that a life is the price of cutting back the service.

The stated response target is for 70% of category-A — life threatening — calls to be attended within eight minutes. For those of us who live in the Ards Peninsula, eight minutes is an impossible target — the drive from Ards to Portaferry takes at least 25 minutes when driving carefully and adhering to the speed limits. The Ards Peninsula is already at a disadvantage, and we cannot afford to have any less ambulance cover. Therefore, I was dismayed to learn from the news that further cuts will be made to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. It seems that more cover is taken each year from the Ards, and from the peninsula, in particular. Last June,

there was a threatened reduction of ambulance cover on Monday and Tuesday evenings — such threats cannot continue. It is time to put the house in order and allocate the necessary funding to ensure that our ambulance cover is not further diminished.

I agree with UNISON that the rapid-response vehicles simply do not cut it. They are not as well equipped to handle emergency situations as ambulances, and lives could be lost that would be saved if a fully equipped ambulance got to the scene quickly and transported the patient to hospital. A local district nurse told me that a rapid-response vehicle does the same job as her, and that, when she rings 999, she requires a vehicle that can transport the patient to hospital, not one that merely assesses the needs of the patient.

I often hear the sound of an ambulance siren when I am in my office, which tells me that someone is in trouble. We must ensure that when people are in trouble they receive the best service. Ambulances provide life-saving care, which is being jeopardised by cuts and by not having sufficient new ambulances in place. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to examine the Ambulance Service and not just demand savings at any price. We are playing not merely with figures — we are playing with human lives.

It is not a matter of saving pounds; it is about saving lives. The Minister must examine the matter personally and take responsibility for the service in the area in which he lives. The Ambulance Service in Strangford and across the Province must improve. People demand that from the Health Minister.

11.30 am

Mrs I Robinson: I thank my colleague Jim Shannon for pointing out the inadequacies of provision in the Strangford constituency. Not only is the ambulance fleet depleted, but it is inadequate for the job of work for which it was designed. We must remember the disadvantages that rural communities in Northern Ireland face. In the narrow roads, highways and byways of the Province, getting directions and finding addresses are some of the many factors that add to the time that is lost when ambulances are called out on emergencies.

There are several young people in the Gallery. I appeal to young people across the Province to stop making hoax 999 calls in order to have ambulances and fire engines dispatched. It is detrimental to people who genuinely need that provision. Ambulance and fire-engine crews do not need those additional pressures.

Mr McClarty: Does the Member accept that young people are not the only ones who make such calls to the emergency services?

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, that is the case — sadly. Adults should know better. Statistics show, however, that the younger generation usually make the calls.

The Ambulance Service has been a crucial emergency service in Northern Ireland throughout the years. I want to record the Assembly's gratitude to members of the service for their invaluable work in the community. They must not be short-changed in their ability to deliver the response that Northern Ireland's people expect. Like Members who have spoken earlier in the debate, I have concerns about the Minister's proposals for the Ambulance Service. I look forward to the fulfilment of the promise of £12 million investment during the next three years. I look forward to the renewal of 20 Ambulance Service vehicles each year for the ensuing three years. I look forward to the fulfilment of the promise of £2.5 million's being invested in new rapid-response vehicles. I also look forward to when the Minister brings his proposals to the Health Committee. However, like most Members, I am sure that those proposals will, once again, fall short of the service's needs and requirements.

Again, the proposed investment is cosmetic. It simply replaces what already exists. It does not enhance the service's ability to meet emergencies that happen on the roads; sudden illnesses; or unfortunate tragedies that happen in communities through various accidents. There have been several examples in the debate of the service's inadequacy in meeting emergencies, particularly in the west of the Province. People want an Ambulance Service that is not funded by recycled money, but by new investment. I am delighted that the Minister is present to respond.

The Ambulance Service cannot be short-changed. It is matter of saving lives. Time is of the essence when emergencies occur. If a door falls off an ambulance while a patient is being treated in it; if a wheel comes off; if an ambulance breaks down when it has a history of doing so — it is not fit for purpose. It is not fit to deliver the provision that the community needs. The service is only as good as the provision that exists. It is only as good as the vehicles in which investment is made.

I appeal to the Minister: in order to deliver a first-class service, he must examine the matter more closely and ensure that adequate resources are found in order to provide the best vehicles and fleet that is required for the service to have an impact in the community and cut the number of lives that are lost for reasons that we cannot understand or know about. Time is not on the side of a person who is found lying by the side of a road, or in his or her home, having suffered a major heart attack. I appeal to the Minister to consider the matter and, rather than come up with a cosmetic answer, find real solutions that involve real funding.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mr McCarthy and Ms Lo for proposing the motion. Several points have been made, and I will attempt to respond to them. I welcome the opportunity to clarify the position on Ambulance Service efficiencies and to address some of

the misconceptions about what will happen over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. In particular, I reassure Members that the level of Ambulance Service provision will absolutely not be reduced.

I share Members' appreciation for the work carried out by the staff of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. It is not merely a transport service; it is the front line of emergency care. The men and women of the service — skilled health professionals who deliver that vital life-saving service — deserve to have modern equipment, vehicles and technology to allow them to deliver high-quality emergency care to the public.

To that end, on 1 October, I announced a major investment in the Ambulance Service, which totals almost £100 million over the next 10 years. That includes £17 million over the current CSR period. That is a hugely significant investment that will allow the service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. During the CSR period, that will allow for the purchase of around 60 new accident and emergency (A&E) ambulances over the next three years to replace older vehicles. A further 60 non-emergency patient-care vehicles will also be purchased, as well as 26 rapid-response vehicles.

A rapid-response vehicle carries all the equipment of an A&E ambulance, except for a stretcher. The point of that vehicle is to arrive at the scene of the emergency rapidly: the first few minutes are vital. Ambulance work is not all about snatching people off footpaths, or out of their homes, and rushing them off to hospital. It is about rendering vital medical support as quickly as possible; and rapid-response vehicles — which are always manned by a fully trained paramedic — provide a way to do that.

I realise that many who have looked at that my proposals for efficiencies in ambulance services have thought only about the A&E ambulance numbers, and they have equated that to the levels of service. I wish to explain the impact of the efficiency measures and the new investment in our ambulance services.

It is interesting to note how some DUP Members talk. When Peter Robinson was Minister of Finance and Personnel, he spoke of "efficiencies". However, now those efficiencies have become "cuts". My proposals contain efficiencies, not cuts. The money that comes out of the service goes back in.

To clarify the position, the Executive has agreed that all Departments must deliver 3% efficiency savings over the next three years. My Department will deliver £118 million, followed by £233 million, then £344 million.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No. I am in the middle of my speech.

Mrs I Robinson: He will not give way.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I may give way in due course. I do not need asides. I am explaining this matter to the House and reminding it where we are with respect to efficiencies.

Those efficiencies will total around £700 million. That was agreed to by the DUP and Sinn Féin at one of the Executive Committee meetings that we managed to hold.

Every health and social-care organisation has been asked to deliver efficiency savings. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has been set the same target, relative to its size. The efficiency savings set for the service over the CSR period are as follows: £1.2 million in the first year, £2.7 million in the second, and £4.5 million in the third.

The Executive had good reason to ask for efficiency savings. This is not just about money; it is about making the service more efficient. The need to improve the efficiency of public services is real. It is crucial that additional resources be released to improve the way in which those services are delivered to the public. The Health Service is one of the areas most in need of investment, so it must be involved.

As I have said repeatedly, we need investment, we must be efficient, and we need to engage the population in public health. The demand on the Ambulance Service is rising at around 10% per annum — year in and year out, an extra 8% to 10% burden is added to the service. Clearly, if the Ambulance Service continues to work in the way in which it always has done, it is not going to meet that demand.

The Department has identified savings of £4.5 million by year 3. Of the total funding generated throughout the CSR, I will allocate £12 million to the Ambulance Service in additional revenues. That will see the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's operating budget increase by around 24% from £46.5 million last year to £57 million in 2010-11. Therefore, I will continue to invest in the resource. Ambulance Service resources will increase, rather than be cut as has been suggested. The additional investment of £12 million will allow the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its services; respond to emergency calls faster, and help to deliver life-saving emergency care to the people who need it.

The Ambulance Service has suggested a range of realistic proposals on how it will deliver its CSR efficiencies without affecting services. For example, up to £1 million will be found from a reduction in absence and from generic efficiencies. Those will include more efficient training and administration, fleet servicing, and reconfiguration of non-emergency vehicles' hours of operation. Several Members expressed concern about that point. The Ambulance Service's proposals will see a small reduction in the number of accident and emergency ambulances and an increase in the number of rapid-response vehicles. Overall, there will be a net increase of seven vehicles providing emergency care and delivered by skilled paramedics.

I will make another point clear: the effectiveness of the provision of ambulance services is not measured simply, or solely, by the number of accident and emergency ambulances on the road. We must examine the service's capability to respond to emergency calls and ensure that available resources are targeted at enhancing the level of the emergency cover that the Ambulance Service provides. By the end of the CSR period, paramedic-response capacity — by which I mean the total amount of cover provided by accident and emergency ambulances and rapid-response vehicles — will be increased by 61,000 hours to more than 600,000 hours of cover.

The net increase in vehicle numbers means that more vehicles will be on the ground to provide emergency care. I assure Members that jobs will not be lost as a result of the efficiencies. At present, the Ambulance Service employs 1,076 people. There will be no reduction in that figure as a result of the efficiency proposals.

Reports in the media and elsewhere have insinuated that a paramedic who responds to a call in a rapid-response vehicle is somehow not as effective as one who responds in an accident and emergency ambulance — I do not accept that argument. An accident and emergency ambulance is manned by one paramedic and one technician whereas a rapid-response vehicle is manned by one paramedic. The paramedic model of service has been in place in Northern Ireland for four years. It is accepted nationally as an effective and modern treatment model that provides direct assessment, care and treatment to the people who need it.

All rapid-response vehicles are staffed by skilled paramedics. The vehicles have an advantage over accident and emergency ambulances in that they can provide a faster response and can gain access to some places that ambulances cannot get to. Mr Shannon made that point.

The equipment provided in a rapid-response vehicle is the same as that provided in an ambulance. The only difference between the two is that a rapid-response vehicle cannot transport patients to hospital. I stress that in the event of an emergency call, an ambulance and a rapid-response vehicle are sent to the incident at the same time. As soon as a rapid-response vehicle arrives at a scene, the paramedic will immediately start to treat and stabilise the patient and will also decide whether an ambulance is actually required. Around 10% of all category-A — life-threatening — calls are, in fact, not life-threatening at all. In one case, an ambulance responded to a category-A call only to discover that the person had a toothache. In another case, a person had called because they could not get a GP appointment, and in another case, a person called because they had cut their finger.

The paramedic who operates a rapid-response vehicle will be able to indicate immediately whether a situation is life-threatening. I had first-hand experience

of that during one of the busiest social nights in Belfast, when I accompanied a rapid-response vehicle paramedic during his shift. In one incident, he went to the aid of a young man who had been knocked down. Within minutes of the call being received, he was at the scene and had started to treat the victim. Only a few minutes later, an ambulance arrived to take the injured man to hospital. That is how I envisage the RRVs working; getting support and help out there as fast as we can.

11.45 am

There is a target for ambulances to respond to 70% of life-threatening incidents within eight minutes, and we are on target this year. From April 2009, I will increase that target to 75% because the period immediately following an incident is crucial. It is not always a matter of rushing in and snatching away the patient; it is often a matter of providing the emergency medical support that the patient needs, particularly if it is a life-threatening incident. That is why those eight-minute targets are in place and why we are providing RRVs.

We are following a practice that has been in place for some years and has a proven track record nationally. That way of working means that patient care is not compromised; getting a paramedic response to an emergency more quickly means that there is a chance of saving a patient's life. If a patient needs to be transported to hospital, the ambulance will take them, freeing the RRV to attend another emergency. An A&E ambulance spends 60% of its downtime waiting at the ambulance station to be called out; the RRV is constantly out patrolling the hot spots, as I saw that night. They are there to respond rapidly because, as I said, in around 10% of cases an ambulance is not required.

Each year, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service receives 360,000 calls of which 125,000 are emergencies, and, as I said, that figure is rising by 8% to 10% every year. However, around 25,000 of those calls are for incidents that are neither immediately life-threatening nor serious. In addition, the service has to deal with some 6,000 hoax calls, and, as David McClarty said, those are not all made by youngsters but by people from all walks of society. All of that adds significant pressure to resources.

To help to address that problem the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service intends to pilot a scheme that uses doctors in the ambulance control room to provide clinical advice to people who call the service. That control room will operate for 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and it will enable the Ambulance Service to target emergency resources better. In order to help the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service further, the public too has a responsibility to make sure that they dial 999 only in an emergency. Every call that is not an emergency only delays an ambulance from attending a real emergency. We are saying, "think before you ring".

I recognise the genuine concerns expressed by Members. Martina Anderson talked about two ambulance

breakdowns, but the fact that that is memorable indicates how extremely rare a breakdown is, given that ambulances respond to some 360,000 calls a year. Further to what I said yesterday, the first occasion involved a category-A call, and the patient experienced a seven-minute delay before a second ambulance arrived. The second occasion was a category-B call and the patient experienced a 19-minute delay. I apologise for that; it should not have happened.

I have an inherited fleet that I am seeking to invest in and replace. Over the next three years the Department will buy 60 A&E ambulances, 60 patient-care service vehicles and 26 RRVs, giving us 146 extra vehicles. However, over the next five years, I have allowed for the full replacement of the entire fleet and investment in a rolling programme of replacement so that, in future, no vehicles will be more than five years old. Some of the current vehicles, as Members pointed out, are long past needing to be scrapped.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If Mr McCarthy would just allow me to finish. Tommy Gallagher made a point about an air ambulance. There are no plans at the moment for an air ambulance and that is probably some years away. I have explained how the fleet will be rolled out. Lord Morrow talked about replacing ambulances in Dungannon, where there is one of the oldest ambulances on the road; that is exactly what I am doing — scrapping the old vehicles and replacing them. Ambulances are serviced every 12,000 miles, which is far more frequently than the manufacturer recommends. They are very well looked after, but it is long past the time for them to be replaced.

Sue Ramsey raised the point that replacing the fleet does not mean attacking the service that it provides. In fact, the opposite is the case; the fleet follows the service that we provide. Investment has been made throughout Northern Ireland, including in Omagh. Tom Buchanan has obviously forgotten about the new accident and emergency ambulances in Omagh and Enniskillen and the 24/7 cover in Castlederg.

Dr Farry: I join all other Members who spoke in commending the work of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service: that sentiment is shared across the community. Furthermore, it reflects the concern at the current situation. In addition to its other work, the Ambulance Service is one of the core emergency services. Many people rely upon it, and they fear the consequences of changes in the system.

Many issues affect the people of Northern Ireland, and, although they look to the Assembly for answers, the solutions are often outside our control. However, through the Budget that it passed earlier this year, the Assembly created the problem of cuts in ambulance services, and we have the solution in our hands. The Assembly is accountable for the problem, and the

people of Northern Ireland should be in no doubt about where the answers and responsibilities lie.

The Budget, which was passed by the Assembly and agreed by the Executive, was opposed by the Alliance Party. Despite the claims that were made at that time of record levels of investment in the health budget, investment in health in Northern Ireland is flatlining compared with the UK average. It does not keep up with the pace of investment elsewhere in these islands in reflection of new demands in the field of health, such as more expensive drugs or an ageing population. That amounts to a potential shortfall of around £200 million by 2011, which is a sobering reality.

At that time, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety acknowledged the problems with the Budget. Disappointingly, however, he claimed victory because of a cosmetic set of changes that were made in response to his protests. Those changes have not tackled the underlying problem of underfunding of the Health Service.

As a solution is sought, much emphasis will be placed on the forthcoming monitoring rounds, during which the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has the first claim upon new resources that come forward. The October monitoring round is already well behind schedule — yet another victim of the Executive's paralysis. Even if a monitoring round does take place, it remains to be seen how much in the way of resources will be made available by other Departments for reinvestment in health, given that the budget is tight across the system. I am not optimistic about resources becoming available.

The so-called efficiency savings are another key aspect of the current financial difficulties. The Minister said that money from efficiency savings goes back into the pot for spending on other aspects of health. That is not exactly the case. The Budget was premised on the basis of 3% efficiency savings across the board. The baselines were recalculated on that basis. The whole settlement has been tightened, right across the board, based on spending 3% less than has so far been the case.

A fine line must be found between efficiency savings and cuts. We can all welcome efficiency savings if it means shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices and reinvesting them in more efficient ways of doing things to provide more effective outcomes. That makes a lot of sense. However, cuts are seen as reductions in services.

That raises a point, which, although it does not relate directly to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, relates to the accountability of how those efficiency savings are being found in the system. Several bodies below the Department deliver health services, and I am not sure how clear in practice the accountability lines are to show where those efficiency savings will be found.

To my mind, and in the experience of numerous colleagues, many bodies are taking a simplistic approach to making efficiencies by simply slicing their services by 3%. That brings me to the core issue of the reduction in the hours of cover by accident and emergency ambulances with the capacity to transport a patient. In 2008-09, 17,000 hours of cover will be lost, rising to 35,000 hours in 2009-10, and 70,000 hours by 2010-11. That profile of cuts mirrors the practice of how efficiency savings will be implemented over the three years of the comprehensive spending review.

The Ambulance Service is a front-line service, and people become extremely concerned when they see savings that are, in practice, cuts, being made to such services. The cuts will create gaps in the service. Members spoke about the non-availability of ambulances in response to emergency calls or for the transportation of patients who may miss their slot or have to wait for many hours. Although the new rapid-response vehicles may have a role, people are concerned that their introduction is at the expense of cover from traditional accident and emergency ambulances.

My colleague, Mr McCarthy, began the debate by making the strong point that the Assembly can make a difference, and he outlined, in robust terms, the case for retaining the full range of front-line services.

Several other Members referred to the impact of cuts in their areas, particularly the problems that would be created in the west of Northern Ireland in Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh.

Sue Ramsey made a critical point about the new investment in the ambulance fleets; and everyone will welcome the positive news that the fleet is to be modernised. However, that is a slightly different issue from the number of hours' cover that the Ambulance Service provides. One could envisage a situation in which brand new ambulances are not used to their full capacity due to a lack of commitment to staff them, which is in contrast to the new investment.

I was disappointed that only one Member from the Ulster Unionist Party, John McCallister, defended the Minister's position.

Mr B McCrea: I am faintly surprised that the Member is calling on me to say a few words. The Minister spoke with clarity on the correct position to take and on how to move forward, and we are 100% behind what he said. If the Member wants to know the position of the Ulster Unionist Party, he should listen to our esteemed Minister.

Dr Farry: I am glad that, as far as the cuts in the Ambulance Service are concerned, Mr McCrea has put the entire Ulster Unionist Party on the hook. The UUP's representatives across Northern Ireland will know where to look when they join others in complaining about the situation in their areas and people are objecting to having been sold a pup.

It was fascinating to listen to Members of the DUP. Today, they let the cat of the bag: they no longer defend the Budget that they so rigorously endorsed when it was passed earlier this year. Members of the DUP now talk about the inadequate health budget, and their use of the phrase "efficiency savings" has been abandoned in favour of "cuts" — I welcome them to reality. However, had they spoken in that way when the Budget was being debated, there would, perhaps, have been a very different settlement.

Lord Morrow, and others, challenged the Alliance Party to state what it would do differently to provide funding, and I will address that point. However, the DUP did not propose any solutions to the problem that it identified as existing across Northern Ireland.

In the short term, the problem can be addressed during the monitoring rounds. As the Minister said, the total shortfall over a three-year period is only £4.5 million, which equates to approximately £1.2 million in the first year. Such a shortfall can be addressed in the monitoring rounds. However, I sound a note of caution about what the first monitoring rounds this year may bring; but we will see what happens.

12.00 noon

Furthermore, monitoring rounds do not affect the underlying baseline, and, therefore, we are forced to address that problem annually. In the long term, the Assembly must grapple with wider Health Service problems in order to release resources. Ultimately, the solution lies in better investment in public health and preventative care. We must reduce the number of situations in which people become sick and must be treated by the Health Service. A reduction in such instances will occasion a major change in how money is spent on health in the long term. I do not want to disappoint Mervyn Storey, and, therefore, I must mention that the cost of division is an obvious area in which we must seek solutions.

This issue is of great concern in Northern Ireland. It threatens people's sense of health security. Ambulances are a front-line service, and I urge the House to support the motion and to send a clear message.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the proposals to reduce the level of ambulance service provision and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to find savings elsewhere and to agree not to reduce the ambulance cover.

Opportunities for Special-Needs School-Leavers

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.

Dr W McCrea: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the opportunities and support necessary to ensure that young people leaving special-needs schools at 16 and over 19 years of age can further their education and aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment.

The motion asks the Assembly to consider the need to enhance life after school for young people with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities, who have spent up to 15 years in a well-resourced, highly structured and supportive learning environment, in which professional staff and helpers have been dedicated to enabling pupils to achieve their best in all aspects of education and essential life skills.

Although the benefits of the special-school system are evident, it is not true to assume that the needs identified in statements of special educational needs have been magically met by the age of 16 or 19. Many parents and carers are disappointed to discover that at school-leaving age, there are, largely, only day-care services available. Moreover, that highly pressurised provision is, at best, limited and, at worst, non-existent. Although further education schemes are offered in theory, the majority of pupils who leave special schools will be unable to take up independent education. Most pupils will still require supervision and help with personal care, medical needs and safety — services that are, typically, more readily offered in a Health Service day-care facility.

Therefore, it is sad that the effort, encouragement and financial resources that define the excellence of the special-school system are quickly eroded when children reach school-leaving age. As a community, surely we want to offer those young people a chance to lead fulfilling lives and to achieve what we take for granted. We must offer them choice, create opportunities for them and give respect to them. There is an overriding need to continue the quality of education that young people receive up to the age of 19.

The Beattie Report, produced in Scotland in 1999, recommended that young people with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities:

“should have access to adequate and appropriate learning provision”.

Furthermore, the report outlined:

“the needs, abilities and aspirations of young people should be recognised, understood and met within a supportive environment

which encourages them to achieve their goals and to make real, measurable progress.”

The Beattie Report recognised that in order for those young people to progress, it was likely that they would require more than one type of support and that their needs may change over time. Although the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) cannot be expected to deliver the entire solution in isolation from other Departments, the further education sector has a generous part to play in helping those young people to lead fuller and more valued lives.

The Warnock Report, which was published in 1978, found that people with learning difficulties should be seen, first and foremost, as learners. It is with regret, therefore, that the Student Voices report, which was produced by Skill Northern Ireland in 2002, recorded that the perception of members of the disabled community was that further education was not for them.

I appreciate the Minister’s presence at the debate, and I have no doubt that he will be keen to inform us that valuable progress has been made since then. I place on record my thanks to the Northern Regional College and the East Tyrone College of Further and Higher Education for their willingness to embrace the ideas and ideals of parents and carers who seek a more appropriate and meaningful provision for their children.

Access to education is the right to equal opportunity — not just physical access. Those young people deserve as much opportunity to enjoy ongoing education as mainstream students, but they desperately need a structured learning environment in which they may continue to progress beyond the age of 19 to attain the kind of life skills that others take for granted.

I want the Department for Employment and Learning to focus more on learning for that group of young people. The emphasis has been placed upon academic achievement and employability for far too long. The FE Means Business and Training for Success programmes are both work-orientated and focus largely on vocational training. Alas, for many of those young people, the world of work is not a realistic option. That is why there is a challenge for further education to provide those young people — where appropriate — with the support and high-quality provision that they need to benefit from education and to improve their chances of a successful life.

In a letter to me, the principal of Clifton Special School in Bangor stated:

“the availability of training and resource places a constant concern for school principals and also for parents who need to provide care, occupation, training and entertainment for their children, seven days a week, if an appropriate adult alternative cannot be found.

The more one tries to explore the options, the more one becomes aware of the gaping holes in provision. Throughout their school lives, we constantly strive to help them to fulfil their potential and it is

demoralising for school principals and devastating for the child and their parents to find that at 19 there may be no future provision for them.

This is an issue that needs urgently addressed by those with responsibility for ensuring that consideration is given to the needs and the rights of our learning disabled."

The principal of Elmbrook Special School in Enniskillen felt that the issue of provision for special-school leavers:

"will continue to be an ever increasing problem unless it is addressed at the highest possible level and long term strategies employed."

The principal of Riverside School in Antrim commented that further-education provision is often dependant on a work placement; that would not be possible for many pupils who leave a special-needs school. For those for whom a work placement is possible, it would not be so without support. Those young people require a means of continued stimulation, whether at a further-education campus or through further-education input at an adult day centre.

At ages 16 and 19, their young lives open up, and educational advancements become noticeable. Simply because those advancements are not measurable on the national qualifications framework does not mean that they are not real. They should not be ignored.

We are duty bound to ensure that the intensive help and support provided by the special-schools system is not eroded and that a choice greater than that which is currently available is offered to those young people.

I ask the Minister: what assessment has his Department made of the situation; what contact has he had with his ministerial counterparts to consider areas of mutual concern; what priority has he attached to the promotion of link courses between further education colleges and special-needs schools; and how much funding will he guarantee for the maintenance and promotion of non-vocational courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at further education colleges and in day-care settings?

If we are to embrace a society in which learning is a lifelong pursuit for everyone, I — and, I believe, the House — cannot accept that educational opportunities appear to end for some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who might have major learning and physical disabilities and who may have a 19-year-old body, but the mind of a six-year-old.

In order to help young people with special needs or disabilities to embrace the lifelong pursuit of learning, the further education sector must be flexible and responsive; its access routes and the content, type and delivery of its courses must meet the needs and aspirations of those young people. Life after school is the next big challenge; the Assembly must ensure that those young people have a chance to overcome the barriers that they face, and our society has a responsibility to make that happen.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support this important motion, and I congratulate the proposer on having it selected. However, I must reflect on the fact that almost a year ago to the day, the House debated a similar motion — which I proposed — that called for increased employment and training places for disabled children and young people. Six months ago, my colleague Michelle O'Neill proposed a motion that expressed concern about the lack of further education provision for young people with learning and physical disabilities.

When I read the record of those debates, I was struck by the fact that there were no dissenting voices. Even the Minister for Employment and Learning — who responded to both the motions and who will respond today — more or less agreed with what was said. Nevertheless, I remind the Minister that the Committee is still waiting for the review of the extent and nature of, and ways to improve, special-needs provision throughout the further education sector, which was promised by the end of June 2008. Perhaps, in his contribution to the debate, the Minister will give us an update on that review.

I do not intend to use my time to share statistics — Dr McCrea highlighted some, and I am sure that other Members will do the same. We are not dealing solely with statistics and numbers; we are dealing with people. We must never forget that young people with special needs or disabilities are as important as anyone else.

Every Member in the Chamber takes his or her education and training opportunities and access to jobs for granted. Young people with special needs or disabilities should also be able to take such things for granted. Let our society be judged on how it provides, and cares, for its weakest and most vulnerable members.

The Committee for Employment and Learning is fortunate. Organisations that represent the young people whom the motion is about trust the Committee and come to seek its help. We have been lucky enough to develop close working relationships with groups such as the Union of Supported Employment, Disability Action, and Ulster Supported Employment Ltd. We work closely with those groups and attempt to ensure that we consult them at every relevant opportunity.

The Committee is united in its support for the work of those, and other similar, groups, and the motion aims to provide greater Government assistance for their activities. Although the motion primarily addresses the Minister for Employment and Learning, all Ministers have a role to play, as the proposer of the motion said.

I shall take this opportunity to share with Members the story of a young man who, before recess, made a presentation to the Committee. Robert has a learning

disability, but he wanted to tell the Committee about how his life has been enhanced by the work of the Union of Supported Employment. Robert works for four days a week in a cinema; he cleans and helps out. He has a boss who looks out for him, and his support worker, who organised work experience for him before he left school, helped him to get the cinema job, for which he is paid.

12.15 pm

When Robert started his job, he also moved into his own apartment. He delighted in telling us that his job provides him with money; he can buy his own CDs and listen to them in his own apartment. He loves his job, and he is appreciated, liked and respected by his workmates. He has friends, and he feels secure and supported. I know that not every young person with special needs or disabilities will be able to have what Robert has; however, we must aspire to make those opportunities available to all who want them. To me, Robert represents how things should be, but we all know that reality is very different.

There are multiple barriers to accessing further education or training and employment for those with special needs or disabilities who are leaving school. Those barriers include current employment practices; a lack of organised support systems; prejudice; indifference; a lack of sustainable programmes and long-term funding; and a reliance on the European Social Fund.

As Dr McCrea highlighted in his opening remarks, all Ministers have a role to play to rectify the situation — I support that statement. In particular, the Minister for Employment and Learning should ensure that the views of young people with special needs and disabilities are taken into account during the development, delivery and assessment of relevant programmes.

We all wish for a world in which all people are treated equally and have the same opportunities and choices. Thankfully, we have moved on from the days when young people with special needs and disabilities were institutionalised and hidden from view. However, our challenge is to ensure that when those young people leave school they have opportunities and a purpose and are supported in making their contribution to society.

I do not believe that any of us would seek to deny young people with special needs any of those rights. I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to listen to what is said in the debate and reflect on what has been said in previous debates on this matter. No one here disagrees with young people with special needs or disabilities having the right to progress from school into whatever further education, training or employment will allow them to fulfil their potential and enjoy their lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw her remarks to a close.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I support the motion.

Mr McClarty: I declare an interest as chairperson of the board of governors of a school with a special-needs unit.

I am delighted that we are debating this issue, because I believe that the Assembly has a responsibility to bring the requirements and potential of young people with special needs further into the public domain. Regardless of the investment and strategies that we put in place, if the mindset of the wider community is not open, educated and welcoming, the potential for young people with special needs to gain achievements through further education and, where appropriate, gain meaningful employment, will be diminished. For that reason alone, the debate is crucial.

The Minister has overseen a substantial increase in the funding that is available to support students with disabilities in further education. The additional support fund provides assistance with the cost of technical and/or personal support. It is my understanding that in 2004-05 that fund was increased from £500,000 to £1 million, was further increased in 2006-07 to £1,125,000, and has been increased to £1.5 million in 2007-08 and 2008-09.

In 2007-08, the Department made £1.5 million available for discrete provision, and that has been increased to £2 million in 2008-09. That fund enables colleges to meet the cost of reduced classroom size, additional lecture contact time, an increase in the number of classroom assistants, or the development of other services involved in delivering tailored courses for those with learning difficulties.

In 2008-09, £2.5 million has been given to the support fund, which enables colleges to provide help to students whose participation in further education is prohibited by financial considerations. Since 2001, the Department has allocated over £18 million of capital funding to colleges to improve access for people with disabilities. It is my understanding that £474,000 has been set aside in 2008-09 for capital programmes expenditure, which includes funding to improve access for people with disabilities. I believe that the Minister is dealing with the issue proactively.

I understand that the review of special needs provision in further education, which the Minister announced during a debate in 2007, has been carried out and completed by the Department. That review will include recommendations that will be brought to the Committee for Employment and Learning for consideration as soon as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: The Member is a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, which was assured that it would be presented with the review in June. It is useful to keep returning to these issues because,

irrespective of what the Member's understanding is, I, as Chairperson of that Committee, do not know where the review is.

Mr McClarty: I appreciate the fact that the review should be brought to the Committee. This is the third time that the Assembly has debated the issue in just over a year, and it is important that we highlight it.

I welcome the action that the Minister and his Department have taken to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and to encourage their participation in public life. There are concerns about the ability of young people with special needs to gain access to employment — an area that my colleague Dr Coulter will explore in more detail later.

Every parent recognises the desire that their children fulfil their potential in life. That desire is no different for the parents of people with additional needs. Furthermore, we can all recognise how disillusioning and frustrating the inability to achieve that potential can be. Society must do more to recognise and welcome the benefits that people with special educational needs can bring.

More can be done, and we have a Minister who is engaged in, and committed to, further improving the potential and opportunity for young people with special needs. I and my colleagues on the Committee for Employment and Learning look forward to the review of special educational needs in further education being brought before the Committee. I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. The issue has been an ongoing concern for parents and education facilitators of special-needs young adults for some time.

The degrees of special needs are more complex than ever. As such, many parents, when their young adult reaches school-leaving age, face a blank canvas without the tools that they need. The security of the school setting is a far cry from the oasis that is the future for many special-needs young people. Current transition systems and post-school opportunities appear to be less than helpful in easing those difficult pathways from the child-friendly school scenario to the adult world — a world in which there are many pitfalls and dangers for young people with disabilities.

I consulted my local special-needs school, which had no hesitation in affirming the sentiments of the motion. That school told me that the dire lack of post-school placements available to young people with disabilities in the north-west is causing continuing anxiety.

However, like Sue Ramsey, I can tell the Assembly about a young man with special needs. He is called Kevin, and he is a very badly disabled 21-year-old who requires a great deal of medical help. Kevin attends the North West Regional College and is making wonderful progress. Indeed, he believes that he is ready to face anything in the world. That is great for Kevin, but we

need the same to happen for all our young people with special needs.

The rights of special-needs young people cannot be allowed to be eroded. In my preparation for today's debate, my first port of call was the Assembly's Programme for Government. Page 4 of that document clearly states:

“Working together we can build a shared and a better future for all — a society which is at ease with itself and where everyone shares and enjoys the benefits of this new opportunity.”

For the young adult with disabilities, and more importantly for that young person's parents, there is a basic human right to a future; a future that is equal in care, education and opportunity; and a future that will, where possible, equip them with a skill, and, at its most basic, give them a reason to get up in the morning and go to their job, no matter how menial that job is.

Those young people are capable of much more than they are often given credit for. My local supermarket employs a number of young people with special needs, and they are more than capable of carrying out their daily duties. Furthermore, they are often more open to change and the transition process than would be expected.

Since last November, motions centred around young people with special needs have been debated in the Chamber on no fewer than three occasions, including today. That will illustrate the level of affirmation and concern that the Assembly has for the issue. I have no doubt that the Minister will give his full attention to the topic, as there is undeniable parental concern about the issue, and I am sure that the ever-changing environment in which we live will continue to evolve and be as uninviting as ever for someone who is slightly different. However, within those differences, often there lies an untapped source of richness and creativity that will improve the lives of the young people concerned and help them to become valued by others beyond their family boundaries.

The situation calls for a cross-cutting approach from the Department of Education, social services, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning. The problem cannot be solved by a single-Department approach. Although the Minister for Employment and Learning is the obvious target of the motion, the solution does not lie solely at his door. However, it is hoped that he will take the outcome of the debate on board and do whatever he can to help our young disabled people.

Mr Lunn: The transition from special schools to post-school provision can be difficult for the young leavers and their families, particularly due to the anxiety caused by moving from a special school to a new and unfamiliar setting. The Alliance Party welcomes the motion, and I congratulate Dr McCrea for moving it and for setting out the related issues so eloquently in his speech.

The Alliance Party welcomes the motion as a further reminder to the Minister that there is a problem; although I am sure that he does not need to be reminded. The motion follows on from a similar motion that was tabled by Sinn Féin on 7 April 2008, which the Alliance Party also supported.

If Members are serious about a shared future, a better economy and a sustainable society, it is important that everyone has access to the education that they require to enable them to contribute to that future, economy and society. Furthermore, as my colleague Anna Lo reminded Members in the debate on 7 April, there is already a legislative framework under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 for the protection of young people who wish to exercise their right to be educated. There is, therefore, a moral and a legislative requirement in place. In fact, there is also a moral and legislative imperative to back our early contention that the objective for many people with learning disabilities should be mainstreaming.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 developed the right of children with special educational needs to attend mainstream schools. That objective and the terms of the motion can, and should, be transferred further up the system.

Approximately 80% of people with learning difficulties who leave special schools in Northern Ireland each year do not require day-care provision. Therefore, mainstream further education is often an option for many of them. That does not mean that the solution is to set up courses that are aimed, specifically, at them, because that would be counterproductive and hinder their access to mainstream society. The objective should be to improve access to the existing courses while ensuring, as far as possible, that the necessary support is available to ensure their full participation.

Building a fair and inclusive society must be the basis for a future in which people are not prevented from accessing services or from reaching their full potential by a disability, or any other reason.

I have no doubt that the Minister has sympathy for the content of the motion, and I urge him to do everything in his power to ensure the best possible provision for school-leavers with special needs and those aged 19-plus. It is also hoped that the Minister's room for manoeuvre is not restricted by any further extension of the current Executive impasse, which, I accept, is not of the Minister's doing. I look forward to hearing from him about any proposals that he may be able to offer the House today. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Newton: I support the motion. It will unite the entire Chamber, and support for those in need should be the motivation of all Members. In his opening remarks, Dr McCrea said that more than one type of support was necessary, and I agree entirely.

Last week, I met a group of primary-school principals representing east Belfast. They expressed their concerns about primary-school funding and quoted the differential in funding between primary schools and secondary-level education as £1,000 for each pupil. They were not saying that funding for secondary-level education should be cut; rather that funding for primary education should be upgraded. The funding package is not sufficient, given the responsibilities placed on teachers, which include social and psychological care, and the need to teach the three Rs. The principals stressed the impediments that that lack of funding has on children with special needs. I refer to that fact because there are children with special needs at primary school who are not in receipt of the support that they need and deserve at the required levels. Early support is necessary if children with special needs are to achieve their full potential.

My comments are somewhat wider than the motion. Nevertheless, all children with special needs deserve to have the educational building blocks in place to assist them in leading a full and productive life after school.

Although I believe that a holistic approach from all Departments is necessary for pupils with special needs, the essential preparation for a successful and complete life takes place in the secondary-school years. School-leavers should be prepared with careers-education lessons that will help them to make informed decisions about their future; be provided with opportunities to take part in attractive work experiences; and — in connection with what Dr McCrea said — have access to college-linked courses that will allow them to attend local further education colleges on vocational-linked courses to prepare them for leaving school. Such an approach allows students to prepare for a quality of life that will be enjoyable and profitable.

There is no doubt that access to post-school education should be available to all. Many students with special needs will not be able to take up employment opportunities and, in such cases, after-school experience in further education colleges must be satisfying and rewarding.

I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, who referred to the presentation given to the Committee by a young man called Robert, representing the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment. In many ways, the eyes of

Committee members were opened following his presentation.

I visited the Orchardville Society recently and was taken to the Law Courts to meet a young man with special needs who had secured a job in the post room. He is operating within the same terms and conditions as all the other staff in the post room and is also attending a further education college. The Orchardville Society provided him with in-house training, a wide range of employment opportunities compatible with his abilities, a chance to gain vocational qualifications, and support all the way through to his gaining his own place to live.

The Committee also received evidence from Ulster Supported Employment Limited, which takes a different, but nonetheless valuable, approach. It offers in-house skills training that will lead to employment on site or outside its premises, vocational qualifications and supportive and sheltered employment.

The support to enable people to live a fulfilling life from early years — whether that leads to employment or gaining further experience at a further education college — should be available to people at all levels.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones as they are interfering with the recording system.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do David Simpson agus do Willie McCrea as an rún seo.

I thank David Simpson and Willie McCrea for bringing this motion to the Assembly. As several Members have said, this is the third time that we have discussed the difficulties that young people with learning difficulties encounter in accessing further education.

The expectation is that most people who complete 12 years of primary and post-primary education can make a transition to further education colleges or university, and that also applies to people with learning difficulties. In the debate on 7 April 2008, the Minister said that in the year 2006-07, almost 17,000 students enrolling in further education declared that they had some form of disability. In the same year, around 1,400 students in further education colleges declared that they had severe learning disabilities.

In the previous debate on this subject, I mentioned the research that states that the percentage of people with learning difficulties and disabilities in Britain is much higher than it is here. The Minister may want to comment on that again. Around 20% of people in further education have complex learning difficulties, and that is an issue. In some ways, it is good that we are focusing our attention on the matter. Many people with disabilities, and their families, look to elected

representatives to raise those issues in forums such as this, because they do not have a voice.

The Minister said in the debate of 7 April that a review was to take place, and Mr McClarty said that the review has now been completed by the Department. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and as the Chairperson of the Committee has said, the Committee has not yet had sight of any report on the review. The review was to have been completed in June, and it is now October. The Committee should be told of the outcome of that review as a matter of urgency. The most important issue is how the review's recommendations will be implemented in further education colleges. I also appreciate that this matter does not just concern the Minister for Employment and Learning; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety also has a role to play, as the Minister for Employment and Learning has mentioned before.

Many parents want their loved ones to be educated or trained in Health Service day centres because they know that their loved ones are being looked after there — those centres provide a sense of security as well as transport to and from the place. However, the disadvantage is that according to some evidence, attending such centres can perpetuate social exclusion — people with severe learning difficulties or disabilities are not mixing with people in mainstream further education colleges and universities.

Willie McCrea mentioned the 'FE Means Business' document, which was drawn up by the Department for Employment and Learning. The document sets out how the Department sees the future of further education. It recognises that students with learning difficulties should be given opportunities to gain qualifications. However, I will raise an issue that I raised with the Minister in Committee meetings and in the previous debate: further education colleges are offloading courses that are aimed at people with special-learning difficulties. I think that Willie McCrea made that point, too. The main thrust of the document seems to be about gaining qualifications, perhaps at the expense of people with learning difficulties.

It can be difficult for many people to achieve success in further education colleges, but it can be particularly difficult for people with learning difficulties. I support the motion.

Mr Hilditch: I thank my colleagues for proposing the motion. People with learning difficulties have huge problems trying to find employment, as they are socially and educationally disadvantaged. It is not only people with learning difficulties who need more employment opportunities; disabled people also lose out.

Little provision is made for people with special needs who are unable to participate in further education, or who are unable to cope with finding employment.

Students who attend special-needs schools are expected to leave at the age of 19, but no assistance is made for suitable follow-up services to promote life skills and independent living. Children with moderate learning difficulties are offered compulsory education up to the age of 16, and those with severe learning difficulties are offered it up to the age of 19. However, after that, young people and their families face a minefield, and we, as elected representatives, regularly witness the distress that that causes. I have spoken to many people in my constituency who struggle to deal with those issues. Fewer than 10% of people with learning difficulties are in paid employment, and it is very unfair that parents and carers are left to deal with the responsibility of that situation.

Although there are both good and bad examples in my constituency of East Antrim, I know of only one organisation in Carrickfergus that is designed to cope with filling the gap between full-time education and employment, and it is a fine example of what can be achieved. Kilcreggan Urban Farm in Carrickfergus employs 36 adults with learning difficulties. Originally set up to teach job skills to the residents of Kilcreggan supported housing, the farm is now open to the public, and it teaches employability skills to adults with learning difficulties, with the hope that those skills will lead to employment. The farm has also been running a very beneficial pilot scheme in which children with learning difficulties and mainstream children work together on the farm in the evenings. I praise Kilcreggan Urban Farm for its work, and urge the Minister to consider the situation and try to promote and assist similar organisations so that young people get the appropriate level of training and education.

According to a representative from the Northern Trust, Carrickfergus has no form of social enterprise, yet Larne and Newtownabbey have facilities where people with special needs can learn the necessary skills. We need more training establishments to offer those adults vocational qualifications. It is a shame that there is no training organisation in Carrickfergus to deal with the special educational needs of young people aged 16 and over.

Hawthorn Day Centre has an enrolment of 65 people from the age of 19, and sometimes it is difficult to believe that there are no suitable job opportunities for those people. Surely, given the correct support, there could be opportunities in our ever-increasing service industries, for example, for people to progress and to aspire to employment, with the help of departmental supported training and further education.

I understand that the care of special-needs school-leavers is a concern for the Department of Education and for the Department of Health. It is not simply a matter for the Department for Employment and Learning — it is a cross-departmental issue. Therefore,

a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting young people is needed to secure the necessary support that will actively encourage social inclusion, challenge discrimination and inequality issues, and develop personal control and choice.

I urge the Minister to take immediate action to provide sufficient further education opportunities to ensure that young people with special needs achieve their full potential. The health and social services trusts must work together with the Department for Employment and Learning to tackle that gap. The Departments must adopt a joint approach to address the urgent issues that have been raised today. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion. It is important that the needs of young people over the age of 16 are addressed, and that the necessary systems are put in place to support them, so that young people with complex, multiple disabilities are guided in the choices that they make and that those choices can be achieved. Everyone continues to learn throughout their adult lives, and that situation is no different for people with special needs.

However, we must appreciate that those people who come from the special-needs schooling system cannot simply step into further education and learn at the same pace, from the same curriculum or by employing the same techniques as others.

2.15 pm

I appreciate that something could be done to improve special-needs provision for those over 19 years of age, but I trust that before any action is taken, the Minister and his Department will do their utmost to ensure that individuals' needs are catered for. Blanket provision for all school-leavers with special needs is unrealistic, given the individual and unique characteristics associated with the varied needs for which special-needs schools currently provide.

The Department for Employment and Learning is making great strides in improving provision for this specific age group. I wholeheartedly support the work that it has done to date and that which is planned for the future. In my constituency of Mid Ulster, Kilronan Special School in Magherafelt and Sperrinview Special School in Dungannon cater for more than 150 pupils, who can stay at school until they are 19 years of age. Those schools, through a combination of specialist teaching and provision, give individual pupils the opportunity to move into further education and employment.

Projects such as Skill Northern Ireland highlight the good work that the Department and the Minister have undertaken in developing the necessary provision for special-needs school-leavers. Skill Northern Ireland promotes opportunities to allow young people and adults to achieve their potential in further education,

training and employment in Northern Ireland. The good results that have been seen in the pilot schemes in Beechlawn School and Sandelford Special School will no doubt be applied to more schools in Northern Ireland.

I know that the Minister is aware of the challenges that must be faced, and I am grateful for his ongoing commitment. In particular, I look forward to hearing the outcome of his Department's review.

The young people at Kilronan Special School, like young people at special schools in all our communities, deserve opportunities that are appropriate to their abilities. I am also aware of the good work that Parkanaur College has done. Many of its residents are my constituents, and I encourage the Minister to continue to provide funds for the people who attend the college. I thank the Minister for his ongoing commitment to making that continued funding a reality, and I look forward to hearing his response to the debate.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I declare an interest as chairperson of the board of governors of the new special school in Ballymena.

For the first time in Northern Ireland, we have brought three special schools together, and we are working closely with the Northern Regional College. Having worked with that section of our community for several years now, I am fully conversant with the problems that arise.

We seem to be concentrating in this debate on one section of those people with learning disabilities. However, there are two sections. One section can undertake a certain kind of employment, but there is another group of people who cannot do so. In that second section, there are people who remain in a special school until they are 19 years of age; for example, those who are afflicted with autism. When they reach 19 years of age, they are not able to move on to further education or employment and are left in their parents' care. Their only outlet is to go to a day centre, where they are grouped with older people who, very often, are suffering from some kind of mental disability. In that context, we must examine both sides of the equation.

I support everything that has been said about employment for people who are 19 years old, or even younger. That is something that we have concentrated on in our new school, Castle Tower Special School, in Ballymena. We monitor those young people as they grow up through their teenage years. Working in close co-operation with what is now the Northern Regional College, we have had the pleasure of seeing so many of those young people enter some form of employment, which has enhanced their quality of life.

On that note, we should pay tribute not only to the teachers in special schools — of whom I cannot speak

highly enough — but to those in the further education system who take on board the problems of those young people, and to the lecturers who have given themselves the special task of endeavouring to help those young people towards some form of normality in life. We should pay tribute to those people who have done so much to help young people with special needs.

We should also pay tribute to the Department for Employment and Learning, and to the Minister, who has done so much. He is engaged in a process of improving the opportunities and support that are necessary for young people leaving special education to gain access to further education, and, where appropriate, to meaningful employment. That is what we are talking about. That is why, in every speech on this issue today, full support for the motion has been expressed.

Although improvements have been made, it is recognised that more can, and should, be done. In that context, we need to give support to the Minister, and to help him in every way. However, as has been said on a number of occasions today, it is not a matter for one Department. The problem is surely a cross-departmental one, which must be tackled together by a team effort. Together, we can enhance the lives of those young people who are in need of our help. I fully support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I would first like to point out that the term "special needs" covers a wide spectrum, and there are many unseen conditions that must be remembered in the context of the debate. There are many positive aspects of the present further and higher education structures. Provision is made for young people, especially those with disabilities requiring them to use a wheelchair, such as: assistance with travel costs; specially adapted university accommodation; the provision of carers and note-takers for lectures; and the putting in place of special arrangements for them during exam periods. Those provisions are very welcome, but let none of us be fooled into believing that enough is being done to ensure that young people with learning and physical disabilities achieve optimum performance.

Much is made of the potential of our young people, and the role that they can play in the new prosperity that I believe Northern Ireland plc will enjoy. However, we must also ensure that those children and young people with a disability are permitted their chance to enjoy the proceeds of Northern Ireland plc. There is much discussion of reskilling the workforce; let us not forget that that includes people with a disability.

I feel that, perhaps, the opportunities for third-level education are more restricted for disabled young people. Much has been done to ensure that schools and campuses are wheelchair friendly and that rooms are

accessible, but there is a problem in the number of disabled people attaining the necessary grades to access the secondary-level education necessary to obtain university entrance. Stigma, whether real or perceived, can be a major factor in a child's educational attainment at secondary level. That obviously impacts on a child with a disability who wishes to enter further and higher education. Perhaps the Minister of Education will think about how she will address that problem.

I support addressing the problem as a matter of great importance, because although much is being done, much more needs to be done, so that Northern Ireland can utilise a home-grown workforce in rebuilding the economy, whether individuals have a disability or not.

I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning to examine closely what can be done to help disabled young people to achieve all that they can. We must facilitate their desire to fulfil their potential. I am sure that the Minister will seek to provide the facilities and courses that special-needs, and disabled, students require to maximise their potential. I support my colleagues and commend them for tabling such a worthwhile motion.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the motion tabled by my colleagues, which addresses an important issue in Northern Ireland.

In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, I am well aware of the difficulties faced by young people with special needs who have left school and are seeking gainful and meaningful employment. In the early part of the year, I was made aware of the funding plight faced by the Appleby Trust in Armagh city; a crisis that almost closed the facility but for the generosity of an anonymous sponsor and the match funding from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, for which we are extremely grateful.

The Appleby Trust is a supported employment agency based in Armagh city, and its team helps those with learning disabilities to find employment and supports them during employment. Another vital part of its work is Appleby's social firm, which specialises in preparing people with learning disabilities to enter the workplace. The trust does a marvellous job in the city and district and is to be commended. However, its funds are only secure for the remainder of the financial year, and it is unacceptable that it should face another episode of crisis and uncertainty when that current funding runs out. Several meetings have been held in my constituency between the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, the Appleby Trust and local Assembly Members. I am conscious that time is running out and that we could face another funding dilemma.

In several representations that I have made to the Health Minister and the Minister for Employment and

Learning, I have proposed cross-departmental co-operation in funding provision as a potential solution. Undoubtedly, the situation in my constituency is repeated across the Province. We are failing those with learning disabilities, and although available funding from the various health and social care trusts is stretched, programmes under the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning are not suitably structured to allow services, such as that operated by the Appleby Trust, to attract funding. That must change.

In response to a question for written answer that I asked earlier in the year, Minister Empey stated:

"Programmes funded by the Department, with the exception of some of those that are match funded, are generic in nature and not targeted at any particular disability category such as people with a learning disability."

I ask the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Health Minister to consider a closer working relationship on the issue to ensure that there is a coherent and meaningful support system aimed specifically at those with learning disabilities. We must not short-change young adults with learning disabilities.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. As always, the debate has been very interesting. It has also united Members from all sides of the House, which we must take comfort from.

As has been mentioned, provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has already been at the centre of two debates in the Chamber. I reaffirm my commitment to do everything possible to meet the requirements of young people with special needs and everyone with a disability.

Those young people cannot be categorised neatly, because each individual has different and diverse requirements, which, in many cases, have to be assessed by a range of Departments and agencies. It is encouraging that a key priority of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people is provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools, including the transition to adulthood and the provision of appropriate health and social care interventions.

The importance of collaborative working to deal with those young people's needs cannot be overstated.

2.30 pm

As with all school-leavers, young people who leave special-education schools have different aptitudes, abilities and expectations. My Department does everything possible to ensure that its support measures and programmes are accessible to them, in order that they are fully able to fulfil their potential and can, in the motion's words:

"aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment."

My Department assists young people who leave special schools by offering several programmes, which include careers advice and guidance; mainstream and specialised further-education provision; and various training, employment and support programmes.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Careers Service Northern Ireland has been restructured, and several careers advisers have been trained specifically to work with clients who have statements of special educational need. Additionally, all careers advisers are provided with basic training in that area. That is a new development. Careers advisers attend transition-plan meetings for year 10 pupils — 14 year olds — who have special educational needs. They also attend subsequent annual reviews. The advisers work with a range of professionals and contribute to transition plans by providing impartial information, advice and guidance on the variety of educational and training employment opportunities that are available. That allows individual young people and their parents or guardians to make informed decisions.

The Department funds a range of training and employment provisions through the Disablement Advisory Service, which works closely with Careers Service to ensure that young people's transition from education to the wider world is as smooth and effective as possible.

Participants on the Department's Training for Success and Apprenticeships NI programmes are given every opportunity to overcome difficulties and to develop using the most appropriate support mechanisms. In order to enhance those programmes' effectiveness, a group with expertise in dealing with young people who have disabilities was established. The group's recent report makes 30 recommendations that focus on disabled people's needs. The Department will fully consider the recommendations, with a view to further enhancing provision in those programmes.

Much has been mentioned about the interface with further education. Colleges are required under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to:

“have regard to the requirements of persons over compulsory school age who have learning difficulties.”

Furthermore, under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO) colleges are required to make adjustments in order to allow people who have learning difficulties and disabilities to access their provision. Mainstream courses are not always suitable for everyone. Colleges, therefore, collaborate with adult day centres to provide customised training and development opportunities for young people who have severe learning difficulties. Those may be offered in a college, day centre or other suitable premises. It is not unknown for that to include clients' houses.

I am encouraged that a recent Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report confirmed that colleges are making good progress in collaborating with health trusts and other key players to improve further their provision to those who have learning difficulties and disabilities.

At this point, I want to respond to the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning's remark on the review's lateness. The Department received the ETI's part of the review on 24 September 2008. In fact, that part is available on the ETI's website. In addition to the ETI's contribution, my Department has carried out an internal review in consultation with stakeholders, which we are currently considering. I hope that it will be presented to the Committee for its deliberation in early November.

In the past, concerns were raised about the emphasis that colleges place on provision to support the economy. Although they are being asked to increase the proportion of their provision that is on the national qualifications framework, it must be remembered that many courses already on the framework are suitable for young people who are leaving special-needs schools and will assist them to attain qualifications that they require to move into employment. However, I fully accept that that is not the only way in which to tackle those issues.

I want to raise a couple of other points that flow from the report that the Department commissioned. The report concluded that college provision had improved since a survey carried out in 2003-04 and noted:

“Considerable progress has been made by the colleges in introducing suitable accredited programmes, revising provision to focus more strongly on the development of skills for independent living or employability where appropriate.”

The report highlights many examples of good practice across the further education sector, including examples of sound working relationships between colleges and other statutory and voluntary agencies to support students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

One of the key points of the debate is that this is not simply a matter for one Department — it is for several, and for a range of agencies as well. I am pleased to say that I am a member of the Executive subcommittee that deals with children and young people, and, through that work, I have the opportunity to work closely with several Departments. I brought one particular case to that subcommittee, which is chaired by the junior Ministers and examines gaps in provision for young people throughout the governmental system. We will have the opportunity to draw matters to the attention of that subcommittee when we believe that collaborative activity is useful.

In his opening remarks, Rev McCrea — who has apologised for his inability to be present this afternoon

— raised a number of issues that I wish to address. He asked me specifically about contacts with ministerial colleagues, and I have indicated that the subcommittee is a forum that allows us to raise all these matters. In addition, we work closely with the Department of Education and with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop joined-up services for disabled young people who are passing into adulthood through the Disablement Advisory Service and the careers service of my Department, which work with their counterparts in the Department of Education and in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Cross-party and departmental co-operation can always improve, but I do not want leave the debate without indicating that there is already a significant level of co-operation.

Rev McCrea also raised the issue of the links between special schools and further education colleges. Some Members are familiar with the vocational enhancement programme (VEP), which was piloted in a number of schools, including those for young people with special needs. The VEP offers advice on the curriculum, the needs of clients and other issues. That will be extended through the entitlement programme and implemented across all schools within the next few years.

Several Members referred to the unsuitability of links between further education and pupils with particular difficulties. That is a difficult interface — we must come clean about that. Rev Coulter made the point that, when a college proves to be an unsuitable environment for a particular individual, perhaps due to a pupil's medical needs, there has been a tendency for that pupil to end up in a day-centre environment, which is not always suitable. A younger person may be placed with a number of older residents who have mental health and other difficulties. That is not ideal.

As I have said, colleges are prepared to discuss the needs of individual clients. In future, as part of its contract with the Department, each college may have a requirement to produce programmes to satisfy us that those issues are dealt with appropriately.

At present, much of the weight on the issue is being carried by South West College, which provides services throughout the system. However, the Department will ask all the colleges to draw up proposals for any new arrangements that it may enter into with them. Colleges are prepared to be flexible, to look at each client individually, and to teach off campus if required — and the degree of flexibility is growing.

Several Members mentioned the issue of resources. The Department has increased the amount of resource available to create opportunities for school-leavers with special needs. However, the issue is not always about money. The Department has provided the system

with more cash. As I said, if I felt that the problem was simply a lack of resources, I would examine that. However, that is not the entire answer; it is more than that. The solution involves examining the co-ordination of the systems, the Departments and the agencies that already exist and, of course, the resources that flow from that. We are improving the amount of resource available, but it is not the entire solution.

I am confident that collaborative work has improved. The Department expects that the reports that are due to be published in a few weeks' time, along with the one that I already mentioned, will provide, by the end of the year, a comprehensive picture of how the entire system is working. Undoubtedly, improvements can be made.

Members will be aware of the system's weaknesses from the experiences of some of their constituents. Although the focus is on the pupil, we must remember that this issue also affects his or her family. As parents grow older they perhaps become less able to cope and that may cause them to have concerns about the future of their children. Parents want to give their children the best possible start. From the experiences of friends, I know that some people are seriously worried that they will not be able to maintain the level of care that their relative will require.

I conclude by emphasising that the Department is doing much to ensure that all programmes are accessible to school-leavers with special needs. However, I agree that we must continue to strive to make programmes and services even more accessible and, wherever possible, to support those young people into employment. That is a worthy objective, and some Members have highlighted the success stories.

I confirm that the Department will work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Education to develop and to enhance services for children and young people making the transition to adulthood. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress in those areas. I am sure that my colleagues will do the same in the areas for which they have the lead responsibility.

Mr Simpson: I thank all the Members who took part in the debate. I was encouraged by the fact that no amendments were tabled. That shows a great degree of unity on the issue. Prior to today, Members also debated the issue in October 2007, and in April 2008. I was reassured by some of the Minister's points, and I know that he is not unsympathetic to the subject. Sometimes there are financial restraints, but, as the Minister said, the issue is not always about money.

It is about systems, structure, management, and how things are fed into the whole procedure.

2.45 pm

I am sure that the vast majority of Members have families and that they have watched their children grow from infants and go through primary school, secondary school and on to college or university. All parents take a degree of pride in seeing their children develop; how much more proud must the family of a child — in many cases more than one child — with learning difficulties be as they see that child develop through those early years.

Sue Ramsey raised the issue of equality for young people and the lack of progress of the review; the Minister has answered that. Some of that review has been finished, and we can examine it. Dr McCrea referred to the Beattie Report and the Warnock Report, which indicated that young people with learning difficulties should be seen, first and foremost, as learners. He also mentioned the concerns raised by Clifton Special School and others.

Rev Coulter raised a very poignant point about children or young adults being denied support beyond the age of 19, which is a bone of contention for parents. In many cases a child's reaching adulthood takes parents unawares. All of a sudden it dawns on them that their child has reached the age of 16, and, when that happens, those parents ask themselves: what do we do now?

I am glad that the Minister outlined that there will be more career officers who can go into schools and identify the tasks that young people with learning difficulties can do or the future that they might have. The Minister also mentioned funding. In my constituency of Upper Bann, I deal primarily with two schools, the Ceara Special School and the Donard Special School. Other schools have special needs classes, and we visit them, but those are the two main schools for children who have learning difficulties, and I will outline some of the points that they have raised. I would like the Minister to pay special attention to the funding aspect.

Changes to the funding of further education colleges have resulted in considerable difficulties for young adults across the Province. The courses that the majority of young people with special needs undertook have been discontinued as they are not financially viable and do not attract funding from DEL, because they are below a specific academic level. We must address that issue. Only a few days ago, I met with parents who were trying to get their young lad — a sufferer of autism and a very bright individual — into the further education college in Craigavon. He could not get into that college simply because the course that he was used to doing at school was not on offer.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Colleges have resources for courses that do not lead to specific qualifications.

If the Member wants to raise a particular case, he may write to me, and I shall pursue that for him.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for that, and I certainly will be in touch with him.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. Many Members have attended events that have been held on behalf of those with autism. Teaching children with autism is a major part of the work of, for example, Ceara School in Lurgan. Members who visit special schools will see the great work that is carried out by teachers, speech therapists and occupational therapists. That work is a credit to those people; they do a fantastic job. As Rev Coulter did, I pay tribute to those people.

In the Long Gallery in this Building, Members have heard speeches from young people who, as children, were diagnosed as having severe autism. Some time ago, a young man of 19 or 20 years of age spoke in the Long Gallery and explained his background, and how he was diagnosed as having autism, to the audience. He was able to stand up in front of an audience and speak because of the courses that he attended and the help that he received from his teachers.

The Minister referred to parents of those with autism. Although parents will be proud of their children, they also have a heavy burden on their shoulders. I ask the Minister to do anything that can be done to improve the situation for parents. I know that the Minister is sympathetic, and I understand that he is doing his best to work within his remit. I urge him to make every effort through his Department to make it easier for those young adults to have a future, and to make it easier for their parents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the opportunities and support necessary to ensure that young people leaving special-needs schools at 16 and over 19 years of age can further their education and aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Regional Investment Inequalities

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 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 in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive Committee to develop urgently, and implement, new and innovative measures for tackling the existing patterns of regional investment inequalities; and to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

Sinn Féin's decision to table the motion is part of a necessary political campaign to fundamentally challenge Invest NI's corporate mindset and to positively transform the existing patterns of inequality and disadvantage in regional investment. The Programme for Government pledged all Departments and Government agencies to:

"develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need."

The irony of the Alliance Party's amendment is that that party supposedly campaigns for the Executive to meet to address social needs, yet the same party has called for the deletion of that Programme for Government objective from the motion.

Sinn Féin will not allow that overarching commitment to be sidelined or soft-soaped by the Alliance Party or by the vacuous statistical contortions that have increasingly become the hallmark of Invest NI's propaganda workshops. Sinn Féin supports indigenous small and medium-sized enterprises, but that sector must be bolstered. Although Sinn Féin is conscious of the effects of the global credit crunch, when it comes to the location of foreign direct investment initiatives sponsored by Invest NI, there is, undoubtedly, a major institutionalised problem in the Six Counties. Therefore, Sinn Féin is not merely questioning or criticising, but actively lobbying for major investment from overseas urgently to locate in the most deprived areas of the Six Counties and the border corridor. That will ensure that those who suffer most from the conflict do not get left behind in the peace.

A fine example of Sinn Féin's efforts came during the US investment conference in May 2008. Sinn Féin

worked successfully, despite Invest NI, with local communities and human rights activists to persuade the New York State Comptroller, Tom DiNapoli, and representatives from the New York City Office of the Comptroller to visit some of the most deprived areas in Belfast and Derry to see for themselves the huge potential for regeneration. For the record, Invest NI did not even put west Belfast or anywhere west of the Bann on the golfing itinerary, never mind on the investment agenda.

That is only one of many reasons that led Sinn Féin to step up its campaign for a full inquiry and report from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee. Their focus should be on patterns of investment distribution and, notably, Invest NI-sponsored foreign direct investment across the Six Counties over the past decades.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is belatedly and as a consequence of the Varney Review II organising a general review of Invest NI. As far as Sinn Féin is concerned, the more scrutiny of Invest NI's failings, the better. Therefore, I publicly invite every political party in the Assembly formally to support Sinn Féin in its campaign for those two substantive reports on Invest NI.

It is worth remembering that the last substantive report on investment distribution patterns in the North was published by the Westminster Public Accounts Committee some 10 years ago, and the areas of social economic deprivation have hardly changed in the interim. That is what makes the patterns of inequality that Sinn Féin uncovered over the past decade so shocking. For example, one in three of all first-time inward investment projects promoted by Invest NI was located in South Belfast — although not, I hasten to add, in the Markets area or Donegall Pass. Furthermore, one in two of all new jobs promoted by Invest NI was created in the three north-eastern constituencies of South Belfast, East Belfast and East Antrim.

Over the past decade, the constituencies of east Derry and North Antrim, both served by MPs from the DUP, received no new first-time inward investment projects promoted by Invest NI. Using a range of indicators, the amount of Invest NI jobs created and projects promoted in South Belfast routinely exceeded the combined total for the entire border corridor of Foyle, West Tyrone, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Newry and Armagh. Worst of all, Invest NI and DETI have refused to provide Sinn Féin with detailed statistics of the number of jobs created or lost either by parliamentary constituency or with specific reference to client companies in Foyle. Its excuse was the absence of a so-called comprehensive data set.

3.00 pm

Moreover, Invest NI and DETI have refused to provide Sinn Féin with detailed statistics on the amount of financial assistance and overall investment that has been secured in parliamentary constituencies and, specifically, in client companies in Foyle. They claim that the cost of publishing that information would be too expensive; however, I presume that that refers to the cost of their own credibility.

It is important to note that Invest NI's failure to collect and collate that basic statistical information for public scrutiny contradicts directly the clear recommendation that was contained in the respective reports of the Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee 10 years ago. Some Members will, undoubtedly, seek to defend Invest NI by using empty buzz words such as "labour mobility" or by referring to the type of creative accounting that characterises Invest NI's bulging expenses sheets, which I recommend are examined and held up for public scrutiny. However, I will leave it to some of my party colleagues to tackle the spurious arguments that Invest NI has creatively concocted to defend its maintenance of regional structural inequalities. When scrutinising Invest NI's expenses sheets, the media could perhaps investigate the close relations between the Assembly's business-class membership and Invest NI's extended family.

Although parties might argue about the causes of the existing regional investment inequalities, it is Sinn Féin's firm view that the reasons are structural and systemic. No party can credibly dismiss the realities. The Alliance Party's attention-seeking amendment is merely a spoiling exercise that, as usual, ignores the needs of society's most vulnerable individuals. In contrast, Sinn Féin supports a modern economic agenda that recognises the interdependency of sustainable economic growth and sustainable social improvement. Therefore, unsurprisingly, we reject the amendment.

For those reasons, Invest NI, DETI and OFMDFM must introduce new and innovative measures urgently to tackle existing inequalities and target objective need. Sinn Féin will work with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that such measures promote new standards of equality in regional investment patterns on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "inequalities;" and insert

"recognises that businesses will seek to make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons; and calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility."

The Alliance Party welcomes the motion, given that it highlights a relevant issue. The increasing numbers

of visitors to Northern Ireland have not failed to notice that Belfast city centre is booming. However, they have also noticed that such prosperity is not shared across Northern Ireland or, indeed, in Belfast. In fact, the Belfast City Council area has the third highest gross domestic product or gross value added per capita of any UK city except Edinburgh and London.

Members are entitled to question why that strong performance has not spread elsewhere; however, the issue cannot be resolved by resorting to outdated ideology.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Neeson: Sinn Féin has a particularly high representation in areas of greatest need. However, the areas of Northern Ireland that are in greatest need now are the same places as 10, 20 and 30 years ago. That indicates that the Assembly must try a new course, rather than seek Government intervention or allocate Government resources, which will, certainly, be more limited in the future.

One of the proposers of the motion represents West Belfast, which is the most deprived constituency in Northern Ireland. However, almost one third of all Northern Ireland's employment lies within two miles of the centre of that constituency.

Opportunities exist, but segregation, division and poor services — particularly in housing, transport and education — disable people's access to those opportunities.

This issue needs practical solutions that are focused not on increasing red tape and Government intervention, but on enabling people to share growing prosperity by ensuring that they have access to jobs — wherever those new jobs are located. For that to be achieved, it must be remembered that businesses create wealth and high-quality employment. The role of Government is that of an enabler. The costs of dividing our society are paid by the very investors who should allocate all their resources to tackling exclusion — not propping up artificial segregation. People must have access to jobs, both physically, through sustainable transport and housing; and educationally, through training and skills.

Ultimately, this issue — like so many others — is about ambition. In our society, in our economy and even in this Assembly, we are obsessed with looking after our own communities. Rarely are we interested in looking after the community as a whole. As a result, we get the idea that what is good for one community must be bad for another community, whether the segregation is along the lines of religion, class, or whatever. It is time that we got rather better at looking at the bigger picture — getting to a stage at which training or job opportunities that are created anywhere

are good for people everywhere, not just in one small district.

The segregation of our society continues to come at a great cost. It means that ongoing fear and distrust are present in society, in the economy and even in the Executive. For our economy, it means that there are severe limitations on labour-market mobility. In other words, it is time that many people got on their bikes.

We live in uncertain economic times, but one economic absolute is that prosperity comes to places with the highest levels of labour-market mobility. If people cannot move house or workplace for fear of being labelled by the other side, we will all be condemned to poor economic performance and, therefore, to relative deprivation compared to our neighbours.

Segregation is a clear competitive disadvantage. It is to the shame of this Executive that they have failed to tackle it, despite claiming to make the economy their priority. The cost of division and the need to rebalance the economy have an impact on the public services that potential investors could use. During this Assembly term alone, the provision of education, leisure and health facilities on a segregated basis has already cost billions — money that could have been invested in our workforce.

The unbalanced economy means that the skills that are available to businesses are limited because they are seized by the huge public sector, or by the brain drain due to private-sector opportunities elsewhere. It is no good saying that investment opportunities are limited in certain locations when our investment potential is not being maximised in the first place.

Other aspects of Executive policy have failed to tackle levels of economic inactivity and exclusion. Nearly half of those who are economically inactive in Northern Ireland have mental-health problems. Despite the budget for tackling such problems already being comparatively lower than those of our neighbours, we find the Executive content to cut the health budget in real, comparative terms.

Social exclusion can be tackled by reforming our education system, delivering better social housing and investing in a much more ambitious public-transport system, so that people have access to a range of job opportunities. In that regard, the Executive are either gridlocked or blocked.

Although the Alliance Party welcomes its broad content, the motion hints at the passive acceptance of a failed policy, rather than a determination on behalf of one of the main Executive parties to put things right.

The issue is not that investment is not going to certain locations, but that people in certain locations are being denied access to the jobs and prosperity that would result from such investment, which is limited anyway

due to the Government's failure to tackle the root causes of segregation, division and exclusion in our society. It is time for change, and it is time for Members of the Assembly to realise that it is time for change.

Although there is some value to this debate, the debates that are being undertaken in the Chamber remind me of those in the Forum for Political Dialogue in the Interpoint building. In other words, unless the Executive meet again soon, the Assembly will be discredited not only in the eyes of the public but in the eyes of the world.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): On my own behalf, I welcome the motion, and I commend the Member who proposed it.

For some time, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been awaiting the answers to several questions about matters relating to the motion. Last year, the Committee welcomed the fact that growing the economy was stated as a top priority for the lifetime of the Programme for Government, which built on the consensus that had been achieved prior to devolution in the Preparation for Government Committee.

In addition, the Committee welcomed the fact that DETI and Invest NI had been given a high-profile budget to deliver on that commitment. Accompanying that responsibility is a compelling need to address regional investment inequalities, and the enhanced budget capacity provides an opportunity for a properly planned subregional commitment, incorporating real financial capacity, which the Committee has discussed on several occasions.

In the past, the Committee has expressed concern that the Department's spending priorities did not include sufficient resources for the social economy and offered only limited resources for local economic development. Committee members were concerned that DETI appeared to be reducing its budget in that area of growing importance, and having expressed concern, we received assurances from Ministers and Invest NI about the suggestion of psychological withdrawal from local social-economy initiatives.

The Committee is also concerned about achieving the best balance between the effort to attract foreign direct investment and support for local businesses — both existing businesses and newer, more innovative enterprises.

Committee members have continued to stress that, in order to tackle social and economic inequalities and to add to the sum of opportunity in the region, the Executive must provide joined-up support for local businesses in areas of economic disadvantage.

At Budget time, the Committee expressed concern about the removal of the integrated development fund,

which was a good means by which local people could work to secure support from different parts of Government and to attract identifiable funding for cross-cutting initiatives. Unfortunately, the Budget did away with such means, which could, for example, have provided the exact wherewithal for Limavady to respond to the challenges that it faced after Seagate closed.

In addition, questions arose in the Committee about Invest NI's, and, indeed, DETI's, corporate plan. In the past, Invest NI encouraged investment in targeted areas of social need, but in its 2008-11 operating plan that goal was removed and replaced with a commitment to secure 75% of land acquisition in areas of economic disadvantage. We have questioned that a number of times. In particular, I have stressed concerns about the need to understand the implications, and the real meaning, of that shift and what it represents, and we have still to receive clear answers. The Member who proposed this motion probably shares that concern.

Given that Invest NI always claims that that target was a success, what is the rationale for doing away with it and replacing it with a target that is about land acquisition rather than job creation and location?

3.15 pm

On several occasions, the Committee raised the case for Invest NI having a stronger subregional emphasis in its work. Last week, the Minister met the Committee and told members about the review that she is commissioning into Invest NI and wider matters of economic development. We welcome that initiative from the Minister and her Executive colleagues' agreement of to it. She has offered the Committee the opportunity to contribute to the terms of reference for the review — we will want to clarify some and amplify others; not least, the final term of reference, which mentions:

“the sub-regional distribution of inward investment and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment.”

The Committee also wants to see a subregional element in relation to indigenous business. The subregional issue should not only relate to inward investment, it should relate to support for indigenous business also. Such support is echoed throughout the Chamber.

The Committee is also concerned about how the Start a Business programme is being developed. We hope that the Minister, when conducting her review, will reconsider some of the changes that are being made to the programme, so that the new contracting system will not suffer from the same problems that have affected some of the other DEL programmes.

Mr Newton: I support the amendment. It is the responsibility of all elected representatives in this Chamber to do everything possible to ensure that there is prosperity and that career opportunities are available

in equal measure to all our constituents. The question is how we can bring that about.

Had Members felt inclined to support the motion, the Member proposing it may have put them off doing so. What came through during her speech was a communist, or Stalinist, approach to the economy — the kind of thinking that brought about collective farming in other areas of the world, and we all know what that led to.

Obviously, a greater level of mobile, inward investment must be attracted to Northern Ireland. That will not be easy in the days ahead, given the current economic climate. Although many people are talking about it, we are not in a recession currently, difficult as times may be. Given the current world economic downturn, there is limited potential in the banking and finance sectors. However, in spite of the current difficulties, we must be certain that Northern Ireland is ready for an upturn when it comes.

We must make Northern Ireland economically attractive to investors — not only those from overseas but indigenous businesses with the opportunity and potential to expand. In the area of excellence in education, we must produce high-quality, motivated and qualified students, especially students with qualifications in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. We must develop motivated and entrepreneurial businesspeople, as well as a creative business culture that embraces risk-taking and within which business failure does not carry a stigma.

Additionally, we must ensure that the skills base of our labour force can be benchmarked favourably against the best in the world. That can only be ensured if we start to embed business sense into the education system during children's very early years, by incorporating it into the primary curriculum. Primary-level education must encourage business thinking and entrepreneurship, as is commonly found in other countries. We compete with such countries currently and will do so in the future.

Secondary-level education must provide the opportunity to gain meaningful vocational qualifications and the increased opportunity to gain access to higher educational courses and attainment of vocational foundation degrees or, where relevant, other types of degrees.

We must have apprenticeship training schemes that can be measured against the best in the world, and not be found to be inferior, to give our young people the best possible training options.

Road, rail and air links will be important features in the future, and we must ensure that those links are available if businesses are to locate in Northern Ireland. Of course, technology links are no impediment to our business success. We are fortunate in Northern

Ireland in having such technology links in place at present and a measure of that success is readily apparent in the successful roll-out of broadband in Northern Ireland

Furthermore, as the proposer of the amendment suggested, we must also encourage mobility in our working-age population: jobs cannot always be guaranteed to be on the doorstep.

If we can put in place our business culture, job skills and support infrastructures, mobile investment will be attracted to — at the very least — consider Northern Ireland as a potential place in which to invest.

I reject the narrow thinking that is implicit in the motion. We all want to see prosperity and jobs located in our own constituencies. However, it is the businessmen and women with funds to invest who will make the decision whether — and where — to locate in Northern Ireland. If we can create the right conditions, the whole of Northern Ireland will benefit through business success.

Mr Cree: The motion under debate calls for the Executive Committee urgently to develop new measures to address so-called regional investment inequalities. I will come to the economic policy issues in a moment, but first I must examine the irony, although perhaps much stronger terminology could be used. The irony is that Sinn Féin Members have tabled a motion calling on the Executive Committee to act urgently when that party has blocked all meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive since the 19 June — 110 days ago.

In the midst of a global economic crisis that is seriously affecting the economies of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin has brought the work of the Executive to a halt. Across the world, Governments are striving to keep pace with the economic threats and challenges that appear daily. What does Sinn Féin do? It vetoes any meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive during the most serious economic crisis that the international economy has witnessed since perhaps 1929 — I do not personally remember those events, by the way. Sinn Féin now has the affront to table a motion calling on the Executive urgently to address an economic policy issue. The motion simply cannot and should not be taken seriously. After three months of vetoing Executive meetings, amidst a global economic crisis, Sinn Féin has neither the necessary political or moral authority to call on the Executive urgently to address economic matters.

If this motion were to gain the support of the House, how exactly does its Sinn Féin proposer expect it to be implemented? How can the Executive Committee urgently develop policies on regional investment when the Executive Committee has not met for three months as a result of a Sinn Féin veto?

I, and my party, agree that there needs to be a debate on regional investment policies. For example, there must be a debate on the role of foreign direct investment in the present economic climate. Furthermore, there must be a serious debate on whether we should reconsider our reliance on foreign direct investment as the core of our economic policy or whether, perhaps, we should move to a renewed emphasis on indigenous business start-ups.

However, today is not the day for such a debate. Why? Because of Sinn Féin's intransigence in blocking any meetings of the Executive during an economic crisis. The Northern Ireland public will, quite rightly, not take the Assembly seriously if we are seen to support a Sinn Féin motion requesting the Executive urgently to address economic policy while that party continues its three-month veto on Executive meetings.

That being the case, I, unfortunately but respectfully, see no merit in engaging meaningfully in debating a motion that, in present circumstances, has no meaning. Therefore I oppose the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support the amendment because it is rooted in the real world. My colleague Robin Newton detected some Marxism — some old-style communism — in the comments of the mover of the motion, Martina Anderson. Although I accept that she and her party have a different ideology to mine on economic matters, her contribution was another example of a speech that was more Groucho Marx than Karl Marx.

Thankfully, I have no insight into republican thinking, but I could have made a fairly good stab at guessing what the Member would say and what her party colleagues will say later.

However, I acknowledge and welcome Sinn Féin's conversion: its members are now calling for investment in Northern Ireland. I wonder, as I am sure do other Members, where the fundamentals of our economy would be today had it not been for Sinn Féin's support for the IRA and the succour that that party gave to it down through the years when that organisation did all in its power to destroy businesses in Northern Ireland, to deter investment here and to single out and murder members of the business community. Would the areas that the Member and her party are trying to identify in the motion be as blighted had they not been in the grip of terrorism for so long? Members should ponder those questions.

I want to see the whole of the Northern Ireland economy grow and develop, and I want to see every area and everyone in every area do well out of a booming Northern Ireland economy. That situation may not be easy to visualise at this time, when we are facing the sort of financial crisis that Mr Cree talked about. Indeed, his comments were valid. I want the

worst areas and the people who are the worst off in those areas to do well out of any investment, but one must live in the real world. Businesses will base investment decisions on what is best for that business, and they will seek to locate their business in an area in which they will have an advantage.

The Assembly cannot do anything to make those decisions for the businesses; that is not what we do. As a Government or, indeed, as an Assembly, we are not in the business of making such decisions. The area that is best suited for the location of a business may well be in the Member's constituency or in the constituencies of the other Members who tabled the motion, or it could be in my constituency of Strangford.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: I hear one voice in support of that idea. If we wanted to go down the whingeing-and-whining route that we have come to expect from Sinn Féin Members during debates on this type of motion, I could match them by whingeing and whining about Strangford.

An Invest Northern Ireland publication, 'Invest NI at a Glance', provides some details on the amount of inward investment and financial assistance that has been made on each person in the population, and, it shows that constituencies such as mine are among the worst off. I could stand here and whinge and whine about how badly off my area is. The figures in that publication show that the constituencies from which the Members who tabled the motion come are doing well out of investment and financial assistance per capita and also out of company visits that are organised by Invest Northern Ireland. They are doing better than other constituencies, such as mine and those of my colleagues. However, we do not whinge and whine about it, because we see the whole Northern Ireland economic picture. We acknowledge that Northern Ireland will boom if Belfast is booming. Likewise, other places will boom if their surrounding areas are doing well.

I do not accept the argument that people in north or west Belfast will not benefit from investment unless it is made in their areas. I wish that the Titanic Quarter development was within one mile of the boundary of my constituency. That area provides one of the biggest employment opportunities in Northern Ireland's history, and it is within a mile of west Belfast and is probably less distance from the boundaries of north Belfast. Huge employment opportunities have been created, and that is where the issue of mobility, as mentioned in the amendment, is pertinent.

I welcome the review into Invest Northern Ireland, as did both Sean Neeson and the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I do not hold any torch for Invest Northern Ireland; it is

important that the work of that body is reviewed. Invest Northern Ireland should be focused on doing what it can to develop the whole Northern Ireland economy so that everyone benefits, rather than merely spreading the wealth and investment around the country.

3.30 pm

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is not only a major issue for members of Sinn Féin: it is a big issue for many of the small and indigenous businesses across the North. During the past year, I met several business owners in the north-east branch of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). Their attitude to Invest NI is one of severe criticism, and they recognise that regional inequalities must be addressed. That criticism deals not only with regional inequalities, but covers dealing with Invest NI in general.

In its response to the Varney Review last year, FSB stated:

"Invest NI has not been a fully engaged partner with the small business sector... Whilst its corporate plan pays lip service to the desire to help develop small business in reality a large proportion of members are unhappy with the outcomes from their dealings with the body."

There is not only a problem with regional inequalities; there is a whole array of problems with Invest NI. I welcome the fact that the Minister will carry out a review. It is hoped that that review will be far-reaching and bring to Invest NI a degree of transparency that has not been seen to date.

My constituency has some very stark figures with regard to the work that Invest NI has not done over the past 10 years. I listened to the Alliance Party talk about outdated ideologies, etc. It is wrong for the Alliance Party to turn a blind eye to the inequalities that exist in society and the causes of those inequalities. At this time, people will understand the need:

"to target resources and efforts to those in the greatest objective need."

as the motion outlines.

However, the figures in my constituency speak for themselves. My colleague Martina Anderson referred to the fact that there had been 133 first-time Invest NI inward-investment projects over the past 10 years, along with 17,180 jobs promoted by those projects — none of which has been in North Antrim. Over the same period, almost 15,000 new jobs had been promoted by reinvestment projects from externally-owned clients, and only 35 of those were in North Antrim. Over the past five years, there were close to 700 visits by potential inward investors, and only three came as far as North Antrim. The issue affects not only republican and nationalist areas; it affects unionist areas as well.

When Sinn Féin says that it wants to deal with the inequalities and target those based on objective need, it will do so regardless of religion or political opinion. Sinn Féin wants to target and help those in greatest need — and more people will come under that category over the next few months as the recession kicks in.

I welcome the Minister's decision to review the workings of Invest NI and the need for that to be transparent. We must ensure that regional inequalities are addressed, and Invest NI has yet to demonstrate that it is willing to address those inequalities. It must start to listen to some of the criticisms levelled against it — not only by ourselves, but by small and indigenous businesses. The response that they get is one of ignorance and disdain. That approach is all wrong and it must be reviewed.

The opportunity exists to change the remit, policies and direction of Invest NI so that investment is directed to areas of greatest need, and investors are actively encouraged to locate in those areas. There is a clear need for Invest NI to listen to what businesses say that it does, and to change the way it does business. Only then will Invest NI be able to address the extreme lack of confidence that many in the business and wider community have in it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. It is regrettable that the debate takes place against a backdrop of an Executive that are unable to function.

The public, particularly the business community, expects the social and economic interests of the people whom we represent to take precedence over any narrow political interests, especially those obstructing Assembly business.

I agree with Sean Neeson about the difficulties that we all face in attracting investment to Northern Ireland — that is a fact. However, my party colleagues and I oppose the Alliance Party's amendment because it distracts from the main issue of addressing regional inequalities. The amendment refers to labour mobility; however, to talk of labour mobility is, in many cases, to let the powers that be off the hook. Some of my constituents — who support the various parties in the Chamber — are losing their jobs in the public sector, for example, in the Water Service, and their options are not good: they are being asked to move to Belfast — that is the kind of labour mobility that is being presented to them. Therefore, the SDLP cannot support the amendment.

There are difficulties across the board, but they are particularly acute in Fermanagh and Tyrone because of the legacy of neglect of the west. There are some clear priorities for addressing that legacy, not least a step up in Invest Northern Ireland's general approach and in the Department for Regional Development's approach

to roads infrastructure. I commend the Minister for announcing a review of the activities of Invest Northern Ireland, because that agency has so far failed to address the problems here, particularly in the west.

Simon Hamilton mentioned visits that were organised by Invest NI. In 2006 and 2007, Invest Northern Ireland brought 230 possible investors to Northern Ireland, but none could be brought to Strabane, the biggest employment black spot in the west; and only one of them could be brought to Fermanagh, which is the second-biggest employment black spot.

Devolution was supposed to make a difference to the lives of people here. Since devolution, Invest Northern Ireland has published a new strategy, the aim of which is to concentrate on directing all investment towards Belfast and Derry. Labour mobility is hinted at, which does not bode well for Fermanagh. I hope that the review of Invest Northern Ireland will include an in-depth exploration of tourism. Much has been made of signature tourism projects, but where are they based? They are in Antrim or Down — none of them is based in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, areas that attract large numbers of visitors.

Last week, the Bain Report on public-sector jobs highlighted the poor roads infrastructure in the west. Enniskillen and Cookstown, which are in the west, and Downpatrick, which is in Mr Wells's constituency, were not chosen as locations for public-sector jobs because of their very poor infrastructure and transport facilities. It is time that we took the subject of the motion seriously. In parts of the North, and especially in the west, the Department's record on inward and infrastructure investment — and these are areas in which there is no alternative to roads — has, so far, been very poor.

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

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I also thank the proposer of the motion who, at the outset, was upfront about the motivation behind it. She said that Sinn Féin's decision to table the motion was part of a political campaign against the corporate mindset of Invest NI.

That is very upfront, and it lets us know where the motion is coming from. Mr McKay tried to resile slightly from those comments in his speech, but it is clear that one party wants to make a political campaign against Invest NI. However, it is very upfront about that, and I thank it for that.

I welcome the motion. First, it allows me to reaffirm the commitment of the entire Executive team to fulfil their responsibility to support the regions of Northern Ireland that have deep-rooted and complex social and

economic problems. I should say at the outset that, as a representative for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I have a clear understanding of the issues. Tommy Gallagher outlined our thoughts on the Bain Report and what it had to say about roads infrastructure, not taking into account that, in this modern era of technology, accessibility does not necessarily mean that people have to travel by road. Secondly, the motion enables me to clarify the capacity of my Department, via its policies, programmes and resources, to impact on regional investment patterns. Thirdly, it affords me the opportunity to clarify for the Assembly the regional investment patterns that have arisen as a result of Invest NI's activity.

As the motion acknowledges, the Programme for Government recognises that achieving sustainable economic growth and improving prosperity for all will require strong and determined action to address poverty and disadvantage. However, the complexities and underlying causes of the problem place an overarching responsibility on the Executive to address existing patterns of economic and social disadvantage proactively. Therefore, a co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is vital if we are to be successful in helping the most vulnerable in our society and create strong, vibrant and sustainable communities that we all desire.

There are targets in the Programme for Government that focus on delivering economic improvement, and they are supported by a number of public service agreement targets that have an economic development focus. However, Sean Neeson made the point — and it was reiterated by Robin Newton — that those targets are the responsibility of other Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Economic development policies and initiatives, and the investments that flow from them, are not the exclusive responsibility of one Department, nor can they be substantially impacted on by the actions of one Department acting in isolation. Through its focus on productivity growth and increasing employment, my Department can, and does, make a significant contribution to the overall objective.

The role of Invest Northern Ireland is to contribute to the growth of Northern Ireland's economy by helping new and existing businesses to compete internationally and by attracting new investment into Northern Ireland. I want to pick up on a point that was made by Mr McKay, who said that the FSB had expressed discontent with Invest Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland does not deal with very small companies, and I have been examining that issue to see whether there is a gap.

Invest Northern Ireland deals with companies that have potential for export or that already export. Mr McKay also commented that indigenous companies were not being supported, but, over the past five years, some 54% of all assistance by Invest Northern Ireland has gone to locally-owned NI companies.

Inclusivity is the cornerstone of the approach for Invest Northern Ireland. As its corporate plan makes abundantly clear, its overriding objective is to increase business productivity in order to create wealth for the benefit of the whole community.

DETI and Invest NI are primarily focused on business development and growth — that is what we have been tasked to do by the Executive. Indeed, we do not have powers to intervene on a social basis. At a time of credit crunch and global economic difficulties, focus on business development and growth is essential.

However, our work is underpinned by the principles of equality of opportunity, anti-poverty and social inclusion. DETI and Invest NI are fully committed to contributing to the Government's objective of developing a balanced regional company.

We have consistently demonstrated our commitment to ensuring that services can be accessed by businesses and individuals throughout Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland uses its influence, where possible, to alleviate the problems of economic disadvantage and to help narrow the gap in key indicators such as economic inactivity.

3.45 pm

Invest Northern Ireland seeks to ensure that its programmes and services can be accessed by businesses and individuals throughout Northern Ireland. It is scrupulous in ensuring that it meets its equality of opportunity obligations and in its reporting of its activities and their spatial impact in a transparent and detailed manner. Those activities are published in Invest Northern Ireland's 'Performance Information Report 2002/03-2006/07', which I commend to Members, and which is available on the organisation's website.

However, there is a limit to what Invest Northern Ireland can achieve and influence, given its limited access to policy levers and resources. In a resource allocation context, the annual Invest Northern Ireland programme activity budget amounts to approximately £150 million. To put it another way, that amount represents less than 2% of the Executive's annual Budget.

Invest Northern Ireland has given a firm commitment that, over a three-year planning cycle of its corporate plan, it will ensure that 75% of new land acquired for the use of its clients will be located in disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, it is important to note that we also ensure that 70% of new foreign direct investment is

located within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage.

Those are well-judged, practical and sensible targets, and they are a direct response to the travel-to-work patterns that characterise modern economies, including that of Northern Ireland. It must be recognised, however, that there are no longer any self-contained labour markets for foreign direct investment projects. People are now much more willing to travel to other areas in order to reach their place of work.

Invest Northern Ireland has the facility to offer enhanced rates of assistance to projects that are located in disadvantaged areas and has used that facility to good effect. Invest Northern Ireland has sought, with some success, to encourage potential inward investors to consider locating in disadvantaged areas. Between 2002 and 2008, for example, 71% of first-time inward-investment projects assisted by Invest Northern Ireland were located in such areas. In addition, 51% of all financial assistance offered by the agency during the same period was to clients located in such areas, the populations of which account for only 30% of the Northern Ireland total. By any measure, that is a significant skewing of Government assistance to those in areas of greater need, mainly in rural areas in the west of the Province.

It is important to examine investment patterns, which are the result of a wide variety and complex set of location decision-making factors, of which the availability of serviced industrial sites and access to financial support are secondary. Invest Northern Ireland's interventions are by their nature largely demand-led and driven by private-sector clients — both companies and individuals — bringing forward their proposals for growing their businesses. That is important, because people are making commercial decisions about what they are going to do.

As I said earlier, a project that is assisted in a particular location has significant potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Many investors draw their workforces from areas beyond council or constituency boundaries. Even the workforce of a hospital, large school or Government office will show that pattern. Much has been made of the fact that a large proportion of inward investment in Belfast is located in the south of the city. In reality, however, 96% of inward investment in Belfast was located within a three-mile radius of the city centre, thereby creating employment opportunities accessible to all in the greater Belfast area. Indeed, it should be noted that almost three quarters of those who work in South Belfast live outside that constituency area.

Making judgements that are based on superficial comparisons of performance across the different geographical areas of Northern Ireland is highly and,

undoubtedly, wilfully misleading. People should consider what they are saying when they make those points.

It is also important to consider the new companies that have come to Northern Ireland to do business in the manufacturing and tradable service industries. Invest Northern Ireland has assisted projects in a range of locations, such as Armagh, Bangor, Larne, Newry, Antrim, Enniskillen, Strabane, Kilkeel and Carrickfergus. Recently, in the north-west, significant project announcements have been made by key investors such as Du Pont, Perfecseal Ltd, Firstsource Solutions and Fujitsu. It is important to note that those companies have made investments in Northern Ireland, and instead of using the anti-capitalist rhetoric that we have heard here today, we should be welcoming those companies to Northern Ireland and encouraging them to invest more.

The amendment rightly recognises that businesses make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons. Unfortunately, the days of philanthropic investments have long since disappeared. Internationally-focused businesses, particularly those supported by Invest NI, will first choose to invest in Northern Ireland, and secondly to invest in specific subregional locations, only for sound economic and financial reasons. They will only invest if they perceive the commercial risk to be acceptable, and, after that, they will then consider whether they can generate a sufficient return on their investment. The level of commercial risk is determined after consideration of all location decision-making factors, such as political and economic stability; labour and skills availability; roads infrastructure; transportation linkages and affordability; accommodation; and grant assistance.

The amendment also calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility. The Department, through Invest NI, seeks to ensure that it has sufficient land zoned for industrial use for the use of its clients across Northern Ireland. At the moment, Invest NI is targeting specific areas in which it needs to increase its holding. Its land bank has been fast diminishing in recent years as a result of strong client demand, and it only has approximately 750 acres currently available for letting to clients. That is something that needs to be addressed.

Arguments have been put forward concerning a perceived neglect of the north-west, or an east-west bias regarding chosen investment locations. The reality, when one considers the facts, is very different. Investment secured per head of population shows that Invest NI-supported projects in the north-west have resulted in the highest level of planned investment per head of any part of Northern Ireland. That is not a vacuous statistical contortion; those are the facts. They may not sit very well with Ms Anderson's warped anti-capitalist view of Northern Ireland, but those are

the realities. If Ms Anderson wishes to make any specific allegations in relation to the expenses of members of Invest NI's board, I firmly suggest that she write to me, so that I may investigate everything that she produces.

To repeat: although the Department and Invest NI seek to fulfil their role in tackling regional disparity, they do not have all of the policy levers and resources to materially influence spatial patterns of investment.

Finally, Members will be aware that I announced to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment last week that there would be an independent review of economic development policies and programmes. That review will examine the structure and remit of Invest NI, as well as the subregional distribution of inward investment, and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment. I will, of course, keep the Members of the House informed of the progress of that review.

In conclusion, if the deep-rooted and complex social and economic causes of disadvantage are to be successfully addressed, the co-ordinated effort of all parts of the Executive, as well as the support of the private, voluntary and community sectors, will be required to ensure that investments are utilised to the maximum benefit of those in our society in the greatest need. I can assure the House that the Executive is fully committed to focusing on those important issues, and will continue to do so. The success of the Programme for Government will depend on all Ministers and their Departments working closely together to ensure optimum economic outcomes on an equitable basis for all of Northern Ireland. I can also assure the House that the Executive, my Department and its agencies, including Invest NI, have been playing, and will continue to fully play, their role in this important matter.

Dr Farry: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today, although I must express regret at some of the thinking that has been expressed by the proposers of the motion. Everyone in the House will agree that there is an issue to be discussed regarding the distribution of economic opportunities across Northern Ireland, but there is a profound disagreement as to the means of best addressing that. The proposers of the motion have demonstrated outmoded economic thinking that is a relic of centuries long ago. They are essentially speaking about a command economy rather than a market economy. One would have thought that the lessons that were painfully learned during the twentieth century would have demonstrated the fallacy of a command economy, whether under national socialism or communism.

Market economies are the only way to ensure that there is maximum economic prosperity for societies around the world. That is accepted internationally by

most people. Sinn Féin seems to be more concerned about how the cake in Northern Ireland is divided, rather than its size.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member will be interested to know that, in the past six years, there have been 165 inward-investment visits to the constituencies of the four Members who tabled the motion. Considering that North Antrim received three, South Down received five and Strangford received nine, those Members can hardly complain that DETI and Invest NI are not making an effort to bring inward investment to their constituencies.

Dr Farry: The Member makes a good point, which I will address shortly.

We must appreciate that there is a limit to how much we can direct the location of investment. As the Minister clarified, businesses will ultimately take decisions that are based on economic and financial reasons, which she broke down into the competitive issues that they will examine, such as transport and the local skills base. It is hard enough to attract investment to Northern Ireland, particularly of a high-quality and high value-added nature, without attaching further strings to the location of that investment.

We have to acknowledge that investment has been made in areas that are close to deprived communities across Northern Ireland. As Sean Neeson stated, there is a high GVA and high employment in Belfast. However, those figures are largely based on commuters coming into the city, which means that there are people who live in Belfast who miss out. For example, although the gasworks site is next to the Markets and Donegall Pass areas, very few people from those areas are employed there. Why is that?

The investment that has been made in Belfast is closer to people who live in West Belfast than it is to those who take most of the jobs and commute from the suburbs of the greater Belfast area and beyond. Why are people in West Belfast not taking those jobs? Therefore, insisting that jobs are created on the doorsteps of certain communities does not address the fundamental problem, which goes much deeper. Forcing the issue will buck the market for no reason, which is to the ultimate disadvantage of Northern Ireland.

We must address skills gaps and the levels of economic inactivity, including issues that are linked to disabilities and mental-health problems. We must invest in accessible and sustainable public transport and address segregation caused by peoples' fears of moving to an area because a different side of the community is perceived as dominant there.

An efficient and effective economy requires full and proper labour-market mobility, which we do not have in Northern Ireland. We have a two-speed society, in which an advanced section has labour-market mobility

and is able to access jobs, and the remainder do not. The Executive must invest their efforts in addressing the barriers that exist for some people to access jobs, instead of micromanaging the economy, which has no discernible benefit — and is potentially detrimental — to the economy in Northern Ireland. The economic situation is fragile enough as it is.

I stress the Alliance Party's support for a review of Invest Northern Ireland, which I think will have support from all sides of the House. There is a range of issues that must be addressed, but the motion is flawed. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I make no apologies for whingeing and whining, which Simon Hamilton accused me of, or for having outdated or outmoded ideologies. The motion is not about whether people can travel to and from employment; it is about helping people who live in disadvantaged areas where there is deprivation and need.

The motion calls for investment to come into those areas, provide employment for local people and help to grow the local economy. If that is whingeing and whining, that is fine. Long-term economic development that is stable, sustainable and socially beneficial to all is at the heart of the motion.

4.00 pm

Invest NI has a long history of not delivering publicly-sponsored investment to areas such as West Belfast and North Belfast, which have some of the most deprived electoral wards and super output areas in the North. For example, of 16 inward-investment projects for Belfast that Invest NI offered £20·7 million of assistance to in 2006-07, none were located in the west Belfast and greater Shankill area. Some of my colleagues have already provided statistics and mentioned the difficulty in getting those statistics from Invest NI. During the past 10 years, the number of jobs that were promoted by Invest NI-sponsored first-time inward-investment projects totalled 4,748 in South Belfast compared with 1,302 in West Belfast, despite the fact that five of the most distressed wards in the North are located in West Belfast. The people of West Belfast and of areas west of the Bann are entitled to have investment opportunities come into their areas.

During the debate, Leslie Cree, among other Members, attacked Sinn Féin I do not know how many times. The previous leader of his party brought down not only the Executive, but the entire Assembly. Therefore, it is a bit ridiculous of him to lecture Sinn Féin on whether the Executive meets.

The subject of the debate is the long-term corporate approach of Invest NI and its predecessor, the Industrial Development Board, which has damaged areas and groups that already suffer significant disadvantage. Even in economic terms, that approach

is outdated, incompetent, wasteful and short-sighted. I have noted the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's comments. She said that equality of opportunity and social inclusion underpin Invest NI's corporate plan. However, she did not explain why half of the assistance that it has offered has gone to clients that are already located in affluent areas. It does nothing for people in disadvantaged areas. That must be remembered.

New and innovative measures to integrate sustainable economic growth and social improvements on the basis of objective need are the cornerstone of modern economic development. Mark Durkan and Tommy Gallagher referred to that. The core of the issue is the compelling need to challenge regional inequalities. Job creation must be targeted towards TSN areas. That is the only way. People do ask to live in poverty or to be poor. Social inequalities put people in that situation.

Ms Gildernew: I listened carefully to the Minister's comments. My constituents will be disappointed that she defended Invest NI's abysmal record in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Speaking in my capacity as MP and MLA for that constituency, I ask whether the Member is aware that, according to figures that have been published by DETI, my parliamentary constituency experiences an economic inactivity rate of 36%, compared with 17% for East Belfast and 19% for East Antrim. Is the Member also aware that the number of new jobs that were promoted by first-time inward-investment projects that were sponsored by Invest NI during the past decade was just 641 in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, compared with almost 5,000 in South Belfast?

Does the Member agree that the Minister's strong support for Invest NI is yet another example of the worst excesses of big-house unionism, which rides roughshod over the objective needs of working-class and socially deprived unionists, nationalists and republicans throughout my constituency? The Assembly must stand up for people's rights. My party will not be afraid to campaign against patterns of inequality, especially generational inequality, which Invest NI has perpetuated.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for her comments. It is also clear, regardless of whether the Assembly agrees, that the areas that receive the lowest levels of financial support and investment are predominantly nationalist areas. No matter what statistics are quoted, that is the reality. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Ms J McCann: We must take every opportunity to ensure that those directly affected by social and economic disadvantage are also directly targeted by the public organisations responsible for creating and retaining employment. We may be facing an economic

downturn — or whatever Members like to call it — but there are still opportunities for us to build for the future. Our priorities must be to protect jobs and to bring forward planned funding for the delivery of major infrastructure projects in roads, housing, education and health as outlined in the investment strategy.

We must use procurement programmes by ensuring that all public procurement expenditure — including that for services, works and goods — integrates long-term economic and social sustainability through the development of creative contract compliance measures in relation to corporate delivery. That important measure could have a significant impact by targeting the long-term unemployed and the economically inactive in the areas that I have talked about. Through the creation of apprenticeships, we can collectively develop a wider sustainable skills base.

We must ensure that local small-to-medium enterprises and social-economy enterprises enter competitions for public contracts at a tendering stage with the same level of expertise as other larger companies, since that will positively impact on the local economy. That is what we are talking about: building local economies.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

We are not just talking about people travelling to and from the city centre into work, but rather building local economies to produce social outcomes and challenge poverty, disadvantage and need.

Invest NI has failed on several levels. In particular, it has not delivered for areas of severe disadvantage, such as North and West Belfast — sorry for whingeing, Simon. Invest NI must be held to account for that. The promotion of equality of opportunity in the discharge of public funds is essential if people are to have confidence in public bodies and organisations.

Members have talked about everything in this debate: skills, technology and mobility, and Sinn Féin has been attacked quite a number of times. The party opposite has talked about outmoded and outdated ideologies, Marxism and communism — but we have not about regional inequalities. That is what the debate is about.

Neither I, nor my party, apologise for tabling the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 22.

AYES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter,

Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Anderson and Mr McKay.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive Committee to develop urgently, and implement, new and innovative measures for tackling the existing patterns of regional investment inequalities; recognises that businesses will seek to make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons; and calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility.

Adjourned at 4.19 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

10 September 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
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Ian Paisley Jnr
Ms Dawn Purvis
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Ms Hilda Hagan	}	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Seamus McCrystal		
Mr Gerry McKibbin		

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): I refer members to the briefing paper from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), which was received too late to be included in members' papers in advance of the meeting. I remind those present that Hansard is recording the meeting and, therefore, mobile phones must be switched off.

I welcome officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel, all of whom have been here before: Seamus McCrystal is the head of the building standards branch; Hilda Hagan is from the properties division; and Gerry McKibbin is from the building regulations branch. I hope that you all had a good break over the summer, but now it is back to porridge.

Not having received the papers in time means that members are not as au fait with the issues as would be ideal. That is an unfortunate situation, and it is one that I hope will not happen too often.

For members' information, and as an aide-memoire, the Committee's support staff will send round a

copy of the recommendations. Will you make some introductory comments, Seamus?

Mr Seamus McCrystal (Department of Finance and Personnel): Would it be useful for me to go through the points that have been made in the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee's report and then summarise the Minister's letter of response?

The Chairperson: Yes, that would be helpful. From what I have seen, the Minister's response is mainly positive, so perhaps you would give the Committee a quick overview.

Mr McCrystal: The Minister's letter to the Committee is dated 8 September 2008, and I apologise for the Committee's late receipt of it. I will go through the key conclusions and recommendations of the report and follow that by examining the Minister's response.

Points 1 and 2 of the Committee's key conclusions and recommendations record its overall observations on the content of the Bill, with particular reference to clause 1, which facilitates any future decision to introduce a requirement in the building regulations for a percentage of the energy that is used in a building to be derived from low- or zero-carbon (LZC) systems. I do not think that that requires a response at this point, because a later section in the Committee's recommendations deals with low- and zero- carbon systems.

Points 3 and 4 deal with protected buildings. In his letter, the Minister agreed to the Committee's recommendation that clause 2 of the Bill be strengthened to require district councils to "take account of", rather than "have regard to", the character of protected buildings. He also agreed that:

"officials will consider how buildings not covered by the definition of 'protected buildings' might be addressed in guidance issued to district councils".

Work on that has yet to take place.

Should I continue?

The Chairperson: Yes, and I will then open up the discussion to members.

Mr McCrystal: At point 5, the Committee recommends that, where possible, the code for sustainable homes be used to inform the forthcoming guidance documents pertaining to domestic property. The Minister noted:

"the standards in the Code are a precursor for the future of building regulations requirements. Building regulations set the minimum standards to be achieved, whereas the Code's minimum standard will always be set above the Building Regulations requirements."

He continues that, as indicated in the code:

"As the Building Regulations requirements are enhanced, the standards in the Code will also be raised."

In point 6 of the key conclusions and recommendations, the Committee accepts the Department's position that it could not take on additional powers with regard to type approvals without affecting the Department's role in determining appeals against council decisions on type approval. The Committee concluded, however, that legislative or legal intervention may be necessary if the proposed voluntary arrangement among councils fails to achieve consistency of approach. The Minister has advised that officials will, through regular meetings with building control, monitor progress on that voluntary arrangement and that any necessary legislative intervention may fall to another Department.

In point 7, the Committee accepts the Department's proposed amendments to the Bill. Those will retain the provisions of article 20 of the principal Order, which relate to civil liability for a breach of duty imposed by building regulations. The Committee is also content with the consequential amendments to clause 16 and its commencement and with the amendments to the schedule of repeals. No further response on that is needed.

In points 8 and 9, the Committee calls on the Department to establish formal protocols covering both publication of the basis-for-appeals decisions and the turnaround time for such decisions. The Committee also recommended that the present appeals mechanism be reviewed at a later date to assess its effectiveness in the context of the change from the deemed-to-satisfy to guidance-based documents once that has bedded down. In response to the Committee's calls, guidance in satisfying Part R — which is the part that deals with access and use of the building and which has figured most prominently in appeals that we have received in the past 12 months — has been prepared. It has been discussed with building control, and it is now published on our website. The basis of appeals decisions is explained much more fully to the appellant, the relevant building control manager, and the chief officer. A turnaround target for 2008-09 has been included in our business plan. The Minister has accepted that the present appeals mechanism will be reviewed as recommended by the Committee once the guidance-based system has had an opportunity to bed down.

Point 10 states that the Committee expressed concern that individual houses in multi-house applications could be built to out-of-date standards and asks that the necessary subordinate legislation to close that loophole be introduced at the earliest possible opportunity. The Minister has advised that, as requested by the Committee, in the work that will be undertaken to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 in order to introduce a guidance-based system, it will be proposed that additional regulations be introduced to reduce the time between the approval of plans and the commencement of work on individual houses.

In point 11, the Committee noted that the Department has agreed to facilitate discussion with building control to examine how best to address the outdated legislation on dangerous places and buildings. The Committee recommended that that review be given priority. The Minister has accepted the Committee's recommendations, including consideration as to which Department is best placed to proceed with that work. At the previous meeting that we held with building control managers, we discussed all the conclusions and key recommendations of the report. We will meet again with building control next week, and the issue of dangerous places will be on the agenda. We will discuss with building control how best to proceed with that.

Point 12 sees the Committee encouraging the Department to examine the scope for establishing more formal North/South and east-west arrangements for co-ordinating policy and legislation on building regulations where appropriate. The Minister indicated that, in his view, existing arrangements work well, but discussions have taken place recently with our colleagues in the neighbouring jurisdictions about meeting to talk about matters of mutual interest with respect to building regulations. Dates have not yet been finalised, but we have agreed that the first of those meetings will take place in November.

In point 13, although the Committee accepted that current building regulations apply to only a small percentage of the total building stock, it believes that continued focus should be placed on identifying additional measures that are aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of existing buildings. In his response, the Minister identified that the Committee will appreciate that, as with other legislation, applying the building regulations retrospectively would be extremely onerous. Any encouragement to improve the carbon footprint of existing buildings would probably fall to other Departments and agencies that have a remit. The Minister highlighted that the last amendment to Part F of the building regulations, 'Conservation of fuel and power', which came into operation in November 2006, introduced for the first time requirements that, in certain instances, cost-effective consequential improvements to the thermal fabric of an existing building had to be considered where an extension of — or a significant adaptation to — such a building was being undertaken. There will be an ongoing review of an extension of that requirement.

The Minister also noted that, with the significant rises in energy prices, cost-effective improvements that have been recommended in reports that accompany energy performance certificates (EPCs) are more likely to be carried out and that the overall efficiency of the existing building stock should improve as a result.

From point 14 onwards, the Committee's report steers away from reference to the Bill and begins to discuss other matters. Shall I continue to respond to the report point by point?

The Chairperson: That would be useful, because I cannot anticipate the priority that the Committee has given to the remaining sections of the report, so, if you do not mind, I would like you to continue with a point-by-point response.

Mr McCrystal: I do not mind doing that. In point 14 of the report, the Committee welcomed the introduction of regulations that require energy performance certificates. The Committee sought assurances that all necessary preparations had been made prior to the introduction of the requirements, that appropriate steps are being taken to raise public awareness, and to assure the availability of trained and accredited energy assessors. The Department was responsible for issuing those regulations, and one of my colleagues will now give you an update of the work that has been carried out to publicise the requirements of the regulations.

Mr Gerry McKibbin (Department of Finance and Personnel): The first phase of The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 came into effect on 30 June, around the time that the Assembly began its recess. Prior to that date, several public seminars were held around Northern Ireland — a total of eight were held before the end of June — and further seminars will be held next week in the Balmoral Hotel in Belfast. Those will take place over two days. On Tuesday 16 September there will be a seminar on display energy certificates, which are required by the public sector. That seminar will target energy managers and premises officers in the public sector. On 17 September, there will be an additional energy performance certificate seminar. So far there has been quite a good response on registrations for those seminars.

At the seminars that took place before phase one of the regulations came into operation, it was announced to those present that officials from the Department would make themselves available to speak to the members of any professional organisation or body that requested such a provision. Several organisations took us up on that offer, and departmental officials have given a number of presentations to organisations such as the Construction Employers' Federation, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Law Society, some solicitors' firms such as Carson and McDowell, and property management companies, such as Johnston Houston. Officials are also meeting with landlord associations. In total, it is estimated that departmental officials have spoken to around 1,400 or

1,500 people in preparation for the introduction of the regulations.

As well as the public seminars, the Department conducted a media campaign and placed advertisements and notices in the press in the run-up to 30 June. That process will be repeated for the next phase, which extends the regulations to all newbuild and comes into effect at the end of this month. For that phase, the media campaign will target the professional magazines that are aimed at the construction industry. A similar campaign will be conducted in the days and weeks before the beginning of phase three, which comes into effect at the end of December.

The accreditation schemes that operate in England and Wales have been appointed to operate in Northern Ireland as well. Departmental officials are in daily contact with the keepers of the register, Landmark, to ensure that the register is ready for the introduction of phase two at the end of the month. We are satisfied that it should be ready, unforeseen technical glitches notwithstanding.

A dedicated website has been set up at www.epb.dfpni.gov.uk. That contains frequently asked questions and lots of background information on the regulations themselves, as well as information and guidance on how to appoint an assessor to carry out the energy assessment and provide an EPC.

On 11 August a mailshot was sent to over 400 estate agents in Northern Ireland, bringing them up to date with the introduction of EPCs and advising them that, although they do not have a statutory duty under the regulations to make sure that their clients — the vendors — are aware of the requirements, they have a professional duty to do so. This week — and last week — officials from the Department visited several of those estate agents and met with them face to face to advise them. Those meetings were, basically, two-way information sessions that were aimed at getting information from the estate agents about what it has been like on the coalface and to provide them with information on progress that has been made since they received the letter.

The Department has also produced a tri-fold leaflet, and it intends to send approximately 75,000 of those around the various estate agents so that they can pass them on to the vendors. That leaflet provides a background to the introduction of EPCs, explains what is required, the process of getting an EPC, how to get an assessor, the penalties for not having an EPC, and some information about the websites and other available information. I have some samples of that leaflet, which I will now pass to Committee members.

Additionally, we have completed work on several guidance documents, which are available on DFP's website. They offer guidance on EPCs for domestic

and non-domestic buildings, the regulations, and the EPCs' requirements for air conditioning systems and display energy certificates (DECs) for domestic and non-domestic buildings.

We have very few printed copies of those with us, but the documents are available on our website.

To date, that is the work that we have done to publicise the regulations.

The Chairperson: Members might want to pursue those points to see how the scheme is implemented. Seamus, do you have any further comments to make?

Mr McCrystal: Yes, but not on EPCs. I wish to continue discussing the related issues that are outlined in the Committee's report. Point 15 states that the Committee looks forward to examining the outcome of the consultation on green rebates. No doubt officials from another business area in the Department will present evidence to the Committee in due course, so I have nothing further to add to that point.

Point 16 states that the Committee calls on the Minister to review the basis for the building regulations function that falls to DFP and to consider the case for the transfer of that function to the Department of the Environment, possibly with other related functions. In his letter, the Minister indicated that it may be appropriate to await implementation of the review of public administration before changing the present distribution of functions. He also indicated that such a decision will be for the Executive as a whole to consider.

The other points that have been raised relate to the reduction of carbon emissions in new buildings, microgeneration and low- and zero-carbon systems.

Under point 17, the Committee recommended that the Minister establish 2016 as a firm target for newbuilds in Northern Ireland to be zero carbon, thereby keeping pace with developments in GB and the Republic of Ireland. The Minister has indicated that in the near future he will announce that officials are to work with others in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to introduce an amendment that will bring the regulations to the same standard and under the same timescale as has been established for England, Wales and Scotland.

We will assess regularly the cost effectiveness of LZC systems, especially in light of this morning's publicity about the planned rise in energy costs. We will have to pay attention to that issue. As we have told the Committee before, we will amend the part of the building regulations that relates to conservation fuel and power in 2010, 2013 and, I hope, soon to be announced by the Minister, 2016. Bearing in mind the changes that we will make in 2010 and 2013, at this stage we still propose to work on the basis of

identifying a target carbon dioxide emissions rate, but it is obvious that the installation of low and zero-carbon systems will be required in order for developers to meet the targets, which will be quite onerous.

We mentioned energy performance certificates, and the Committee might want to know that the average dwelling rating on those certificates for existing housing stock is about 51 points out of a scale of 100, whereas a newbuild house would score in the region of 80 points. Therefore, there is a significant difference between an average house and a newbuild. That shows that newbuild housing is built to quite a high standard. Therefore, any changes to emissions targets will be onerous.

That summarises the responses that we wished to give to the Committee. I am happy to answer your questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Seamus. You had to gallop through your presentation, but I must say that you did very well.

Mr Weir: Thank you for your presentation; it was very useful.

You mentioned that one of the amendments on character-protected buildings was to change the wording from "have regard to" to "take account of". I understand how that appears to be stronger language. Did you receive any particular legislative advice about the practical effects of the change of that wording?

Ms Hilda Hagan (Department of Finance and Personnel): Several months ago, when I first gave evidence to the Committee, the Office of the Legislative Counsel advised that to say "take account of" was only slightly stronger than to say "have regard to". However, it said that the wording should not be any stronger because one council cannot be compelled to comply with a decision made by another.

It is about perception: it is not easy to identify specifically how much firmer that language is — "take account of" just seems to be a firmer and therefore a tighter requirement. "Have regard to" could be interpreted as meaning that they have had regard to the issue but that they are not going to do anything about it, but "take account of" implies that they have to account for what they have done. That is the basic explanation, but the semantics of the language could be argued.

The Chairperson: Has that language ever been tested, even in a different context?

Ms Hagan: I am not aware that it has, but given that it was the Office of the Legislative Counsel that advised me that that language was slightly stronger, I can only assume that —

The Chairperson: In fairness, you explained that previously.

Ms Hagan: That organisation may be aware of other pieces of primary legislation in which that particular phrasing is used; I am not.

Mr McCrystal: Where protected buildings are concerned, building control already works within written guidance. That means that what we will now have in legislation will be an advancement on that and an encouragement for building control to follow that guidance.

The Chairperson: I suppose that we are just anticipating problems — which is perhaps not a bad thing — but we should not get preoccupied until we are confronted with a difficulty.

Mr Hamilton: It is good to see that a target on the turnaround times of responses to appeals that are made to the Department is to be included in the corporate plan. That was certainly something about which the Committee expressed an interest in its report. Another such issue was the publication of appeals decisions: what is the Department's position on making that process a bit more open?

Mr McCrystal: That rests with me at the moment. Appeal cases are dealt with on an A-to-Z basis, and over a period of time, particularly when dealing with appeals that fall under the same section of the regulations, there is a great deal of commonality. We have taken all the common elements of an appeal and published those on our website as part of an overall guidance note to try, hopefully, to minimise the number of appeals and complaints that we get.

It rests with me to look at the details of each case and to consolidate and, in some cases, anonymise the appeal — for example, we cannot flag up on our website that Mr Hamilton made an appeal to the Department and that it was not upheld. We will anonymise such instances. We are following through on that, and I apologise for the delay in getting it done.

Mr Hamilton: In its report, the Committee sought recommendations on the availability of trained staff that are able to assess and credit energy performance certificates. What does the Department consider to be the optimum — or required — number of assessors to do that work?

Mr McCrystal: I cannot answer that because it depends, in some respects, on the state of the market. Any figure that I could give you today would be quite low, but on the other hand, if the requirements had been introduced 12 months ago, that figure could have been significantly higher. All I can say is that there is an adequate number of assessors, some of whom are quite busy and others who are underemployed. For many of them, that is not their sole business: it is an add-on service that they provide to clients.

Mr Hamilton: Finally, how does the current average cost of the energy performance certificate compare with the original estimate?

Ms Hagan: I will reply to that question. When we were speaking to estate agents last Friday and Monday, part of those discussions was to ascertain whether they had information on how much the certificates were costing. On average, from the estate agents that I spoke to — and I think that this concurs with information coming from colleagues — a certificate can cost anywhere between £80 and £120, particularly in the Belfast area, and they are perhaps slightly more expensive in rural areas. That appears to be a reduction on initial charges, which may lead me to conclude that there are enough energy assessors around and that the prices that they are charging have reduced slightly since the requirements first came on stream.

Mr Hamilton: What is the reason for the differential? Is it due solely to market forces?

Ms Hagan: It is probably due to market forces. Some estate agents have in-house energy assessors, and others are contracting assessors from elsewhere. That can sometimes account for price differentials.

Mr McCrystal: The time that is taken to travel within rural areas could add to those costs.

Mr Hamilton: By and large, however, is the average cost lower than what you had originally estimated?

Mr McCrystal: It certainly seems to have come down. In the early days, complaints were made that some energy assessors were charging £200 plus VAT. The advice that we gave to people was that they should shop around because plenty of assessors are available.

The Landmark website lists all the available energy assessors, and if people search that website, they will be given a random number of assessors. Therefore, if someone does not like the estimate that they have been given, they can go to another assessor. I should say also that there is a facility on the website to check that an energy assessor is properly accredited. You can log in their registration number and it will give details about them. Therefore, a reasonable amount of cross-checking can be done.

Dr Farry: The Minister's letter states that he would like to make an announcement at the earliest opportunity on the availability of zero-carbon homes from 2016. Is that entirely contingent upon the legislation being enacted, or could that decision theoretically be made independently? What could prevent the Minister making that statement tomorrow? What particular obstacles would have to be overcome before he can make such an announcement?

Mr McCrystal: Given that that announcement is not contingent on the legislation, there are no obstacles

to prevent his doing that. We are fortunate in that the 1979 Order is the existing legislation that covers that matter, so that such a statement could be made. We may need to discuss it with the Minister, who may want to choose an appropriate forum in which to make that decision.

Dr Farry: Potentially, therefore, an announcement could be made this side of Christmas, if not sooner?

Mr McCrystal: Yes. I am sorry, I do not want to pre-empt what the Minister might say — we would have to discuss that in detail with him.

Dr Farry: Yes, but does the potential exist for the statement to be made?

Mr McCrystal: The policy has always been that we work in harmony with the requirements of building regulations in other jurisdictions. The difference is that there can sometimes be a time lag between the introduction of such regulations in each jurisdiction. The last amendment that was made to that part of the regulations was only six months behind the introduction of similar provisions in England and Wales, but sometimes that time could be shorter or longer. However, we expect to work with our colleagues on that. Even if the announcement has not been made, we anticipate that we will be working towards that target anyway.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Whenever I read the words “guidelines”, “increased guidelines”, “regulations” or “more regulations”, the thought of red tape and fees sends a shiver down my spine. What work — if any — has been done to study the impact on fees for those who are involved in the trade to whom this legislation will apply?

Mr McCrystal: The most recent fees regulations were produced in 1997. The fees, other than those for dwellings, are on a sliding scale, depending on the cost of the work. We recognise that those fees are somewhat out of date, and we have been having early discussions with building control to obtain feedback on the costs that it incurs in its work. We will propose a review of the fees regulations. Without trying to avoid your question, that work has not yet been completed, and we will be coming back to the Committee with those proposals.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will that work be complete before this Bill is passed?

Mr McCrystal: No. The Bill will give us primary powers; the fees regulations would relate more to the technical requirements that are in the building regulations, which are obviously the subordinate legislation.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I understand that, but we will be asked to support legislation without having been made aware of the full impact of the fees. From an

examination of some of this, it looks as though the fees could be quite extensive. Is that correct?

Mr McCrystal: These are primary powers that will give the Department the authority to make regulations. Obviously, officials will have to come back to the Committee to ask for approval to make further regulations. The Department will also have to consult publicly on all those matters. At this stage, therefore, it is not a matter of the Committee signing a blank cheque. This legislation will give the Department the power to act. However, if the Committee decides that that is an issue on which it does not want the Department to proceed, then it will not happen.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Why are the fees on a sliding scale — or, it would be more apt to say, a climbing scale? I rarely see them going down. They are on an upward escalator, and some of them, according to my passing knowledge of the industry, are quite high.

Mr McCrystal: The fees for an individual dwelling are about £250, which is much lower than in planning or other areas. There would have to be a sharp hike in fees for individual dwellings in order for them to be seen as comparable. There must be some give and take between domestic and commercial properties, and that is why a lot of foundation work must be undertaken before officials return to the Committee with proposals on fees.

Mr F McCann: As regards dangerous buildings; following especially well-publicised accidents there are usually debates in which it is said that those accidents might not have happened had regulations been tighter. There now seems to be a debate about who is best placed to enforce those regulations. Local building control officers say that they should be responsible, so that there can be a local, hands-on approach. Obviously, the Department has many years of experience in the matter. Who is best placed to carry out enforcement; and when can legislation be expected?

Mr McCrystal: The Department made a proposal in the original draft of the Bill. However, the more that we discussed the matter with building control, the more it became clear to us and to them that what was being proposed would dilute the powers available to them under other legislation. Plenty of control measures exist, but the legislation is very old. Building control had asked the Department to bring some of that legislation together in what is now being proposed.

However, the difficulty is that because we are referring to building regulations in the Bill, we could not cover dangerous places. If the Department were to repeal some of the legislation that is available to building control, there would be nothing to cover dangerous places. It was felt to be much safer to leave matters as they are and discuss how all of the requirements could be best consolidated. Building

control and local councils are aware of the legislation with which they work, and the Department did not want to compromise their position as regards what they can do with regard to dangerous buildings and dangerous places.

Mr F McCann: Do you know when those discussions will conclude?

Mr McCrystal: Officials will be meeting building control next week, and this matter will be on the agenda. Over the summer, building control officers became involved in flood work and suchlike, and a lot of resources were diverted from this issue.

The Chairperson: The Committee addressed the problem of developments proceeding on out-of-date plans. I have read the Minister's written response. However, is there a time frame for an amendment to close that loophole?

Mr McCrystal: The Department will start work on amending all of the regulations, including the amendment to Part A, which is the interpretation and application. By the time that the development process, consultation and notifications to Europe are completed, it is generally two to two-and-a-half years before a wholesale change is in place.

The Chairperson: Two-and-a-half years?

Mr McCrystal: The Department has an outline programme, but no detailed programme. I hesitate to give the Committee a particular time frame, but it is likely to be about two-and-a-half years.

The Chairperson: This is not a major issue. Surely it could be dealt with as part of the process of introducing the Bill, so that all of the amendments land on the table at the same time?

Ms Hagan: Our plan is to make all of the amendments at the same time. However, there are many regulations involved, and — as a result of the different powers in the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill, and updates — it will be necessary to review all parts of those regulations. The Department intends to look at the matter in one fell swoop and make a new set of up-to-date regulations.

We could also make one amendment to deal with the issue that you have raised. However, that would also take some time, because the same processes would have to be followed. Furthermore, it would lead to yet another amendment, which would make the legislation more piecemeal. Since it is not a big problem, and evidence does not suggest that the practice is commonplace, we thought that it would be better to wrap it up with the other amendments that are required to be made to update the entirety of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. That will take a couple of years.

Mr Beggs: Why will it take two-and-a-half years to amend regulations to state that when building control has been given —

Ms Hagan: I did not say that it would take two-and-a-half years to do that; I explained that that would take less time — but it will take time. On average, it takes one year to complete a piece of subordinate legislation, by the time the policy is drafted and issued for consultation, and if it is a short, sweet, acceptable and uncontroversial piece of subordinate legislation.

Mr Beggs: It seems to be a lengthy process.

Ms Hagan: The procedure is laid down in the subordinate legislation handbook and must be followed.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The solution is to employ more lawyers — and no one wants to do that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCrystal: If we were to introduce a requirement without proper consultation, there is a possibility that it would be subject to challenge.

Ms Hagan: A consultation alone takes 12 weeks.

Mr McCrystal: Chairman, do you wish the Department to develop this as a separate issue?

The Chairperson: It is such an obvious issue. There may or may not be a problem, but, with current pressures, people might see opportunities, and it might become a problem. It is an issue worth considering, because it does not seem as if it would be too complicated to close the loophole and ensure that it does not become a problem.

Mr McCrystal: The significant element is in the thermal fabric of new buildings. That seems to be the part of the regulations which, perhaps, would cause most concern.

The Chairperson: The houses could be built and the responsibility passed to the new owners.

Mr McCrystal: From the end of September, all new buildings will be required to have an energy performance certificate. We have been at pains to inform the construction industry — and everyone else we have spoken to — that the certificate will contain a benchmark of what the building would have achieved had it been built to the building regulation standards that were in operation on the day that the certificate was issued. We have, therefore, been at pains to inform developers that the certificate contains two energy performance measures — one for the actual building and one stating what the energy performance could be.

Builders have told us that they will review plans, which have been approved through building control, with a view to upgrading them, because inefficiencies in the buildings will have been highlighted.

The Chairperson: I presume that you believe that that will have the same effect.

Mr McCrystal: That was our view on our previous visit to the Committee, because of the high energy prices. Given this morning's announcements, energy consumption and its cost will affect everyone.

Mr Beggs: During evidence sessions, the Committee heard that some houses have been built according to 30-year-old regulations. That meant that some buildings did not meet the regulations regarding disability access, for instance. It is a nonsense to allow that to happen. There are, therefore, problems with disability regulations as well as with energy performance.

Ms Hagan: I would stress that there has perhaps been one instance of that in a number of years, so I suggest, respectfully, that it is not common practice.

Mr Beggs: How do we know the scale of the practice?

Mr McCrystal: If it were a significant difficulty, building control would be reporting the extent to us, but they have not done that. We meet building control on a quarterly basis — our next meeting is next week — and we can ask them for feedback on that.

The Chairperson: It may be worthwhile asking the question, but the Committee has also not received any evidence to indicate that there is a significant problem.

As regards sustainable homes, the guidelines reflect the minimum standard and the code sets a higher standard. Why is there a differential? Why do they not operate to the same standard and be reviewed periodically at the same time?

Mr McCrystal: The code is intended to flag up future changes in building regulations, thereby giving the industry advance warning of future requirements. It is also used as a vehicle for social housing, in which the buildings tend to be built to the higher standard — code level 3. The idea is that building regulations represent the minimum standards required but that the higher standards introduced in the code give the industry early warning of how things will develop over the years.

The Chairperson: We are looking forward, with very clear targets being set out, and yet there is a differential. We are also being told — and evidence suggests — that the code is generally applied. The regulations set a minimum standard and the code is being accepted and applied. Why is there a differential at all?

Mr McCrystal: The code is being applied to social housing primarily. However, houses in England and Wales can now be assessed against the code. Those houses will get a code rating that developers can use as a marketing tool.

The Chairperson: That does not explain why the opt-in or opt-out option exists. If the Department has a

specific outcome of the review of regulations in mind, why can it not be specific? Why can it not codify the requirements and apply them across all developments, social or otherwise?

Mr McCrystal: The code has only been introduced in England and Wales in the last 12 months or so and, as a starting point, it is being applied to social housing. However, research developments are taking place to find out how efficient buildings can be — whether they can be code level 5, code level 6 and so on — and what the cost of that is likely to be.

The Chairperson: That is not really my point. The argument almost seems to be that this is how it has always been done and that it will not change. Surely, there is an opportunity to mark out the required threshold and apply it across the board. Would that not simplify life for everyone, in terms of enforcement and delivery?

Mr McCrystal: The building regulations do that: the minimum standard is set out and is applied universally.

The Chairperson: The code sets a different standard.

Mr McCrystal: There are quite a lot of other standards, such as the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) standards for non-domestic buildings and those for eco-homes. There is nothing to prevent a developer building to those standards and using the higher standard as a marketing exercise, or an individual building his or her house to the higher standard.

Mr McKibbin: It may also be worth pointing out that the proposed amendments to Part F in 2010-13, which Seamus mentioned, will take building regulations to code level 3 and code level 4 equivalents. An announcement about 2016, if it is made, will be that there will be a code level 5 zero-carbon equivalent.

The Chairperson: Is that a convergence target that we could work towards, or will a differential always be maintained?

Mr McCrystal: A differential will always be maintained. The code is intended to set standards higher than the building regulations and give the industry an indication of future changes to building regulations. Code level 1 is a higher standard than building regulations, which are the bottom-line catch all. However, as I said earlier in relation to thermal insulation, the standard in new-build housing is very high.

The Chairperson: Seamus, Gerry and Hilda, thank you very much for your assistance.

Mr McCrystal: Gerry McKibbin said that the Department will hold seminars on energy performance certificates on 16 and 17 September 2008 at the

Balmoral Hotel, Blacks Road. Unfortunately, the first seminar coincides with business in the Chamber, and the second presentation coincides with a Committee meeting. However, members are welcome to attend.

The Chairperson: The Committee might be able to arrange representation at the event. Thank you very much; general response to the work has been positive.

The Bill's Consideration Stage is likely to take place on 7 October and will include a debate on the amendments tabled by the Minister. Subsequently, members can discuss the Bill's wider issues during the Final Stage.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

11 September 2008

GOODS VEHICLES (LICENSING OF OPERATORS) BILL (NIA 15/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The next item of business is an update on the Goods Vehicle (Licensing of Operators) Bill. It has been some time since the Committee dealt with the Bill. The Committee Clerk will talk members through the various stages.

The Committee Clerk: The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill Committee is now at the Committee Stage.

The Committee's most recent piece of work on the Bill was to ask the Assembly to extend time to 12 December 2008. That was agreed; however, the Committee does not have to use all of that time. If its work is complete, it can report earlier.

Under the Committee's instruction, a public notice was issued, inviting written comments. Three responses were received, and those are included in members' documents. The Chairperson may want to take members through those, or give them time to consider them today. They are not long.

The Committee must now decide what, if any, oral evidence it wants to take. If the Committee believes that sufficient evidence has been received on the relevant issues, it may decide to take no more. Alternatively, it may consider that further issues arise from the oral evidence, which it may want to tease out in more detail. Furthermore, it may decide to hear evidence

from other bodies — people who have not responded but from whom the Committee wants to hear.

Once that evidence has been received, Committee staff will collate the issues that arise from all of the written and oral correspondence and map those against clauses in the Bill. The clause-by-clause analysis will then begin.

The Department will receive, and respond to, that document and, at that stage, the Committee will decide whether to propose amendments to, or make recommendations on, the legislation. That will bring the Committee to the pre-report stage. The purpose today is, therefore, to decide on the evidence.

The Chairperson: When we initially discussed this some members — certainly Mr Armstrong and Mr Clarke — raised issues around the question of agricultural and horticultural vehicles. I think that it is important to hear from those people.

Mr T Clarke: They expressed concern on that issue in their submissions. Therefore, we must listen to them.

The Chairperson: The third written submission we received is from Ms Beverley Bell, traffic commissioner for the North West Traffic Area in England. She offers to make a presentation to the Committee. I am not so sure about that — how do members feel about inviting her to appear as a witness?

For the sake of clarity, do members accept her submission, which arrived after the 11 July closing date?

Committee Members: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do we wish to hear from her? No enthusiasm is evident.

Therefore, we will take evidence from the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland. Is there anyone else from whom we want to hear? No?

I advise members that the Committee had agreed to treat the paper from the Federation of Passenger Transport as a submission in respect of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. However, the Committee staff contacted Mrs Karen Magill, chief executive of the federation, who advised that it would not be appropriate to treat its paper as a submission.

We have already taken pre-legislative evidence from two stakeholders — the Freight Transport Association (FTA) and the Road Haulage Association (RHA). Is there any other organisation, group or Government agency from which we must take evidence? No?

Mr Boylan: There is the issue of planning permission for three-and-a-half-ton vehicles operating from home. Do we need someone to advise us on that?

Mr T Clarke: That would be helpful, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: I agree.

Mr Boylan: Should we hear from someone in the Planning Service?

The Chairperson: It should probably be the appropriate person dealing with that issue in the Department. What about hearing from enforcement officers, who are at the coalface? We can have the Department bring their respective officials in relation to planning issues. We will hear from enforcement officers, then. Is that agreed?

Members indicated assent.

Mr T Clarke: We need a definitive answer, because we could not get a straight answer from the Roads Service witnesses on the obligations of persons operating from residential properties. We must have a definitive answer from the Planning Service on whether such operators must apply for permission to run businesses from home addresses.

The Chairperson: As a reminder to myself, in relation to the McAnulty case, aside from maybe notifying Mr McAnulty when the officials will be attending the Committee meeting, we should also notify Mrs Magill in order to keep her informed of developments.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

11 September 2008

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (REFORM) BILL (NIA 21/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister
Mrs Claire McGill
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Craig Allen	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Ivan McMaster		
Mr Bernard Mitchell		

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): The Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill is an important piece of legislation that will greatly affect health provision across the board. Today marks the beginning of the Bill's Committee Stage, and departmental officials are here to brief the Committee on its provisions. Over the next few weeks, we will hear evidence from interested groups before embarking on a clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill.

We are subject to a very tight timescale, and we must complete our report by 23 October 2008. I refer members to the separate red folder, which contains a copy of the Bill, a briefing paper from Assembly Research and Library Services and a copy of written submissions to the Committee's consultation on the Bill, which took place over the summer. In total, 29 responses to the consultation were received. I remind members to bring their red folder to each meeting during Committee Stage.

I welcome Mr Bernard Mitchell, Mr Ivan McMaster and Mr Craig Allen from the modernisation directorate

in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). I invite the witnesses to outline to the Committee the background to the Bill and its general provisions. Members will then be able to ask questions. I will allow up to one hour for the evidence session.

Mr Bernard Mitchell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): On behalf of my colleagues, I am grateful for the opportunity to begin this process of engagement with the Committee in considering the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. I will start by thanking the Committee for its input to date to the legislation. I acknowledge the helpful comments that were made during the Bill's Second Stage in the Assembly on 1 July 2008.

The Chairperson has highlighted the tight timescale, for which I am also grateful. We are working hard to try to deliver the proposed changes by the due date of 1 April 2009. It is important to do so from the point of view of all those staff who need certainty about their futures and about the way forward. We have a busy few months ahead of us in going through the detail of the Bill's proposals. Several proposals are still under consideration and subject to final decision. I will cover those areas if Committee members have questions about them. We will, of course, be available to answer any questions during the Committee's consideration of the Bill, and we will call on other officials if additional expertise is required.

We intend to give a short explanation of the Bill's main provisions, based on the broad thrust of its proposals. We will then take questions. I will now hand over to my colleague Mr McMaster.

Mr Ivan McMaster (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I will quickly run through the broad provisions of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, and how those provisions are set out. First, it is important to say something about the Bill's general content, and, perhaps more importantly, what it does not contain. The Bill's purpose is to provide a legislative framework within which the proposed new healthcare structures can operate. The Bill's aim is to set out, as transparently as possible, the high-level functions of DHSSPS and the various health and social care bodies that will be created under the legislation.

The Bill seeks, either in the body of the document itself or by securing the powers to make subordinate legislation, to establish parameters within which each of those health and social care bodies will be permitted to operate; what is expected of them; and the necessary governance and accountability arrangements that would support the effective delivery of health and social care in Northern Ireland.

It is probably just as important to note that certain measures are not included in the Bill. It does not rewrite Northern Ireland's entire body of health legislation. Functions that existing health bodies carry out will still need to be performed. The Bill will legislate that functions once performed by A will instead be performed by B.

Pieces of legislation that bestow a vast number of functions, such as the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 or the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, are extant, and the Bill will not seek to replace them. Rather, the Bill puts in place a framework of new structures. It will amend existing legislation only where it is absolutely necessary. For instance, pieces of legislation that were used to establish bodies that the Bill now seeks to dissolve must be repealed. In general, however, the Bill is to be read with, rather than instead of, other legislation.

The Bill does not address a number of issues. No mention is made of organisations such as the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) or the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC). Bodies not mentioned in the Bill will continue to exist in their present form.

The Bill has 35 clauses, which come under 10 broad headings. I will cover those as quickly as possible. The fairly explanatory heading, "Restructuring of administration of health and social care" covers clause 1, which defines health and social care bodies. It is at the beginning of the Bill, along with explanations of abbreviations and acronyms that appear throughout, to facilitate the reader.

Clauses 2 to 6 deal with the "Department's role in promoting and providing health and social care". The clauses explain the Department's general duties, powers and priorities. It is important to bear in mind that the Department will maintain all its existing duties. Those provisions broadly replicate the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 by establishing the Department's overall duty for health and social care in Northern Ireland.

However, the clauses, by providing an explanation of the Department's duties, go one stage further than the 1972 Order did. The 1972 Order outlines the Department's overarching duties to improve the health and social well-being of the people in Northern Ireland, whereas the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill explains, in more depth, related issues, such as introducing policies and holding people to account. Clauses 2 to 6 set out clearly what the Department should and should not do, thereby allowing people to hold the Department to account if a duty is not performed properly.

Clause 5 introduces the new concept of the framework document. It sets out how the new bodies will be accountable in the discharge of their functions; how they must conduct their relationships with the Department; and, as equally important, how they will conduct their relationships with the other organisations to create an effective joined-up approach.

The introduction of the framework document is recognition that total clarity is needed about the roles and functions — local and regional — across all health and social care organisations, and of the Department.

The next broad heading, which covers five clauses from 7 to 11, deals with the establishment of the regional health and social care board, including its functions and objectives, and makes provision for the establishment of local commissioning groups (LCGs).

The existing four boards will be replaced by a single regional health and social care board. The regional board will focus on the main areas of commissioning health and social care; managing and improving the performance of health and social care trusts; and resource management. The legislation will give the regional board the power to offer guidance and direction to health and social care trusts, as well as to place a responsibility on them to abide by the regulations and to provide information as the board requires.

The reform will seek to ensure co-ordinated commissioning at all levels. The clauses will require the regional board to draw up a regional commissioning plan, and to consult with and to have due regard to advice or information that the proposed new regional agency for public health and social well-being (RAPHSW) provides.

Clause 9 deals with the establishment of local commissioning groups. The legislation allows the regional board to establish whatever committees it likes, but it specifically states that it must establish particular committees called local commissioning groups. Those groups will involve local health and social care professionals, local government and lay representatives. They will bring together their innovation and expertise and deal with local communities' needs in the planning of services.

The number of local commissioning groups and the areas that they will cover will be specified in subordinate legislation. The current thinking is that there will be five groups, which will be coterminous with the five trusts. Those details will be covered by subordinate legislation because the issue may be re-examined when the local government boundaries are finalised. Therefore, it is slightly easier to deal with the matter through subordinate legislation than through primary legislation.

The membership of the LCGs will also be prescribed by subordinate legislation, which allows for

more flexibility should any changes need to be made. The current thinking is that each group will comprise four GPs, a pharmacist, a dentist, four elected local representatives, two social-care professionals, one nurse, one public-health-medicine professional, one allied health professional and two health-and-social-care-related voluntary-sector representatives. If my maths is right, that is a total of 17.

The Bill requires the commissioning groups, in exercising their functions, to consult the proposed regional agency and to have due regard to any information that the agency provides. Again, that is an attempt to encourage joined-up thinking.

The next heading deals with clauses 12 and 13, which simply establish the regional agency for public health and social well-being. The creation of the agency stems from a desire to bring a higher profile to public health and social well-being and, equally importantly, to reduce health inequalities. The thinking is that a dedicated body is the best way in which to create a sustained and enhanced focus on the matter and to drive the public-health agenda forward in a manner that is not possible under current arrangements.

The new agency will have three key functions: health improvement; health protection; and the provision of public-health support to commissioning and policy development. It also has a particular responsibility for promoting improved partnership-working with local government and other public-sector organisations. Indeed, the clauses will place an obligation on the new agency to co-operate with other bodies that carry out health-protection or health-improvement functions. Again, we are aiming at some kind of joined-up work.

Clauses 14 and 15 will create a regional support services organisation (RSSO). Believe me, over the next few weeks, members will become familiar with those terms and initialisms. If members are struggling with them, do not worry. We are still struggling with them as well, so bear with me. The organisation will incorporate the majority of services that the Central Services Agency currently provides, but it will offer a broader range of support functions for the entire health and social care service.

Those clauses will impose a specific duty on the organisation to ensure an economic, efficient, effective service to all users. It will be required to operate within clearly defined standards, with measurable performance indicators. Clause 15 places a duty on the RSSO to put in place arrangements to that end, and the Department must approve those arrangements beforehand.

Clauses 16 to 20 deal with a broad range of “Patient representation and public involvement”. The five clauses deal primarily with the establishment of the patient and client council. They also deal

with enhancing patient choice; meeting the needs and expectations of patients, clients and carers; and ensuring that their views are heard and listened to at all stages in the planning and delivery of services. The patient and client council will replace the four existing health and social services councils. It will build on the excellent work that those councils have carried out in the past, and it will combine the strong local focus that the councils provided with a powerful regional voice — a voice that has been missing in the current set-up.

Although the patient and client council will have a clear regional focus, subordinate legislation will provide that it must have five committees at local level, and those committees will be coterminous with the five integrated trusts. Those satellite offices will provide the important local presence that the health and social services councils do currently, but they will feed local issues and perspectives into the formulation of wider regional aims through the patient and client council.

Clause 18 places a duty on the Department, the regional board, the regional agency, the trusts and special agencies to co-operate with the patient and client council in the discharge of its functions. That is a statutory duty. There is also a duty to consult with the patient and client council, to give such information to it as it requires and to have regard to advice that it provides. That gives the patient and client council a statutory footing that it may not have had before the legislation was drafted.

Clause 19 also requires those bodies to prepare a consultation scheme, which the Department must approve. In the past, such a requirement has been known as a statutory duty to engage. The consultation scheme places a duty on all health and social care bodies to show that they will make arrangements with patients, clients, the patient and client council, and carers to ensure that they are involved in, and consulted on, the planning and provision of care, the development of proposals for change and decisions that affect the provision of all aspects of health and social care.

Clause 20 states that the bodies are required to have regard to the comments given — they cannot ignore them. The bodies will have to prepare a written statement that summarises the comments, and set out a response to those comments.

The next heading, “HSC trusts”, comprises clause 21, which deals with health and social care trusts. It places a duty on trusts to aim to improve health and social care, despite any competing priorities that they may have. The duty imposed in the clause already applies to the other organisations that we are creating in the Bill. However, for consistency, it was considered

important that the provision be applied to trusts also, even though the legislation does not deal with trusts.

The next heading, “Public-private partnerships”, comprises clause 22 and deals with public-private partnerships (PPPs). Current provisions in legislation permit PPPs. The inclusion of that provision in the new structural arrangement clarifies that the Department, the regional board, the trusts, the regional agency, the regional support services organisation and special agencies are permitted to form, or participate in forming, partnerships to provide facilities or services. The inclusion of the clause is not about encouraging the use of PPPs, but it is acknowledged that private finance initiatives (PFIs) are only one of a range of procurement models and should only be used where it can be demonstrated that it represents better value for money as a conventional option over the lifetime of the contract. The clause permits, rather than encourages, their use.

The next heading, which deals with the “Transfer of assets, liabilities and functions”, covers clauses 23 to 28. The Bill becomes technical at this point. Clauses 24 to 26 deal with the dissolution of the health and social services boards, the Mental Health Commission and the Central Services Agency, plus the subsequent transfer of their assets, liabilities and functions. It does not seek to replace existing health legislation but merely states that functions that were previously performed in one place will now be carried out elsewhere. That is what the Bill does — it states that the responsibility for functions that were carried out previously by body A will be done by body B. Therefore, it does not interfere, detract from or add to those functions.

Clause 23 requires the Department to produce schemes for the transfer of assets and the liabilities of dissolved bodies, including staff who can be listed by name or by the type of work that they do. The staff have to get from body A to body B, and the technical provisions contained in clause 23 allow that to be done.

Clauses 29 to 35 become even more technical. They deal with the Department’s power to make supplementary, and other, provisions by amending or repealing legislation where necessary, and several are necessary. Although I said that we were leaving all legislation as it was — for the most part — some elements need to be amended or repealed, and those clauses deal with that.

There are seven schedules to the Bill, the final two of which set out in detail repeals and minor and consequential amendments. The first four schedules deal with the establishment of new bodies: the regional board; the regional agency; the regional support services organisation; and the patient and client council. Schedules 1 to 4 deal with details about the constitution and

operation of those bodies; their committees and who shall serve on them; how their boards will be constituted; and how they will be established.

That is a very quick run-through of the Bill. I will leave copies of our submission with the Committee Clerk, as our submission may assist the Committee at a later stage in its scrutiny.

The Chairperson: May I ask a simple question? The consultation period ended on 12 May, and you received around 120 responses. Can you indicate what the general thrust of those responses is, percentage-wise?

Mr Mitchell: I may not be able to give a percentage breakdown, Chairperson; however, I can say, and the Minister will have said this in his announcement, that broad support was received for the thrust of the proposals. Having read through each and every page of all the received proposals, I can say that the quality of response was high and that the responses included some really good material. If you are interested, I will be happy to talk in detail at some point about changes to the proposals that have arisen as a direct result of the consultation responses.

A number of broad themes emerged from those responses; there was a great deal of support for the regional agency’s proposed role and for the renewed focus on public health and social well-being. There was a concern that the Bill be comprehensive and that it not be driven by a solely health-orientated agenda but that it take into account social well-being. That explains the name of the new agency in the Bill:

“The Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being”.

It was chosen to try to get across the message that the agency will adopt a comprehensive approach to the public health and social well-being of the entire population.

There was much support for the new agency’s role, and for the establishment of a regional board to replace the four existing boards. The responses included a great deal of advice on how we might ensure a good relationship between the regional agency and the regional board; it was felt important that those two bodies operate seamlessly to a common agenda. It was suggested that the Department put arrangements in place to ensure that that is the case.

We received a limited amount of comment on the regional support services organisation. Responses that we did receive were broadly supportive, with the major theme being a concern that the RSSO be genuinely accountable to its customers to whom it will provide a service, especially those smaller agencies that will rely on it for support. It was felt important that those concerns and wishes be given due regard.

There was overwhelming support for our proposed patient and client council model, which is to have a

regional council and five local committees. The notion of creating a strong regional voice with a good local presence that reflected local concerns and struck the correct regional/ local balance was also welcomed. That is an overview of the consultation responses, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed, Bernard. I now ask Committee members to put any questions that they may have to our panel.

Mr Easton: In your consultation, did any groups highlight major concerns? Is there anything to be worried about?

Mr Mitchell: It was a good consultation so, as you would expect, two or three concerns were raised. As I have already said, the relationship between the regional board and the regional agency was raised. That is what I mean by a “good consultation”; many comments were insightful and came from people who had a good understanding of the importance of roles and relationships in an organisation. Therefore, the Department is paying a great deal of attention to that issue, and it is a key piece of work with which the Department is dealing and will continue to do so over the coming weeks.

Representatives from the voluntary and community sector expressed concern that that sector should play a proper role and be seen to have its place in the new system. The Department has sought to respond to that point in several ways. For example, the increased membership of the local commissioning groups — which now have two representatives from the voluntary and community sector — was a change to the original proposals that came about as a direct result of comments from the consultation. Another decision that was made as a result of the consultation was that the Department will seek to have an individual director with an allocated responsibility for the voluntary and community sector at executive level in the regional agency and the regional board so that there could be direct input into the work of both bodies.

A concern was raised that there should be more than one social care representative on the LCGs, so the Department has proposed that there should be two. That ties in with a related issue because notionally, at this stage, the Department has adult and children’s services in mind. Concern was also expressed that the broader agenda for revisiting arrangements for children’s services planning, and its multi-sectoral nature, should not be lost because of the new arrangements. The Department had several meetings with constituencies representing that side of the house and has agreed arrangements with them on how that part of the agenda will be developed.

I do not believe that any of those concerns would fall under the category of serious, below-the-waterline

problems; they simply reflect a thorough response from the consultees.

Mr McMaster: Some concern was expressed that the regional agency for public health and social well-being might take away from the good work that is already being done on the ground. As a result of that, there was an original proposal that many health-protection and health-promotion personnel from the trusts would transfer to the new agency. Given those concerns, it has been decided that community-development and other health-improvement staff who currently work in trusts will not be affected in the shake-up. Therefore, the Department recognises that much good work is currently being done.

Mr Mitchell: When the proposals were initially announced, at a meeting that I attended with the Minister, members raised that point. A decision to bring a much-reduced number of staff into the regional agency was directly based on that concern and the subsequent consultation responses.

Mrs McGill: I joined the Committee only recently, and I have a question about the number of groups that have evolved because of the proposed changes. Is there confusion about that issue, or is there likely to be confusion? Given that you have said that the changes relate to the structure of care rather than the actual care that is being delivered, will you comment on the responses from those consultees? The Mental Health Commission responded and had some concerns about the lack of integration that might ensue as a result of the changes.

Mr Mitchell: I should have referred to the issue of the Mental Health Commission in answer to Mr Easton’s question. That concern was expressed, and it was considered carefully; several meetings were held with those concerned.

The view taken was that the functions of the Mental Health Commission could be undertaken more effectively within the broader infrastructure of, and with the greater resources held by, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). If the Committee plans to meet representatives from the RQIA, that would be an opportunity to seek some reassurance on that point. That was the rationale for the carefully considered decision to proceed with the transfer of the functions of the Mental Health Commission to the RQIA.

In the second reform phase, the number of bodies was significantly reduced. The first reform phase involved a significant reduction in the number of trusts, which now amounts to five trusts and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. The current phase will involve the amalgamation of the four health and social services boards into one regional health and social care board. The number of agencies affected was

reduced from the original proposals, because it was felt that some of those agencies, such as the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, were doing good work. There was no reason to change the functions of that agency and other bodies because they were carrying out their functions effectively.

Mr McGill: I declare an interest as a member of Strabane District Council. The Mental Health Commission submission states that councillors will be at arm's length from commissioning decisions. Will that be the case?

Mr Mitchell: The view of the Department is that the functions currently undertaken by the Mental Health Commission will be fully addressed by the RQIA and that greater resources will be available to address those functions than is currently the case.

Mrs McGill: Is it only the elected councillors who will be at arm's length from commissioning decisions? Will there still be local accountability?

Mr McMaster: The proposal is that there will be four councillors on the LCGs.

Mr Mitchell: There is provision for four local government representatives on each local commissioning group. There is also provision for local government representation on the patient and client council and in the regional agency for public health and social well-being. From the Minister's perspective, the introduction of improved democratic accountability through active engagement with local government representation is an important element of the reforms. The current proposals are significantly strengthened in that regard compared with those that were previously being progressed under direct rule.

Mrs Hanna: Is it unusual for a Bill to contain provisions for the use of PPPs at this stage? I accept your view that that does not mean that such schemes will be used, but it seems strange to have that provision in the Bill, particularly as there is so much concern about PPPs. It seems as if the provision has been inserted so that, even if the use of PPPs is opposed, the option is still available to make use of them.

Mr Mitchell: The Department was conscious of that. The view was that legal clarity was needed in the event that it was decided to make use of a PPP scheme, and, if it were felt that the legal framework were not sufficiently clear, it would then be too late to address concerns from a contractor. The aim was to insert a provision into the Bill that was permissive but that made it explicit that the provision simply made the use of such a scheme possible, if it were required. As my colleague said earlier, it is not the Department's intention to insert that provision with any motive to encourage PPP schemes. It is simply a permissive provision, and it provides the legal clarity that a PPP

scheme can be used if it is required and is judged appropriate in individual cases.

Mrs Hanna: I am concerned that, if people are opposed to a PPP in any given case, it would be difficult to oppose it if the provision is already in the Bill.

Mr McMaster: The provision simply allows the use of PPP schemes, and it is not prescriptive about whether such schemes should be used; it simply permits their use. Timing is the issue; the provision for the use of PPPs does not sit altogether comfortably in the Bill. However, the Bill is probably the biggest structural change to health services since 1972, and the Department feels that the Bill is as good a place as any to insert a clarification that such a PPP scheme is available.

Mrs Hanna: It flags up the issue of PPPs, which people may not otherwise have thought about.

My other main concern is that powers are still centralised and do not flow down, despite all the discussions about personnel being in place to allow that to happen. The proof of the pudding may have to be in the eating; we will have to wait and see whether the powers are provided so that personnel will be able to make decisions and budgetary controls will be given to people nearer ground level. For many people, that has been a concern throughout the process.

Mr Mitchell: I want to comment on that, because several work streams are ongoing across a range of initiatives.

First, work is being undertaken on the proposed improved partnerships among health, social care, local government and other stakeholders. Those partnerships are at the heart of the proposals, and there are plans to run pilot schemes from April 2009. If that works and the pilot arrangements are put in place, that will be a real step forward in front-line, ground-level partnerships among the respective stakeholders who have an influence and interest in public health and social well-being.

Secondly, if LCGs and GPs feel that they do not have the required devolved authority, they will not participate and, therefore, will not function. Indeed, if Dr Deeny were here today, I feel that he would agree with that point. Effective commissioning is required, a sentiment that was expressed to me at a meeting this morning. I do not believe that the four local government representatives would be content to sit on a body if they felt that it did not have devolved authority.

Therefore, the Department is developing operating frameworks for the local commissioning groups. They begin with the premise that funds will be devolved to the LCGs through the governance arrangements of the regional board. However, that is done on the basis of empowering them to make decisions about local

services. Many of the reforms rest on a number of factors, but that is one of the key foundation stones.

The Department is attempting to change the public's perception of the scale of the LCGs, which is an issue that arose from the consultation process. Although LCGs are local, many people think that they will be large groups. The LCGs must think about how they will engage with local communities.

Mrs Hanna: Those are my thoughts. That is particularly the case with public health, where we want to reach the most vulnerable people. The LCGs must be linked in on the ground.

Mr Mitchell: Some of those people say that they are not represented by national bodies that represent the larger organisations. Therefore, the Department is introducing specific proposals for that type of stakeholder community engagement with the LCGs.

Mrs Hanna: By the same token, there is expertise beyond the Department on the current boards to make the decisions, particularly on public health issues.

Mr Mitchell: I recently met representatives from the Food Standards Agency, and they were enthusiastic about the potential role of that agency in focusing the agenda. That is what the Minister had in mind when he made the proposal.

The Chairperson: The Appleby Report identifies notable deficiencies in the Northern Ireland Health Service and also the distinct absence of an explicit performance management system. The report contends that the current performance management system is devoid of clear and effective structures, information and, most importantly, incentives — both rewards and sanctions — at individual, local and Northern Ireland organisational levels to encourage innovation and change.

Will you comment on that view and how it weighs up with the Bill's proposals?

Mr Mitchell: That is an interesting aspect of the Department's current work. It is akin to the blood flowing through the arteries rather than the bones of the structure.

Something similar to the current basic skeletal framework mechanism will remain, with the Programme for Government feeding down to a public service agreement, priorities for action, health and well-being plans, and trust development plans, with accountabilities at various levels.

There are real opportunities at present, because changes are being made that allow for a fresh examination of what is being done. The reduction in the number of boards, and the setting up of a regional board, provides an opportunity to consider greater consistency of information and for a more comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to the sort

of management performance to which the Appleby Report aspired.

The very presence of the regional agency for public health and social well-being will allow a focus on the development of measures that can effectively gauge whether the progress in public health and social well-being that is expected as a result of the creation of the agency is being made. There are real opportunities. Colleagues with whom I met this morning are working on the detail of that performance regime, taking in all the relevant issues, including the regulatory framework, the role of the RQIA and the revised role of the slimmed-down Department, with an improved focus on how the regional agency and the regional board will work together and how the LCGs will play their part in that function and relate to the trusts.

The Department will provide a definitive framework for performance management. The reforms have given us the opportunity to do that. The Department is working hard on that matter, and proposals will be published in the next four to eight weeks.

Mr McMaster: The provisions of the Bill include a statutory responsibility for the regional board to performance manage the trusts. The board can now be told that that is no longer something that it should be doing but which it absolutely must be doing.

The Chairperson: I am glad that there will be that level of accountability and scrutiny. We are only at the start of the long process of considering the Bill in detail. Members have had to go through a lot of reading material. I thank the departmental officials for attending this afternoon; it has been very helpful. Thank you for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

17 September 2008

PRESUMPTION OF DEATH BILL (NIA 23/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Ian Paisley Jnr
Ms Dawn Purvis
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Neil Lambe	}	Department of Finance and Personnel
Oswyn Paulin		

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): This is the start of the Committee Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill, to which the Committee last week agreed to give priority over the Civil Registration Bill. Also, as agreed last week, a notice drawing attention to the Bill's Committee Stage and seeking submissions by 15 October will appear in tomorrow's newspapers. Organisations which responded to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's consultation on the Bill will be contacted directly by Committee staff.

Does the Committee agree that written responses received may be forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel for consideration and response, which is the normal process?

Members indicated assent.

I refer members to the briefing paper from the Department and the secretariat paper, which are among the papers provided. I remind members that this session is being covered by Hansard, so all mobile phones must be switched off.

I welcome Oswyn Paulin, departmental solicitor and head of the Government Legal Service for the Department, and Neil Lambe, principal legal officer with the civil law reform division of the Department. I invite them to make their presentation. In order to give the Committee an opportunity to comment or ask questions, I suggest that they deal with the Bill on a clause-by-clause basis. Is that OK?

Mr Oswyn Paulin (Department of Finance and Personnel): First, may I say that it is gratifying for the Department that the need for, and the principles enshrined in the Bill, have been universally welcomed by Members? It is also gratifying that the Assembly agreed the Second Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill on Monday. This is the first Bill for which the civil law reform division of DFP has responsibility to have reached Committee stage since the restoration of devolution last year.

Several detailed issues were raised by Members during the debate on Monday, and I hope that today, and during the coming weeks, we can address those issues together. I also hope that the Committee will arrive at consensus on those issues — for example technical issues relating to court procedures and the rules of evidence. We are eager to provide the Committee with as much assistance as possible during this stage of the Bill's progress through the Assembly.

In the briefing papers provided to the Committee in May and June 2008, the Department highlighted some issues that were raised during the public consultation. Furthermore, we described the changes made to the Bill to accommodate those issues before its introduction: for example, giving greater recognition to close relatives of missing person in the application process, and allowing the High Court to dispense with the need for the placing of advertisements in the local media. However, we noted that there were two outstanding issues — insurance and disclosure — which required further consideration.

With respect to insurance, the Minister indicated on Monday that the Department has reconsidered the provisions relating to insurance and capital sums. We have decided to follow exactly the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977 in the treatment of those matters. We consulted the insurance industry on our proposed amendments and they were content. A proposed simpler definition of an insurer for inclusion in clause 16 of the Bill is still with colleagues in the Treasury for comment. However, I expect that issue to be resolved very shortly.

As far as disclosure is concerned, members will recall that the Department first raised the issue in the consultation document. Consultees were invited to express views on whether the Bill should include disclosure provisions, and those who responded

favoured such a provision. Disclosure is always a difficult issue, and we have given much thought to how such a provision should be framed. We are continuing to work with colleagues across UK Departments and Departments here to secure the necessary agreements for a new provision in the Bill. That new provision will allow the High Court to order a third party — a person, group or body not involved in the case before the court — to disclose relevant information. However, Government Departments and other agencies that hold sensitive personal data have been understandably cautious about the terms and scope of the High Court power compelling them to disclose otherwise protected information. I will share with the Committee a draft of that provision as soon as agreements have been secured.

This Bill is unusual, because of the number of its provisions that concern reserved matters. The consequence of that is that those provisions — dealing for example with the powers of the court — require the consent of the Secretary of State. As the Minister said in his speech to the Assembly on Monday, that consent has been obtained for the Bill in its present form. It will be the responsibility of officials to ensure that any further changes in the provisions of the Bill dealing with reserved matters also have the consent of the Secretary of State.

Now that the Bill has reached Committee Stage, we are very much in the Committee's hands and are happy to provide members with any assistance that we can. I understand that the Committee wants us to proceed through —

The Chairperson: Yes. Will you go through the Bill on a clause-by-clause basis? I will invite the Committee to comment as we proceed.

Mr Paulin: Clause 1 sets out the alternate grounds on which the High Court can make a declaration that a missing person may be presumed dead.

The missing person must be thought to have died or have not been known to be alive for a period of at least seven years. Under clause 1, any person may make an application to the High Court, although the court must refuse to hear an application if it considers that the applicant — other than an applicant who is the spouse, civil partner or close relative of the missing person — does not have a sufficient interest in the determination of the application.

Subsection (2) sets out the jurisdictional rules that must be met in order for the High Court to be able to hear the application: either the missing person must have been domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland or, where the applicant is a spouse or civil partner of the missing person, the applicant is domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland.

I will move on now to domicile and habitual residence, if the Committee wishes.

Ms Purvis: May we ask questions now, or should we wait until all the clauses have been covered?

Mr Paulin: We are still on clause 1.

The Chairperson: We will wait until clause 1 has been finished with before taking questions.

Mr Paulin: I will now turn to domicile and habitual residence. There is nothing particularly exceptional about the jurisdictional rules in clause 1, which are based on jurisdictional rules that apply when a person seeks dissolution of a marriage or civil partnership based on the presumed death of the spouse or partner. The Committee can look, for example, at article 49(4) of the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

The term “domicile” has a particular meaning in law: it describes the relationship that a person has with a particular country. Every person has a personal law, which is a law that attaches to each of us individually and which determines our capacity to do things wherever in the world we may be. An individual's personal law will be determined by the person's domicile. The term “habitual residence” is another legal term that is used as a determining factor in connecting a person with a particular legal jurisdiction.

Finally, I want to mention close relatives. Because not every missing person will be married or will be in a civil partnership, clause 1(3) provides that the High Court cannot refuse to hear an application for a declaration of presumed death from certain close relatives of a missing person. That is a more liberal approach than originally existed.

I am happy to take any questions on clause 1.

Ms Purvis: Has the Department considered the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's point that some of the disappeared may not have been domiciled in Northern Ireland and so may therefore fall outside the legislation?

Mr Neil Lambe (Department of Finance and Personnel): We met some of the families of the disappeared when the legislation was being drafted and they raised that as a potential issue. One of the disappeared, in particular, was not resident in Northern Ireland at the time of his disappearance. The fact that he was outside the jurisdiction at the time is very unlikely to mean that he was no longer legally domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland. Although it is ultimately for the High Court, on receipt of an application, to make the determination as to whether it has jurisdiction in a particular case, we would be fairly confident that the disappeared would satisfy the domiciled or habitual residence requirements.

Ms Purvis: Clause 1(2)(b) suggests that only the spouse or civil partner of a missing person needs to be domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland. What is the purpose of that provision?

Mr Lambe: That jurisdictional rule emerges from the existing jurisdictional rules that must be met if an existing spouse or civil partner seeks dissolution of a marriage or civil partnership in Northern Ireland on the basis of the absence and presumed death of the spouse or civil partner. Thus, it is an existing jurisdictional rule that already applies to comparable High Court proceedings.

Ms Purvis: Will you give the Committee an example?

Mr Lambe: Under the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, were a husband to walk out in untoward circumstances and for no reason, and eight years later his spouse decides that it is most likely that her husband is dead because his family has not heard from him; to obtain a divorce in Northern Ireland, she must satisfy the High Court that she lives here; that her husband has been missing for more than seven years, and that she satisfies either the domicile or a habitual residence test. Establishing either domicile or habitual residence in Northern Ireland justifies the High Court in Northern Ireland, as opposed to the High Court in England and Wales, in having jurisdiction to decide the case.

Mr Paulin: That also applies in divorce cases. In the ordinary course of events, we are not a forum to which people come to get divorces; they generally have to have a connection with Northern Ireland, which is usually on the basis of domicile or habitual residence.

Ms Purvis: Given that that provision applies to a spouse or a civil partner — and not everyone is married or has a civil partner — does that same provision apply to a close relative?

Mr Lambe: No. In the application process under the legislation, spouses and civil partners are given a privileged position over all other possible applicants because, unlike any other possible applicant, they remain in a legal contract with the missing person until the marriage is formally dissolved or the civil partnership ended. Therefore, such a person is not free to marry another person or enter into a civil partnership.

It is true that not every missing person will have been married or have been in a civil partnership. We are not putting close relatives in the same position as spouses or civil partners, but we are distinguishing them from other possible applications; for example, a bank that is owed money by the missing person. The High Court cannot refuse to hear the application on the basis that the close relative does not have an interest in the outcome of the application, but a close relative who is applying will have to satisfy the court that the

missing person was domiciled or habitually resident in Northern Ireland.

Ms Purvis: Is it wise to give a spouse or civil partner privilege? Hypothetically, a woman could have separated from her spouse and be living with another person as a cohabitee for many years, but that spouse will still have privilege under the Bill.

Mr Lambe: Even if there had been a family breakdown and the separated spouse was living with another person, that separated spouse still remains in a legally-binding relationship with the missing person, and is, in our view, in a different position from a cohabitant no matter how long the cohabitation has lasted. A cohabitant will be able to apply under the legislation, and it is most likely that the High Court will, following clause 1, say that the cohabitant has a sufficient interest in the outcome of the case and, therefore, will hear the case and make whatever determination is appropriate on the affidavit evidence supplied.

Ms Purvis: On what basis will the court determine that sufficient interest exists?

Mr Lambe: That is a matter for the court.

The Department's role is not to advise the High Court on whether particular connecting factors satisfy the sufficient interest threshold — that is the court's job when it receives an applicant's evidence affidavit. For example, consider a case in which a missing person's neighbour, who has no interest in the missing person's property, will not benefit from his or her estate and is not a relative, just wants clarification. On receipt of an officious bystander's application, the court would be entitled to rule whether he or she had sufficient interest in the case's outcome to warrant the desired determination. In such circumstances, if family members had not thought fit to apply, of what interest would it be for someone down the street to go to the High Court? The sufficient interest criterion will allow the court a measure of discretion when deciding which cases it will allow to come to court.

Ms Purvis: Should there not be guidelines setting out what constitutes sufficient interest?

Mr Paulin: The courts are used to dealing with a concept such a sufficient interest, and we feel that they would readily be able to sort that out. If the Department starts listing criteria that constitute sufficient interest, where would that end? One tends to think of relatives and people who have been adversely affected by someone's disappearance as having sufficient interest; however, someone who is owed a substantial sum of money by a disappeared person might not come so readily to mind, and, in order to recover that money, such a person might wish to go through the procedure. If we attempt to work out such parameters in advance, we may not consider every

possibility that might arise. I am confident that the courts will use such powers properly.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Further to Ms Purvis's point about sufficient interest; as legislators, we should provide the courts and the public with a clear understanding of what the legislation that we make actually means. Although I appreciate the fact that the Department does not wish to draw up a list because it could not be exhaustive, it should be clear about what is meant by a person — a friend, a parent or, as has been said, a debtor — having sufficient interest. It would be useful for the Committee to understand how the courts will interpret that clause. Although now is not the time, perhaps the officials could provide the Committee with some case studies of how the courts might interpret it.

I wish to explore the matter raised in clause 1(1)(b):
 “has not been known to be alive for a period of at least 7 years,”

How did the Department arrive at that period of time?

Mr Paulin: That has been the standard to date in similar provisions. The Department is repealing some provisions, such as the matrimonial causes provision, which enables people to bring a marriage to an end in such circumstances. Seven years comes from the period in the law of evidence that applies to presumption of death.

Five years is sufficient in cases of desertion. If a person leaves their spouse without cause for five years then the marriage can be brought to an end — that is in the situation in which the person is living, or not, as the case may be. A longer period, seven years, is the period used to establish the presumption of death as far as the rules of evidence are concerned. The Department has picked the timescale of seven years because of a common-law rule that is reflected in statutes. That is also reflected in the Scottish Act.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I was about to ask if that is reflected in other, similar legislation.

Mr Lambe: We noted in the consultation paper in January 2008 that some states in the United States have some statutory intervention, or procedures, for establishing death, and that they adopt different periods of time — some as low as three years, others four, and others five. I do not know the particular reasons why those state legislatures have adopted those time periods. A number of Canadian jurisdictions use the standard seven-year period. In Scotland the period used is seven years, and in common-law jurisdictions like ours, that have limited statutory intervention in this field at the moment, the courts rely on the rule of evidence that posits the seven-year rule.

In fixing the time limit in this Bill to seven years, we followed the Scottish model, but the seven-year rule is known colloquially among the public. If one were to ask about someone who had been missing

for seven years people would say that that person could be presumed dead after that period of time. I would explain that it is not quite so straight forward, but I would know what they are getting at. At least there is an element of familiarity in these very early days of a new piece of legislation and a new statutory jurisdiction.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is really a convention, then. Has any thought been given to how it might affect someone who has to invoke this legislation if they are 65, and they realise that nothing can be done until they are 72? Some people may think that that is too long to wait.

Mr Weir: The spouse in the back garden?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I do not think that that is funny.

Mr Paulin: There are two situations: first, there is the situation in which the person is thought to have died. In such a case, there may be evidence that the person has died; for example, they may have been abducted, such as in the case of the disappeared, or some event may have occurred, and although death cannot be established, there is reasonable belief that the person has died. The seven-year timescale would also apply if there is no other reason to believe that someone has died other than that they have not been heard of.

We have not given a lot of thought to the age of the spouse. In taking that line, it may introduce a form of shifting scale, and that would become quite difficult in legislative terms, and I think that it is quite difficult to justify.

The Chairperson: There was some limited discussion on Monday, when the Minister was before the Assembly, that the period of seven years may be too long generally although not in specific cases.

Mr Paulin: There is power within the Bill, as drafted, for the Minister to change the period of time, and I think that that would be subject to an affirmative resolution.

The Chairperson: The Minister did address the matter in those terms.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am also thinking of a spouse of pensionable age, or perhaps a perceived victim who is a child, and another family member having to wait seven years before they can achieve closure. There are issues there that could be looked at on either scale. I know that it would cause a legal headache, and I am sure that you, as a legal draftsman, would think it would very difficult to include such a condition, but I wonder if any thought has been given to those issues.

Mr Paulin: We can reflect upon that further.

Mr Lambe: There are two issues. The first is whether seven years, as a default, is too long. During

consultation, some people thought that that was too long and others thought that we were right to follow established conventions. It is an issue that is exercising the Council of Europe working party. The preliminary discussions that I had with colleagues in the Law Reform Commission of Ireland revealed that they favoured a five-year period. However, much will depend on what the Council of Europe decides at international level.

The second issue is what might be an appropriate time period in individual cases. If we were to insert into the Bill a provision that sets the default position as seven years but states that the High Court can dispense with that in particular cases, potential applicants might not know where they stand because the rule is not fixed. The situation could depend on what discretion the High Court would be prepared to exercise on the particular day that the application comes before it.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In such a case, I prefer that we — as legislators — are clear about why we are setting timeframes rather than leaving that to a court to determine. It is not that I distrust a court; I think that we must be clear when we are making the law.

Mr Weir: I will pick up on the points that Ian and Dawn raised. You said that during the consultation people thought that the seven-year period, or a shorter period, was sufficient. Did anybody suggest that seven years was an insufficient period of time?

Mr Lambe: No: not to my knowledge.

Mr Weir: In one regard, the debate is about whether the period should be seven years or five years, although I agree that a fixed timeframe should be included so that people have a degree of certainty.

Dawn made a point about sufficient interest. Does Scottish legislation contain a similar reference? Has case law been built up about what sufficient interest is?

Mr Paulin: There is very little case law in Scotland.

Mr Lambe: I have not been able to find any reported cases on the Scottish Act, primarily because cases are only reported that raise issues of the law. In Scotland, declarations of presumed death operate at the Sheriff Court level, and people make applications for a bare declaration of presumed death. No issues of law are involved — it is an application of the principles of the legislation to the facts of the case. People obtain a declaration and nobody is any the wiser for it.

Mr Paulin: The Scottish legislation states:

“any person having an interest may raise an action of declarator of the death of that person”.

The person concerned does not even have to have a sufficient interest.

Mr Lambe: The term “sufficient interest” derives from pre-existing Northern Ireland legislation on High

Court declaratory proceedings. If the High Court is petitioned for a declaration of parentage, it has the power and discretion to refuse to hear that application if the applicant does not have sufficient interest in the outcome.

I expect the court to use the sufficient interest threshold primarily as a means of preventing nuisance and vexatious applications to it by officious bystanders, whoever they may be. There could be an application from a family member — perhaps an aunt or an uncle; depending on the family structure of that missing person. I doubt that the High Court would tell such an applicant that they do not have a sufficient interest.

Mr Weir: It has been made clear that we want people to have a degree of certainty about timeframes, and that we do not want variations from case to case. Also, I appreciate that the High Court should have flexibility in interpreting the sufficient interest test. However, I am concerned that we are abrogating the matter by leaving it to the High Court to determine. I understand the argument that the danger in having a tight definition of sufficient interest means that some categories will be included and unforeseen categories will not. However, people will want to know what category they fall into and whether they will have the opportunity to meet the sufficient interest test from a financial relationship perspective or whatever.

Surely, it would be possible to have a list of what sufficient interest means, along with a catch-all final line. That would give the High Court some flexibility and guide it in the same way as a tightly-controlled definition of close relative. It would provide people with a degree of clarity. There are a lot of good definitions in the system, but we seem to have left the interpretation of sufficient interest entirely to the High Court. If we do not produce a framework, people will be confused about whether they qualify as having sufficient interest.

Mr Paulin: Would it be helpful if — as one of your colleagues suggested — we produced authorities to show how the court has interpreted sufficient interest? That might allay your concerns.

Mr Weir: That could also support my suggestion. If there are several of examples of sufficient interest having been interpreted in a particular way, why can those not be put down as a clear legislative qualification for sufficient interest? The legislation could include a final provision that would give the High Court some discretion where an application that does not fall into one of those categories. Such legislation would not be unique. It would at least give the High Court some guidance on what should be counted as sufficient interest, rather than the current apparently blank-cheque process.

Mr Paulin: We need to consider what we are trying to do. Do we want to restrict the number of people who can apply, or —

Mr Weir: We want to restrict the number of people who can apply. However, we also want to send a signal to people who do not fall into the category of being a spouse or close relative. People will be left in the dark somewhat if the decision is left to the High Court and no guidance is provided about what constitutes sufficient interest. If people were given examples of what constitutes sufficient interest, it may affect the number of applications. We should do our best to provide some clarity.

Mr Paulin: The matter is similar to the situation in judicial review of whether someone has locus standi; I am not sure what the corresponding English phrase is. It means that there is sufficient interest in the issue that is being challenged to bring proceedings. Locus standi is almost a dead letter in judicial review now, and almost anyone can bring any proceedings.

Mr Weir: Consequently, if locus standi in judicial review cases is a dead letter, surely it would be helpful to provide guidance for determining what constitutes sufficient interest. As things stand, does it not place a wide interpretation on the High Court on whether one person or another fulfils the sufficient interest test? It would be helpful to provide the court with guidance on the issue.

Mr Lambe: We will have to further consider what might be interpreted as sufficient interest, but I will leave the Committee with the thought that any person can make an application under clause 1. The applicant, prior to making the application, does not have to decide whether he or she has an interest, because the legislation does not require them to do so. The sufficient interest threshold comes in after the application has been lodged with the High Court. The High Court can acknowledge the application, but it can refuse to hear the application if it considers that the applicant does not have sufficient interest in the outcome of the case. Therefore, the case will not go to a hearing.

Mr Weir: With respect, it does not preclude anyone from applying. However, if someone wishes to take a legal case, they would have to consider what threshold they have to reach to have their case heard. The deterrent would be the sufficient interest test. We should be considering something with more clarity, which would allow the High Court to have some flexibility.

The Chairperson: I have no particular expertise on the issue, but it relates to whether the prescriptive approach is helpful to all concerned, including the applicants, or whether, in the light of experience of case law, development over time would be a wider approach that would allow people to know whether

they qualify, to seek advice and then decide to give instructions to a solicitor to pursue the issue.

We have strayed well into clause 2, so we will move on. We may not complete this discussion today, but we will work for as long as possible. I suggest a cut-off point of 12.15 pm may give a focus to people.

Mr Beggs: In case law, what is the definition of not having sufficient interest?

Mr Paulin: We will come back to you on that.

Mr Beggs: There is no need for a debate about it now.

Mention was made about whether someone would be presumed dead after seven years or five years under European law. How does that influence the thinking about whether it should be five years or seven years in the Bill?

Mr Lambe: It is simply an indicator of whether there is emerging international consensus that the conventional time frame of seven years is too long.

Mr Paulin: It is the Council of Europe, not the European Union. The Council of Europe is a much larger organisation than the European Union.

Mr Beggs: Are there any directives on the issue?

Mr Paulin: No.

Mr O'Loan: The seven-year issue is significant, but it is not the only test.

I would appreciate it if officials would provide the Committee with evidence that has been gathered internationally to show whether the seven-year test has resulted in any difficulties. In Monday's debate I referred to anecdotal evidence relating to the 2004 tsunami. On reflection, I am not sure why there were problems, but nevertheless, I have heard that some difficulties were exposed.

Mr Paulin: The twin towers may be another example.

Mr O'Loan: Yes, that was another example that I had thought of.

Mr Paulin: Clause 2 makes further provision in relation to declarations of presumed death. It provides that when the High Court makes a declaration of presumed death it must find either that: the missing person has died at a specified time and date or at the end of a specified period in cases where the evidence leads the court to conclude that the missing person has died; or, where the missing person has not been known to be alive for a period of at least seven years, that the missing person died at the end of the day occurring seven years after the date on which the missing person was last known to be alive. Is that reasonably clear?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Paulin: Under clause 12, the Department of Finance and Personnel will have the power to vary the requirement that a person must not have been known to be alive for a period of seven years if, for example, an international consensus is reached that a five-year period is sufficiently long to justify a court making a determination of presumed death. In that instance, the Department would be able to make that change through a statutory rule subject to affirmative resolution, rather than the change having to be made via primary legislation. That is based on the assumption that the Assembly will agree on the seven-year period, rather than changing it to a five-, six- or eight-year period.

Clause 2(4) of the Bill is taken from the Scottish Act. It provides that when other courts or tribunals are asked to find that a person may be considered to be dead, such courts or tribunals should apply the criteria in subsection (1) and fix a date and time of presumed death in relation to the missing person. There may be proceedings in other courts that are quite unrelated to the Act and no proceedings that are under the Act — I cannot immediately think of an example, but if it were to occur we would ask the courts to follow the same procedure.

Mr Beggs: I do not understand fully how that situation would arise.

Mr Paulin: An example relating to property would be in the case of a lease for lives, where there is some sort of land arrangement involving a person and the last life is a person whose whereabouts are not known; who is believed to have died, but that belief is not based on any evidence. A lease for lives is a form of abeyance of property in which a lease is given to person X as long as persons A, B and C are alive. It used to be the case that person A was someone such as the Queen — someone totally unconnected with the property, and usually someone who is well known so that their death would be known publicly. However, sometimes it can happen that no one knows whether the person is alive or dead and, in those circumstances, the rules in clause 2(4) would apply and therefore the court, in deciding in such circumstances that a person had died, would have to apply the provision that relates to the time at which they had died as set out in the Act.

Mr Beggs: Am I right to interpret the subsection to mean that the High Court simply makes a judgment about whether it deems a person to be dead whereas a court or tribunal must deal with any incidental issues?

Mr Lambe: No, as I understand it, subsection (4) applies where no application is made under the Bill. A close relative is not required to apply for a declaration of presumption of death. However, a situation could arise — at which the Bill may not be specifically directed — where the decision as to whether a person

is dead or alive becomes a crucial fact. If it is found that someone is dead a court must determine when that person died.

The Chairperson: Is there a common test that must be satisfied even if it cuts across a number of different legal processes?

Mr Paulin: Yes, a common test must be used even if the case relates to different legislation or no legislation at all.

Mr Lambe: Under the common-law rule of evidence, if a person has been missing for seven years they may be presumed to be dead. Over the past 150 years, during the formulation of that rule, never once was it said that the time and date of death must be fixed as part of that judicial pronouncement in civil proceedings.

The intention of subsection (4) is to get other courts, which hear contentious disputes between individuals where the issue of presumption of death arises, to follow the form of the new legislation and to fix the time and date of any deaths that they — as a matter of evidence as opposed to a matter of law — presume to have occurred.

Mr Paulin: It allows for consistency in approach.

Clause 3 provides for the general effect of a declaration of presumed death under clause 1. In essence, the declaration of presumed death shall be conclusive for all purposes and against all persons. It will have the same effect in law as if the missing person had died and their death is recorded by the Registrar General for Northern Ireland in the usual manner.

A declaration of presumed death will automatically end any marriage or civil partnership to which the missing person was a party. Revocation of a declaration will not revive any marriage or civil partnership that has been ended by this operation. The clause makes it clear that once a declaration is made the marriage or civil partnership is ended for good.

A party to the proceedings will have six weeks from the date of the court's judgment to lodge an appeal with the Court of Appeal. In other words, if I were to apply for a declaration of presumed death and the court rejected it, I would have six weeks within which to lodge an appeal. Similarly, if I were to apply for a declaration to which someone were opposed they would have the same route of appeal if the decision went against them.

Once court procedures are complete, a family member may provide proof that the missing person has been declared dead by lodging a certified copy of the entry in the register of presumed deaths. Paragraph 6 of schedule 1 explains that a certified copy of an entry in the register of presumed deaths in relation to a

person is to be received, without further or other proof, as evidence of a person's death.

Mr Hamilton: It is almost stating the obvious to say that if a married person were to be presumed dead under the Bill that their marriage would be over. It has been said that in such cases the marriage or civil partnership would be deemed over forever. I have re-read the clause, and it is not clear that that is the case.

In circumstances where a married person comes back from the dead, so to speak, like the man in the canoe, is the marriage still effectively over?

Mr Paulin: In other words, can it be revived?

Mr Hamilton: Obviously, one could go down to City Hall and get remarried. However, what is the legal status of the marriage?

Mr Lambe: When a marriage is ended in law, which is what clause 3 says occurs; there is no common-law doctrine of which I am aware for the revival of the marriage. In law, the missing person is dead and, therefore, death has ended the marriage. What we are trying to do, as far as possible, is to ensure that the consequences of a declaration of presumed death in law are exactly the same as those of the end of a marriage when a person has died.

In clause 3, we are trying to make it clear that that would be the case if the person were found to be still alive at the time when the declaration was made. How could it be otherwise? To allow for the possibility of the revival of the marriage if the declaration is subsequently revoked would put the surviving spouse in an awkward position — would he or she be free to remarry if the legislation were to allow for the possibility of a future revival of the first marriage? That is why, when we raised the issue, during consultation, on whether the declaration should have the effect of automatically ending a person's marriage or civil partnership, people said that it should. However, the prime reason for doing that is because certainty is needed for the surviving spouse. Whether he or she is the applicant in any particular case or not, the individual needs to know whether he or she is still lawfully married following the declaration.

Mr Hamilton: It was almost getting into the realms of soap opera there.

The Chairperson: I noticed that no one declared an interest. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Paulin: Clause 4 deals with the ancillary powers of the High Court, which may be exercised only if it makes a declaration of presumed death. There are three powers. One is to determine the domicile of the missing person — we have already discussed domicile. Determining whether the missing person is domiciled in Northern Ireland or elsewhere is a key issue if the missing person has an estate that requires administration under

succession law. Domicile is an important issue in law of succession and the administration of estates. The court also has the power to determine on questions relating to the interest of any person in the missing person's property. For example, an applicant may wish the High Court to determine that the applicant and the missing person hold property together as tenants in common, rather than as joint tenants.

The other ancillary power is to make such order as it considers reasonable as to any rights to or in property acquired as a result of the making of a declaration of presumed death. Upon the making of a declaration of presumed death, the property of the missing person devolves or passes to others in accordance with the rules of law governing succession and the administration of estates. However, there may be particular circumstances in which the court might consider it appropriate to make an order that relates to a small estate, thus avoiding the need for further proceedings in the High Court, especially when there is no will. For example, the court may decide when making a declaration of presumed death to order that the estate be divided between the surviving siblings of the missing person — his or her brothers and sisters.

Subsection (2) provides that an order under clause 4(1)(b) may direct that the value of any rights to, or in property acquired, as the result of the making of a declaration of presumed death are irrecoverable. For example, the court may order that the value of any painting or car, for example, or the proceeds from the sale of the painting or car, are not recoverable under a property variation order made under clause 6(2). Property variation orders can be made when it is found that a person for whom a declaration of presumed death was made is, in fact, still alive.

I am happy to answer any questions.

Mr Weir: I want to make sure that there is no drafting gap. I appreciate that we have dealt with the domicile issue and that determining the domicile of a missing person at the time of death could be difficult. The question of domicile also arises in the situation of a spouse or civil partner and whether they are domiciled or habitually resident at the time of application. Should the High Court not have the power to determine domicile? I presume that there could be cases in which there are grey areas around whether the applicant, being a spouse, is domiciled or not. I wonder why that is not included. I would have thought that that could be easily determined. Why is that not one of the issues to be determined by the High Court?

Mr Lambe: As a jurisdictional rule, on the issue of the domicile of a missing person or an applicant spouse, the court does not need to have power under clause 1 of the Bill to make an order saying that it is satisfied that an applicant is domiciled, and, therefore,

has the jurisdiction to hear the case. The resolution of any issues on whether the jurisdictional rules are satisfied will be dealt with during the course of the application. There is no need for the High Court to make an order saying that the applicant satisfies the jurisdictional rules of the case. The difference, when we come to clause 4, and the ancillary power of the court to make a determination about the domicile of the missing person, is where the consequences of making that determination will not be for the proceedings before the High Court at that time, but will have effect, perhaps, in subsequent succession or administration proceedings.

Mr Weir: There is an essential difference between process and outcome.

Mr Lambe: Yes. In order for any case to come before the judge in the High Court, there will have been a determination, however implicit, in allowing the case to get that far, and that the jurisdictional rules that have been set out have been met.

Mr Weir: OK.

The Chairperson: Are there any other questions?

Mr Beggs: I have a question about the sequence of the clauses of the Bill. Clause 4 gives the High Court the power to determine the domicile of a missing person and deals with issues such as interests in property. Why are those powers not specified in a preceding clause? If a person were not domiciled, would the judgement not be made that it was not for that particular court to deal with? Should that determination not be made at an earlier stage? Where property is concerned, are such decisions not made on the basis that the person concerned may have made a will, rather than determining whether or not it is related to an interest that a person may have in a case?

Mr Lambe: The ancillary powers will only be exercisable if the High Court has made a declaration that the missing person is presumed dead. That is why, in the structure of the Bill, those powers come after the court makes its pronouncement that, having been satisfied that the jurisdictional rules have been met and satisfied by the evidence presented by the applicant, it is right to proceed; and, if all of those conditions have been met, whether other orders are required to be made. That is when the court would consider those issues.

The Chairperson: Clause 4(1)(b) deals with the powers of the High Court to make orders about property rights as a result of a direction. What distinction will there be between the exercise of that power and the existing law governing succession to the estates of deceased persons?

Mr Paulin: My understanding is that it will follow the existing succession law, so that if a person dies intestate without a will, the normal laws of intestate

succession will apply. Similarly, if there is a will, it will be administered by the court in exceptional circumstances.

Where the estate is substantial, it will be normal, even though there has been a declaration of presumed death, for the person to apply in the normal way for probate.

The Chairperson: Where there is a will...

Mr Hamilton: ...there is a way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Paulin: Similarly with intestacy — if there is a substantial estate.

Mr Lambe: The provision is there, primarily, to allow the High Court to deal with the substance of what is before it, in declaring someone to be presumed dead, and also allow the judge to deal with other minor miscellaneous matters that might arise. The alternative is to have the High Court say that it cannot deal with such matters under this legislation, obliging the plaintiff to commence a separate set of proceedings in the High Court. We hope that one judge would be able to resolve minor issues, obviating the need for further proceedings.

The Chairperson: During the consultation, the Northern Bank was particularly concerned that the Bill does not give the High Court the option to grant ancillary orders to those who may have an interest in the estate or assets of persons declared dead.

Mr Lambe: I am not sure what the Northern Bank had in mind by way of its reference to ancillary orders. I thought that it was querying whether, as the Northern Bank, it would have the right to apply and use this jurisdiction if a large sum of money was owed to it. As a corporate person, it is able to apply to have a debtor presumed dead, provided the court does not then exercise its discretion and declare that it did not have a sufficient interest in the outcome. It probably would decide that a creditor did have sufficient interest.

On the other hand, if the Northern Bank understood the phrase “not being able to avail of further ancillary orders under this legislation” to mean that it would be unable to get an order for possession of property, that is so. It would have to initiate — in our view, quite properly — a separate set of proceedings, which it will only be able to do because it has previously established the presumed death of the missing person.

This Bill is not a one-stop shop for the resolution of all possible legal issues that might arise in connection with the affairs of a missing person. Other legal avenues exist for resolving those disputes. One of the aims of the Bill is to leave in place and not disturb the existing procedures and working practices.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the Bill does not set aside any existing legal mechanisms or recourse for creditors.

Mr Lambe: Exactly. The legal routes to acquire possession of a property will still be available to creditors.

The Chairperson: It does not fall to the High Court, under this Bill, to make any determinations in respect of disputes or creditors' claims.

Mr Lambe: That is correct. Existing debt-recovery processes are unaffected. However, if, to obtain an order to initiate any debt recovery process, the Northern Bank, or any financial institution, has to establish the death of the missing person, such a financial institution can apply, in the same way as a family member, under this proposed legislation.

The Chairperson: Might it be possible for you to deal with clauses 5 and 6 together?

Mr Paulin: Yes. Clause 5 provides the High Court with the power, on application, both to vary and revoke a declaration of presumed death made under clause 1. Whereas any person may apply for a variation order, subsection (2) provides that the court must refuse to hear the application if it considers that the applicant does not have a sufficient interest — we hear that phrase again — in the determination of the application. There are no special rules for spouses, civil partners or close relatives in determining who can apply for a variation order, or how the court should deal with these applications. Given that a declaration of presumed death has already been made in respect of the missing person, there is no need for rules that privilege one type of applicant over another.

All applicants will have to satisfy the court that they have sufficient interest in the application for a variation order.

Clause 5(4) is not required to deal with the court's powers in clause 4(1)(b) to make orders in relation to the missing person's property etc, because the limited property varying powers of the court are dealt with separately in clause 6.

Clause 6 sets out the general rule that a variation order under clause 5 is to have no effect on property rights acquired as a result of the making of a declaration under clause 1.

Although, clause 6(2) allows the High Court to make a further order in relation to any rights to or in any property acquired as a result of the making of a declaration of presumed death, clause 6(5) makes clear that, other than in exceptional circumstances, no order under clause 6(2) can be made unless the application for a variation order was made within five years of the making of the declaration of presumed death.

Clause 6(3) further limits the scope of any order that may be made under clause 6(2) by providing that no such order shall cause income generated during the period from the making of the declaration to the making of the variation order to be returned to the missing person, or otherwise redistributed to a person who is entitled to it in consequence of the variation order.

Clause 6(4) sets out the considerations that the High Court must take into account in deciding whether to make an order under clause 6(2).

Clause 6(6) provides protection to a bona fide purchaser for value of any property acquired from a person who is entitled to it on foot of the declaration under clause 6(1).

Clause 6(7) deals with the trustee's liability for a breach of trust and makes it clear that the trustee is under the same duty of care in relation to the property of the missing person as if he or she were administering the estate of the person who had died and in respect of whom a grant of probate or administration had been obtained.

Under clause 12, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has the power to amend clause 6 to vary the five-year period, or the seven-year period. In the future, an international consensus may develop that five years is too long a period of uncertainty for those who may have acquired an interest in property as a result of the making of the declaration of presumed death. In that case, DFP will be able to substitute a shorter period of, for example three years, by order. That would be subject to an affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

Mr Hamilton: My question sounds fairly simple. Clause 5(1) states:

"A declaration under section 1 may... be varied or revoked by an Order".

Will officials cite a practical example of where a declaration would be amended in any way other than its being revoked?

Mr Paulin: That could happen when evidence, which was previously not known to the Department, arises that a person died on a particular date. The subsequent discovery that a person died on a particular date could have consequences for property, tax and so forth. Is that a good example?

Mr Lambe: Yes. Over the past 100 years, the common-law presumption of death was applied in some case law. By adopting one date of presumed death, one set of relatives would inherit under the person's will whereas, had a different date of death been fixed, a different set of relatives would have inherited. That would result in their going back and forth to the courts in the search for evidence in, for

example, late nineteenth century Ohio, to ascertain when the person was last known to be alive. Therefore, the date of presumed death is significant, and in clause 2, for example, the Department stresses that a person could not simply presume a person to be dead — it must be known from what point in time that presumption dates.

Mr Hamilton: Does that apply when there is a greater certitude of death?

Mr Lambe: Yes, it applies when further evidence comes to light.

Mr Paulin: That one example readily springs to mind but there may well be others.

Mr O'Loan: I have a question as a lay person. Clause 5(1) states that an application for a variation order can be made at any time. I expect that a person who has been presumed dead my turn up 50 years later. Clause 3(a) states:

“no appeal is brought against a declaration under section 1 within the time allowed for appeal”.

I cannot see another reference to the time allowed for appeal.

Mr Paulin: Clause 3(a) refers to the appeal against the declaration of presumed death. So, if I were to apply for declaration of presumed death and succeed, and someone else who was interested in the case had fought it by saying that the person had not died but was still alive and had not been heard from, they could argue that the court was wrong and they could appeal. That would happen at the declaration stage.

The variation stage is different. It is a new, fresh application and asks for presumably new evidence to be brought on which the application could be based.

Mr Lambe: The reference in clause 3(a) to the time limit in which to appeal essentially makes the point that the effect of the declaration would not occur until the window during which an appeal on a decision from the High Court may be lodged to the Court of Appeal. Although the High Court may decide today that “X” may be presumed to be dead, that judgement would not take effect until six weeks later. That is because six weeks is the timeframe in which an appeal against that decision could be lodged.

Mr O'Loan: Where is that timeframe specified? Is that a general thing and how quickly —

Mr Lambe: The six-week period is the general period in which orders of the High Court can be appealed to the Court of Appeal as set out in the rules of court.

Mr O'Loan: Can the applicant appeal? You talked about a third party appealing.

Mr Paulin: Yes, the applicant can appeal. They would only need to appeal —

Mr O'Loan: Is that obvious? It does not seem to say that anywhere.

Mr Paulin: They would only need to appeal if they —

Mr O'Loan: Yes, if it had gone against the way that they had wanted.

Mr Paulin: Yes. Either party can appeal.

Mr Lambe: It does not need to be said. You are given the right of appeal. It does not need to be specified.

The Chairperson: There is a right of appeal?

Mr Paulin: Yes, there is a general right of appeal.

The Chairperson: OK. I suggest that is sufficient for today. The decision of the Committee in relation to the progress that has been made is whether members want to continue this by correspondence, or whether we should invite you back to complete this particular session.

Mr Beggs: I have a question regarding this particular clause.

The Chairperson: Sorry. Excuse me.

Mr Beggs: In relation to clause 6(5), I do not understand why there is a five-year limit and yet the bill states:

“The High Court must not, except where it considers that there are exceptional circumstances”.

Exceptional circumstances would mean that there is no time limit. Therefore, why is there a time limit, but yet there is no time limit?

Mr Lambe: The purpose of the five-year limit, given that it is not always going to be binding on the High Court, is quite directional toward the High Court. It states that you should work on the presumption that you do not make an order more than five years after the initial order. However, if you are satisfied that exceptional circumstances exist, you may depart from the five-year principle.

The way that it is raised means that “the High Court cannot do this unless” rather than “the High Court can if it wants to”. It is a difference in emphasis perhaps, but we would not expect the High Court to say lightly that there were exceptional circumstances and that, therefore, they could disregard the clear intention of the legislation, which is that a five-year rule applies.

Members will recall that the discretion regarding exceptional circumstance was not in the draft Bill that we published for consultation, but a number of respondents suggested that it was too rigid and did not give the High Court any flexibility in that regard. Therefore, we agreed to give a limited measure of flexibility — our interpretation as to whether it is limited or not might differ.

Mr Beggs: I assume that exceptional circumstances would be, for instance, when there is a body, and a date could be established. However, obviously that would apply —

Mr Paulin: Or a person returns.

Mr Beggs: Obviously. Those would be exceptional circumstances, so why then do you require a time limit? What would constitute non-exceptional circumstances that could be allowed to be applied in a five-year period?

Mr Paulin: The person returning is the exceptional circumstance. More definite information on when the person died may not be an exceptional circumstance, but that may depend on the consequences of that if it makes a major difference to people. For instance, if it is known that someone died on 3 January 1972, but that makes no difference, then that would not be exceptional circumstances. However, if it known that someone died on a specific day, which means that X gets an estate of £1 million instead of Y, then that might be an exceptional circumstance.

Mr Beggs: I understand the terminology about exceptional circumstances, but not why there is a five-year limit. What is happening in the five-year limit that is not governed by exceptional circumstances?

Mr Lambe: Clause 6 is not an easy clause to understand. There are three elements to it with regard to whether a missing person who was mistakenly presumed to be dead can get their property back.

Clause 6(1) sets out the basic rule: it does not matter if you come back within two years — you do not get your property back. The basic rule is that a variation order, whether it is varying the time or a revocation order, has no effect on the initial distribution of that person's property which was made on foot of the declaration of presumed death. The assumption should, therefore, be that property is not returned.

If the court is minded to return the property, it can do so only if the application for a variation order is made within a five-year time span. Even then, it is still governed by the basic rule that one should not be making an order returning the property to the individual. If, however, someone comes back seven years later, the two earlier presumptions should apply: no return at all on foot of a revocation order; and you are also outside the five-year window of opportunity for the return of property, which the legislation states. However, we are recognising that, in an individual case, there might be exceptional circumstances in which it would be harsh and unfair to apply those two presumptions. The court therefore has exceptional discretion — it is an accumulative set of barriers.

Mr Paulin: Almost like a shifting back and forwards.

Mr Lambe: I am afraid that it is not straightforward.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee wish to continue this discussion at another sitting?

Mr O'Loan: There are two other issues about which I want to talk.

The Chairperson: Today?

Mr O'Loan: No, but they do need to be discussed. One is the issue of disclosure. Mr Paulin earlier referred consideration being given to inserting a clause to allow the court to order disclosure. There needs to be a much stronger clause. There is a duty on any person who has awareness of the proceedings and who has any relevant information to bring that to the court.

The Chairperson: May I suggest that the Committee slots that brief section in next week?

Mr O'Loan: The other issue that might be useful to consider is the statement in the explanatory and financial memorandum that the legislation is deemed to be compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. What discussion has there been, or is proposed, with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on that matter, including the issue of disclosure?

The Chairperson: OK. If other issues occur to members, we can flag them up and a note will be sent to give Members the opportunity to reflect on them.

I thank the witnesses for their submission and Hansard for its work this morning.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

18 September 2008

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (REFORM) BILL (NIA 21/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Sam Gardiner
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister
Mrs Claire McGill
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Hodkinson	}	Central Services Agency
Ms Jacqueline Kennedy		
Ms Paula Sheils		

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Stephen Hodkinson, chief executive of the Central Services Agency, Jacqueline Kennedy, director of human resources and corporate services, and Paula Sheils, director of family practitioner services.

I invite you to make a brief presentation, after which I will invite questions from members. You are very welcome indeed.

Mr Stephen Hodkinson (Central Services Agency): Thank you very much for the invitation and the welcome. You have explained who we are so I will begin.

I intend to use our submission, which I have already sent to members, as the basis for the short presentation. I intend to give you some sense of the Central Services Agency's work. At the end of the submission, we raise a number of issues, which are relatively minor on the scale of change taking place, but we thought it perhaps useful to draw your attention to those.

The Central Services Agency is a relatively long-standing Health Service organisation. It was established in October 1973 under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, and its main brief — as defined in the Order — is to provide a range of regional support services for the rest of the Health Service. The agency's functions are wide-ranging and include legal services and procurement services, which covers sourcing, contracting, procurement and warehousing logistics.

The agency supplies family practitioner services, which I will describe in more detail, because the boards also provide such services. The Central Services Agency has a family practitioner services counter-fraud unit and an office of research ethics committees, which is less well known. The research and development office handles the budget for research and development in the Health Service, and the agency provides a range of financial services to support the Health Service and others. There is also a human resources department.

The agency currently provides approximately 90% to 95% of legal services to health and social services, which, in broad terms, is mainly for trusts. On 11 July 2008, as the Committee will be aware, the Minister took the decision to cease the use of private-sector providers. We are now working to bring all legal services to the Central Services Agency. That will ensure that all legal services in the Health Service are provided by the public sector. Our legal service is not profit-motivated; we aim to break even, and, furthermore, we provide services solely to the Health Service.

The submission shows the breakdown of the number of staff that our legal services employ, the size of the budget and the quality of service. There are usually 5,500 to 6,000 cases in operation simultaneously, which cover all areas of law including family law, child law, employment law, a wide range of medical negligence cases and cases that involve trips and falls. That workload will, probably, increase by between 500 and 1,000 cases when we adopt the work currently provided by the private sector.

The agency's regional supplies service is one of two designated centres of procurement expertise in the Health Service, the second being health estates, which is part of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That title indicates that we meet a wide range of standards in our areas of involvement.

The regional supplies service also provides services to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It purchases a range of vaccines and various types of medicines for emergency situations for the Department. It has two stores in the Province in which those vaccines and medicines are handled.

There are issues about the possible future development of the procurement function. We currently play a small part in the procurement of services that are provided by nursing homes, residential homes and a range of domiciliary services. Those are currently contracted for by individual trusts, and we are working with a group made up from the Department and the trusts to find out whether some general, regionally applicable rules can be put in place so that the procurement process is consistent across the service and recognises the problems that the market faces in supplying the services.

The submission provides the Committee with an overview of the regional supplies service. Members will have gained a sense of its size; it has 300 staff and spends £307 million a year, which is a large amount of public money.

I will outline the role of the family practitioner services, although the fact that the director of that service has accompanied me to the meeting indicates that I am less well equipped to speak on that area. The service does not provide services to patients, but it provides a range of support services to the contracts that general medical practitioners, pharmaceutical practitioners, dentists and ophthalmic practitioners have with the boards.

We provide a range of payment services and support issues concerning the registration of patients, and our organisation issues medical cards. As a result of that process, we produce much information on the use of the services that we provide to the Department, the boards and the practitioners for planning and policy purposes and, to some extent, the monitoring of issues such as fraud.

Family practitioner services comprise a large part of the Central Service Agency's business; we spend some £700 million a year on it, which is a large amount of money. We have some 180 staff, and the submission provides details of the numbers of practitioners who are contracted to the boards. My staff are in regular contact with those practitioners on various issues.

I have mentioned several issues that are on our agenda, and which have been for some years. The implementation of the electronic prescribing and eligibility system (EPES) is a particularly important issue. The Committee's earlier business referred to its meeting with the patient and client council, and the Department and the Central Services Agency are in discussions with the patient and client council on that issue. EPES is an important project for us.

There are other issues around the implementation of new contracts for certain practitioners, which automatically bring about a change in the way in which we operate, how we pay and how we staff. That is a large area of work.

The counter-fraud unit is, in some senses, linked to that, as it currently deals with family practitioner services issues. The unit pursues people who are suspected of having fraudulently claimed exemption from paying for their prescriptions. There is also a section that deals with contractor fraud, which, along with the boards, undertakes investigations when it is thought that fraudulent practice by practitioners may have taken place. Those are the two main areas of the counter-fraud unit's work. We expect that the role of the counter-fraud unit will be extended to provide a service to the rest of the Health Service, including the hospital services, instead of simply concentrating on family practitioner services. That would involve a large piece of work.

The issue of free prescriptions has been the subject of some discussion over the years. That would be a significant issue for the Central Services Agency, because it would mean that it would not have to pursue people for non-payment of statutory charges. That is an interesting area of work, to which we would respond if required.

The office of research ethics committees (OREC) manages the agency's research ethics approval process. In broad terms, applications to carry out research in the Health Service that may have ethical implications must go through the approval process. That is a statutory arrangement, and although the Central Services Agency houses OREC, appoints members of the committees and handles the process, it has very few powers as an organisation to change that arrangement, because it is part of a UK-wide process. OREC processed 230 applications for research work in 2007-08, which should give members an idea of the large volume of its work. OREC works exceptionally well, particularly in its close relationship with the trusts. The office is based at Haslem's Lane in Lisburn.

I will now turn to the work of the agency's research and development office. The Central Services Agency has managerial responsibility for a fund of some £13 million, which is allocated from the Department. That money is used to fund research across the Health Service and is linked to OREC. Although the present expectation is that all the agency's services will be transferred to the new regional support services organisation (RSSO), to which reference is made in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, a decision has still to be made about where the research and development office will go. All the other services that I have talked about will transfer to the regional support services organisation. We await that decision.

We have submitted two additional papers that deal with financial services and human resources services. Although it is reasonable to expect that an organisation of this size will have a finance department or a human resources department, the agency provides services

to a range of other relatively small Health Service organisations and bodies, some of which are listed in our submission. The agency provides a payroll service, and it pays accounts for other customers. Our service model is an embryo of the shared services approach that is heralded by the regional support services organisation, which offers a wider service, including payroll, accounts and recruitment facilities across the Health Service. The staffing numbers are indicated in our submission.

Similarly, the agency provides human resources to a wide range of Health Service organisations and has been doing so for many years. Part of the human resources director's brief is to look after equality services, to have responsibility for the implementation of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to run the corporate services of the organisation such as building works and administrative processes.

The final page of our first submission provides the Committee with a few indicators that summarise the size of the organisation. The Central Services Agency currently has approximately 700 staff. Our operational budget is around £24 million, which is mostly spent on staff recruitment.

I have already referred to the large spend of the family practitioner services, while money spent on the regional supplies services is also rather significant. If taken together, those functions would account for around £1 billion of health and personal social services spend that the agency in some way handles. Furthermore, and for your information, I have indicated that we are not only based in Belfast city centre but have a range of offices — primarily for our procurement staff — across the Province. I have mentioned Haslem's Lane in Lisburn already, but our headquarters, where the vast majority of our services is located, is in Franklin Street in the centre of Belfast.

That concludes my description of the agency. My general observation is that the services that the agency provides are important and significant in the delivery of other services. Obviously, the agency's activities mainly concentrate on services that are delivered to patients in hospitals and community-care settings. However, behind all that, lies a fairly significant support arrangement that provides very important services such as procurement, payroll and legal services. We view the agency as an important part of the architecture of health and social care. We are very interested in the development of the regional support services organisation as a wider organisation that provides a wider range of services.

I raised four points in our second submission. They, in a sense, relate more directly to the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. We, in our response to the consultation document on the Bill that

the Minister issued earlier this year, indicated a support for the development of the RSSO. We believe that the establishment of the RSSO would represent a natural progression from the Central Services Agency, because it will provide a wider range of services than we currently provide. We have no fundamental concerns about the Bill or the creation of the RSSO.

It is very important to establish a wider organisation. Indeed, we have advocated that for some years. The creation of the RSSO will ensure that individual parts of the Health Service provide more functions regionally or centrally, and, for that reason, we support its creation.

I mentioned earlier that, as more services are placed together, the potential for producing a great deal of regional information begins to kick in. Therefore, we need to think of the RSSO not only as a provider of services but as a major provider of information.

My letter of 7 August 2008 to the Committee suggested that the new organisation not be named the RSSO. We feel that the new organisation's name should be more reflective of the business and business-support functions that we currently provide, and "support services" does not reflect those. Although the RSSO will support the delivery of health and social care, it will also have a status of its own. For example, we currently have a number of professionals working for us who provide financial, human resources and procurement support. We also employ other professionals, such as dentists and pharmacists. We wish to see the name changed to reflect that.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Stephen, for that detailed presentation. I will now open it up for Committee members to ask questions.

Mr Easton: First, what functions that will add to your workload will come from the boards and trusts to the new body? Secondly, how much savings do you think that you will be able to make? Thirdly, will there be any job losses among your 700 staff, or do you foresee that an increase in staff will become necessary as a result of more services being transferred from boards and trusts?

Mr Hodgkinson: I expect the RSSO to provide more services than the Central Services Agency does at present. The plan that we have worked out with the Department is that services such as the Department's superannuation branch, which runs the health and personal social services superannuation scheme — therefore, it is a scheme for the Health Service, not one for the Department — should transfer to the regional support services organisation. That is the current thinking. According to the timetable, that function will probably transfer on 1 April 2009, so that will happen in the relatively short term.

The four health boards perform some payment functions for GPs. Our expectation is that those functions will transfer to the RSSO to complete the package of payment services that we have. Our medium-term expectation is that ICT and IT services provided in the Department will transfer to the new organisation.

In the longer term — two to three years — subject to the investment that is necessary in ICT, we expect financial services such as payroll and “accounts payable”, which is the handling of all invoices, will transfer to the RSSO, and those services will be provided on a regional basis for all the trusts.

Human resources and recruitment is another area. At present, all Health Service organisations recruit for themselves, more or less. There are some arguments, and models, that indicate that some of those recruitment services could be provided regionally for other organisations.

Mr Easton: What about savings and job losses?

Mr Hodkinson: The expectation is that savings will be made once the RSSO is in its completed form. Several models of shared services exist across the public sector. Those can be found principally in the United States, Australia and the Far East, where organisations have adopted the shared-services approach. I must stress that, with proper investment in IT and its various support systems, one can make savings and produce a much more cost-effective way of working.

As I said, the agency currently has 700 staff, and it is planned that the RSSO will have anywhere between 2,000 and 2,500 staff. That represents a sea change. Central Services Agency services will not make savings in the first instance, but they could be made as we expand the support services that form part of the RSSO over the next two to three years.

We will remain part of the comprehensive spending review until 2011, and the whole of the support-services area must take its share of savings made.

The Chairperson: That was a very detailed response.

Dr Deeny: I welcome Jacqueline, Paula and Stephen. It is nice to see some of the faces behind the Central Services Agency, because, in my role as a GP, I have been in touch with the agency many times down the years. Of course, Stephen, I know your brother well, who works in Omagh as a consultant.

Ms S Ramsey: Do you need to declare an interest?

Dr Deeny: I do not. I want to be clear, because I have not looked at the legislation since before the summer recess. Three major agencies are to be established: the regional health and social care board;

the regional agency for public health and social well-being; and the common services organisation. I assume that the Central Services Agency, which will be renamed the RSSO, and which you would prefer to see renamed, will lie within the common services organisation. Is that correct?

Mr Hodkinson: “Common services organisation” was the initial name chosen, before it was changed to “regional support services organisation”. We were even more unhappy with the former, because we did not like the use of the word “common”. We have progressed the issue to “regional support services organisation”, and the next stage, as we see it, should be to change the name again to “regional business services organisation”. However, yes, the agency’s services were originally to lie within the common services organisation.

Dr Deeny: What else, along with the Central Services Agency, will make up the RSSO?

Mr Hodkinson: The legislation indicates broad headings of areas in which the RSSO will provide services. However, the kind of work that we are trying to plan for the RSSO indicates that it will include: the Department’s superannuation branch; a large part of the services that the Department’s directorate of information systems currently provides; and financial and human resources services that boards and trusts currently provide. There has also been discussion about moving information services and providing a range of estates services regionally for the entire service, but that is a longer-term objective. Some of the boards’ family practitioner services will also move to the RSSO.

Dr Deeny: I have some experience of what the agency does, and that includes much good work with GPs. Mr Hodkinson also mentioned that he would like to see other functions added to the agency’s current duties.

Finally, paragraph 4 of your letter states that the acronym RSSO:

“could have an unfortunate and clearly unanticipated sound”.

What is that sound?

Mr Hodkinson: I have been practising it, Chairperson, and I am not sure how to say it to the Committee.

The Chairperson: I have that problem all the time.

Mr Hodkinson: In my case, the problem is possibly down to my age. RSSO, if pronounced as one word — must I say it?

The Chairperson: Yes, please. I like to laugh at someone. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hodkinson: It sounds like “arso”. *[Laughter.]* I thought that that might surprise the Committee.

Ms S Ramsey: It is as well that Jonathan Ross is not here.

Mr Hodkinson: People are generally mumbling the sound. I was hoping that members would rehearse it in their minds and that I would not have to say it. It is an unfortunate sound, even if it was not intentional.

The Chairperson: Once it gets out, the name will stick.

Mr Hodkinson: That is true. It must be dealt with at an early stage, and I am trying to do so with my departmental colleagues.

The Chairperson: It would be wise to change the name, because you would be the butt end of a joke.
[Laughter.]

Mr Hodkinson: Thank you very much.

Dr Deeny: You mentioned the agency's current functions. Are there other functions that you would like to take on?

Mr Hodkinson: I mentioned the research and development office, which is one of our functions. However, the Department has not as yet told us where that function will go. It may not go to the regional support services organisation but to one of the other two main bodies to which you referred.

Mrs Hanna: You may be aware that the before it became DEL, the Department for Employment and Learning was almost named DOLE — the Department of Learning and Employment. That had to be changed.
[Laughter.] You may have to do the same.

What impact will the Minister's decision to bring all legal services in-house have on the agency? You mentioned the fact that the agency plays a large role in information and communication services. How will it manage those functions?

Mr Hodkinson: The agency welcomes the Minister's decision that the Central Services Agency should provide all legal services from the health and social services internally. We have argued for that for some time.

There will be big changes. First, costs will be saved. As I said earlier, we are not a profit-driven organisation — we charge to cover costs. That means that we build a relationship with our clients. We agree fees with them on hourly rates or block contracts. Our intention is only to recoup the funding that we need, fundamentally to pay our staff. That, in itself, takes us out of going rates in the market for legal services. That is an improvement.

There are other, perhaps less obvious, advantages. Under the arrangements that existed when there were several providers of legal services, it was possible that different advice was being given for the same problem in several places throughout Northern Ireland. For example, a social worker could ring for advice

on a child case in Strabane, and another could ring in Newry, Larne or wherever, and they would all receive slightly different advice from different providers. There is potential for us to bring together such advice. We can, therefore, offer advice to someone in Belfast, and if that person's query emerges as a frequently asked question, we can then inform the rest of our clients — the rest of the Health Service.

We provide a training regime for our professional and support staff, and also for clients, in how to handle matters themselves so that they do not always need to call their solicitors and create an administration process in order to solve a problem. Until now, we have not provided that training for some parts of the service whose legal services are provided by the private sector. Therefore, that will bring about consistency.

We have a system that I have always considered an expensive way in which to do things. If, for example, a medical-negligence case arises that involves three hospitals — say, a patient has gone to his or her local hospital, has been referred to another hospital, and then to a tertiary service in the Royal Victoria Hospital — and the three hospitals belong to trusts that have different legal-service providers, each of those legal-service providers may wish to engage an expert because they each represent a different client. That is expensive. That will not happen — certainly not to the same extent — if all legal services are provided from one source.

Therefore, there are several hidden advantages; for example, for headline and costs. However, there are several other matters on which we must begin to work more strategically across the entire service.

Mrs McGill: My question is on procurement, which Carmel touched on in a previous question. To date, what has been the agency's relationship with the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) here? What will it be in future?

Mr Hodkinson: We have a close relationship with the CPD at a professional, working level. Our colleagues in the regional supplies service work with the CPD. We consult the directorate on a one-to-one level for advice. We also work with the CPD on several groups that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has put together over the years to ensure that consistent approaches are taken to procurement across the public service. The best example, which I carry round in my head, is that we have vehicles, such as ambulances and trucks. We also have contracts for tyres and tubes. I apologise for reducing the matter to such a basic level. However, it illustrates the point that I am making.

Parts of the public service, such as education and library boards, use more vehicles than we do. Therefore, it makes sense that they should have the

contract for tubes and tyres for the entire Province, and that we buy off that contract. Similarly, it makes sense that we should have the contract for laboratory equipment, and schools and universities can buy off our contract. We are developing relationships with the Central Procurement Directorate, the Water Service, the education and library boards, the Housing Executive, and so on, in an attempt to get the best return for the investment that has been made across the public service.

Mrs McGill: Did the Central Services Agency engage with CPD to provide legal services and advice on the difficulties and the Minister's subsequent decision?

Mr Hodgkinson: No, CPD secures its own legal advice, presumably from DFP legal services or Government legal services. The Central Services Agency has not advised CPD on legal matters. Indeed, that would have been a conflict of interest, because we would be a potential competitor to other groups.

Mr Buchanan: I apologise for being late and missing part of your presentation. When I came into the meeting, you were answering a question that Alex Easton had asked. You stated that substantial investment in IT services is needed if savings are to be made. What level of investment package would IT services need in order for appropriate savings to be made?

Mr Hodgkinson: Three projects are in need of investment. The first of those is family practitioner services, which I will ask Paula Shiels to talk about in a moment. The second is finance and supplies — procurement — and the third is payroll and human resources.

Our payment systems for paying bills are fairly antiquated. We have had them for some 10 to 15 years, and they are not fit for purpose for what we want them to do. Those payment systems pay the bills. However, the turnaround is not fast enough; they do not produce the necessary information; and they are not compatible with the supply services, which, because of the large number of suppliers that we have to pay within a certain timescale, are closely linked to paying bills.

It is generally accepted that investment is needed for new systems in finance and supplies and in payroll and human resources. Our payroll system is very old — information and communications people would call it a legacy system. The system pays people — we do not receive complaints on that front generally — but its sharing of information with human resources is antiquated. Human resources information is used in payroll calculations. An investment of around £12 million is needed in order to improve those systems.

Ms Paula Shiels (Central Services Agency): The payment systems that we use in family practitioner services pay general practitioners, dentists, optometrists and pharmacists. Like the systems that

Stephen has just described, they were fit for purpose 20 years ago, but the nature of the contracts with the independent contractors has changed over time. The systems were originally built to cope with items of service claims — someone did one thing and was paid for doing that one thing. However, contracts are moving to the provision of a service with practice-based payments.

Many of our payments must be calculated offline before being entered into the payment system. We cannot calculate those payments on the system. Therefore, we must change the systems not only to ensure that they are sufficiently up to date to meet the demands of the current contracts but to ensure that they are flexible enough to be amended easily in order to adapt to future changes.

To make a change to the current systems is extremely expensive, because the programmes were written in an old language, the common business oriented language (COBOL), expertise in which is disappearing. People are no longer being trained to maintain that system. Therefore, we must change the system for family practitioner services payments. The system is fine for making payments, but we look forward to the day when any necessary changes can be made more cheaply.

Mr Gallagher: The agency seems to have approximately 700 staff employed in delivering services. The overall exercise is one of rationalisation, so how many people do you expect to employ after restructuring the organisation?

Mr Hodgkinson: If the regional support services organisation were not being introduced, and we were implementing the computer systems that we need, we would be reducing staff numbers from 700. It is difficult to give an exact figure, but it would probably reduce to approximately 600.

If we transfer the 700 employees to an organisation that employs between 2,000 and 2,500 staff from other boards and trusts, there are potential savings to be made in areas such as payroll and finance, which are currently distributed around the system. Therefore, to bring them together in one or two places, or into one process, will produce savings. Overall, the Minister expects us to cut 1,700 administrative staff across the review of public administration, thereby saving £53 million. That £53 million is funding freed from support services and administrative services for release into direct patient and client-care services.

The Chairperson: Everyone who wanted to ask a question has done so. Thank you for that detailed and interesting presentation, Stephen, Jacqueline and Paula. We appreciate your coming today. Thank you for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

24 September 2008

PRESUMPTION OF DEATH BILL (NIA 23/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Ian Paisley Jnr
Ms Dawn Purvis
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Neil Lambe	}	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Oswyn Paulin		

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): We are joined once again by Oswyn Paulin and Neil Lambe. Considerable progress was made last week, but there were time constraints, so we appreciate that you have rejoined the Committee this week. Perhaps, Mr Paulin would provide a brief reprise of the progress that was made last week, and we will continue from there and complete the process. The Committee has been scrutinising the Bill on a clause-by-clause basis and has reached clause 6.

Mr Oswyn Paulin (Department of Finance and Personnel): I had the impression that we had finished clause 6 last week.

The Chairperson: I cannot remember; you have caught me out, Oswyn. I am sure that members will correct you if you are wrong, however, as no one is indicating, I will assume that your recollection is more accurate than mine.

Mr Paulin: I am happy to continue with clause 6 or clause 7, but I think that clause 6 was dealt with last week.

I will say a few brief words about each clause, and then give members the opportunity to ask questions, to which Mr Lambe and I will attempt to reply. If there are points raised that we cannot answer at this stage, we will come back to the Committee at a later stage.

With your permission, Mr Chairperson, I will begin with clause 7, which deals with insurance matters. It is modelled on, but is not exactly the same as, the insurance provisions in the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, which was referred to at the previous Committee meeting and by the Minister during the Second Stage debate. The Minister indicated that the Department has decided to propose amendments to clause 7 and to clause 6(4)(b), so that provision for the treatment of capital sums for insurance purposes will be the same here as provided for in the Scottish Act.

Mr Weir: What discussions has the Department had with representatives of the insurance profession here? How do they see things with regard to costing, or even with regard to how the Bill will work in practice?

Mr Neil Lambe (Department of Finance and Personnel): We had a meeting with the Association of British Insurers and discussed whether we were right to treat annuities and other periodical payments as capital sums, or whether we should follow the Scottish model and exclude them from the treatment of capital sums. The association thought that it would be better for its members if we followed the Scottish model, which has not presented them with any problems.

Given that the legislation in Scotland is rarely used, most insurers do not encounter it in practice. The type of insurance that we are talking about — trustee or beneficiary indemnity insurance — is a fairly niche market, but it is a service that is offered by all of the large insurance companies.

Mr Weir: From the practical perspective, did you receive any indication from the insurers as to whether they felt that a standard rate should apply across all cases; or should the rate vary according to the circumstances of each case?

Mr Lambe: We did not have detailed discussions about what rate would be used to fix particular premiums, but I imagine that the premium would have to relate in some way, for example, to the amount of life insurance moneys that are being paid out, or to the value of the missing person's property at the date on which he or she is presumed to be dead.

As with all insurance products, the premium payable would relate to the value of the property or life insurance capital sum that is in issue. It would be very specific.

Mr Paulin: Clause 8 provides for the rules of the Supreme Court. Among other things, it makes

supplementary provision in relation to applications for declarations of presumed death and variation orders. The rules will prescribe the forms to be used in court and will detail those persons who should receive notice of applications made under the Bill.

Clause 9 deals with the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, who will receive notice of all applications for declarations of presumed death and of applications for a variation order under the Bill. The clause also states that the Attorney General may intervene in any proceedings in relation to presumed death before the High Court to argue any case that he or she thinks should be fully argued.

Clause 10 deals with the circumstances in which a person may intervene in any proceedings for a declaration of presumed death under clause 1 or a variation order under clause 5. Unless the person wishing to intervene is the spouse, civil partner or a close relative of the missing person, he or she will have to obtain leave of the High Court.

Mr Weir: Are there any circumstances in which somebody who does not fall into those categories can intervene — for example, where somebody alleges, or gives evidence, that the person in question is not actually dead? Is that an example of when an intervention could be made that is outside the criteria?

Mr Paulin: Yes.

Mr Weir: Is that the thinking behind the provision; that it could be someone other than the spouse or close relative?

Mr Paulin: Yes — and an intervention could be made by the person who is presumed dead.

Mr Weir: One assumes that that would have a fair chance of stopping the proceedings.

Mr Paulin: They might want to come back and say that they are still alive.

Mr Lambe: It is likely to be used only when someone wishes to contradict the affidavit evidence of the applicant and seeks to prevent the court exercising its jurisdiction to declare the missing person to be presumed dead.

Mr Paulin: Or again, as it applies in variation orders, which is what I was thinking of.

Clause 11 deals with costs. Those are the costs between parties and not, as we would normally understand in public administration, the costs to the Exchequer. The clause confers on the High Court a broad power to make such order as to who shall pay the costs of proceedings as it considers just. Costs may be ordered to be paid using the property of the missing person.

Clause 12 allows the Department of Finance and Personnel to increase or decrease the length of time a person must have not been known to be alive before

the High Court may make a declaration under clause 1. We had an earlier discussion about that. Under clause 12, the Department may increase or decrease the five-year limitation period in relation to property variation orders made by the court under clause 6(2).

Clause 13 provides that the existing statutory provisions that permit the High Court to dissolve a marriage or a civil partnership on the grounds of the presumed death of a spouse or civil partner shall cease to exist.

The Chairperson: The Committee had some discussion on that issue.

Mr Paulin: Clause 14 should be taken with schedule 1 of the Bill, which sets out the provisions in relation to the register of presumed deaths. It was the register and the registration that provided the initial impetus for the legislation, although it is now much wider than that. Clause 14 and schedule 1 provide for the Registrar General for Northern Ireland to establish and maintain a register of presumed deaths. The provisions deal with the making of entries in the new register and the amendment, cancellation, correction and re-registration of entries. The powers available to the Registrar General in relation to entries in the new register are similar to his powers in relation to entries in the register of deaths under the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

Clause 15 deals with Assembly subordinate legislation and procedures applicable to the making of orders and regulations in the draft Bill.

Clause 16 is the interpretation clause, which defines certain words or phrases used in the Bill. As noted in earlier briefing provided to the Committee, we had hoped to replace the definition of “insurer” with something that might be simpler and more readily understood to the non-lawyer and, possibly, to lawyers.

Clause 17 allows the Department of Finance and Personnel to make transitional, saving, supplementary, incidental and consequential provisions and savings in connection with the Bill.

Clause 18 should be taken with schedules 2 and 3, which deal with amendments and repeals of legislation. The clause should be read along with clause 13, which I referred to earlier and which deals with the repeal of existing matrimonial and civil partnership legislation, and the dissolution of a marriage or civil partnership.

Clause 19 is the commencement clause. Some clauses in the Bill — or sections in the Act, as it will be — will commence immediately the Bill receives Royal Assent and the Department will decide when other sections of the Act commence.

Clause 20 relates to the short title.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Do members have any comments?

Mr Hamilton: I have comments on general issues that were perhaps not covered. There was some discussion during the Second Stage debate about the disclosure of information by third parties. The Minister suggested that he was going to look at that issue again. Will you tell the Committee what is being looked at?

Mr Paulin: I believe that Mr O'Loan raised the issue of disclosure at the previous Committee meeting. Just to recap: in the draft Bill, the Department did not incorporate the provision that is in the Scottish Act, but we raised the issue of whether there should be disclosure provision and what form that should take. The consultation process produced a number of responses saying that there should be disclosure provision.

Drafting a disclosure provision has been tricky, and the Department decided to proceed with the Bill and amend it as it goes through the Assembly. We are making progress with a draft disclosure provision, which will be presented to the Committee as soon as it is in a presentable form.

The Chairperson: Will the Committee have sight of it in good time before it goes to the Assembly?

Mr Paulin: Absolutely: we hope to have it by later next month.

Mr Lambe: I hope to have all the necessary agreements across Government to the disclosure provision by the middle of October.

Mr Paulin: Due to the fact that the disclosure provision will relate to the powers of the court, clearly the agreement of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is required because this is a reserved matter.

Mr Beggs: You indicated that disclosure requirements exist with regard to the Scottish provision. Why was that provision not just lifted across if it works properly there? Is there not a working model elsewhere that is acceptable?

Mr Paulin: We are not entirely clear that it is a working model in the sense that it works. Research has, I believe, indicated that it is not a provision that has had any effect — it has not been useful. The Department is looking at a provision that will be useful and practical, and which will involve the court having the power to order disclosure.

Mr O'Loan: I expressed concern last week about this issue. I am not reassured by what I am hearing today or by what the Minister said in the Assembly. The most, it seems, that is being indicated is to give the court the right to ask for information if it feels that a person or organisation has such information.

This Bill originated particularly from the issue of the disappeared, to which it would be generally

applicable. However, when one considers the disappeared, it is highly desirable that a clear duty and obligation is imposed on any person or organisation that has information relating to a case in progress to bring that information before the court. I am thinking, in particular, of the police, the security forces and the security services. There should be a proactive clause in the Bill.

Ms Purvis: If the court issued an order for disclosure of information, and someone did not disclose that information, would they be in breach of the court order?

Mr Paulin: Clearly, they would. First; the court would issue an order, if required and necessary, and it could issue it on the application of any of the parties to the proceedings. That is the normal position with regard to disclosure in court proceedings — that the court has the power to order disclosure. However, that is done generally not by the court of its own volition but by application by various parties. If there is a failure to disclose in accordance with a court order, that is a serious matter and, ultimately, can lead to contempt proceedings against the person who has failed to disclose.

The Chairperson: How does that relate to the broad argument that was presented by Mr O'Loan?

Mr Paulin: We must consider the purpose of the legislation: it is not to have a general, wide-ranging inquiry into the circumstances of someone's disappearance; it is to establish whether that person is dead or still alive. In the vast bulk of cases it will be clear, beyond doubt, that the person is dead. Therefore, the proportionality of placing a duty on people to disclose all relevant information on a person's death must be examined: is it proportionate to place a duty on people to disclose a lot of information when it is clearly beyond doubt that the person is dead? It is important to consider that issue before imposing upon a wide range of bodies and individuals a duty to disclose information.

Dr Farry: Does the clause put a general duty on unidentified organisations and the wider population, or is the intention to name specific organisations, particularly Government bodies?

Mr Paulin: It would be better for the court to have a wide-ranging power. It would be unfortunate if the provision were restricted to Government organisations and a case arose in which a judge felt that he or she would like to order disclosure against an individual or private company but could not do so because the provision was clearly restricted to Government. It should, therefore, be wide.

Dr Farry: In a sense, therefore, other Government agencies have been consulted about the matter, but there is not a formal requirement to get agreement

from different agencies before it can be introduced into our legislation.

Mr Paulin: The agreement of the Secretary of State is required, because the matter falls into the reserved field and may even be excepted.

Dr Farry: That leads me to my next question. Leaving aside the issue of the disappeared; if someone is not dead, it is likely that they will not be in Northern Ireland — he or she will have moved elsewhere in these islands, to Europe or further afield. How will the measure work, given that it will apply only in the narrow jurisdiction of Northern Ireland? Will it apply to, for example, HM Revenue and Customs, a UK-wide agency, which I would have thought would be one of the first organisations that you would contact about, for example, whether any tax is being paid, and so on? How does the Bill relate to agencies that operate UK wide? Other European Union countries may hold also relevant information. How does the law relate to those jurisdictions? If there were suspicion, for example, that someone was living in the south of France or Spain, could the Bill's powers be extended in order to obtain information from either the French or Spanish authorities?

Mr Lambe: As regards a Government agency such as HMRC; that UK-wide Government body would be bound by the order for disclosure because it would have been made by the High Court. If the order is directed to the agency, it will carry out a trawl of its records based on information that is provided by the court. It would then reveal to the court that its data-recording system shows that the last transaction was made in that person's name on a particular date. That information will support and complement the affidavit evidence, or will contradict it; in which case the court is faced with conflicting evidence. That procedure would be followed by all Government agencies named in the disclosure order.

It is likely that the High Court would not find it helpful to make a disclosure order in relation to an individual or an organisation that is based outside the United Kingdom, because it would not have any enforcement powers over that order.

Mr Paulin: There are complex arrangements for co-operation between courts in the European Union. I have forgotten the exact phrase that is used, but the 1968 Brussels Convention, for example, provides courts with the means to seek the assistance of other courts. Co-operation is possible through that provision. However, the reach of the Assembly is limited in those matters, and I am not sure whether the courts have any greater jurisdiction or powers. I will come back to you on that.

Dr Farry: I appreciate that.

Mr O'Loan: I am not reassured by anything that I have heard. The police service or the security forces

may have knowledge of an individual for whom an application for a presumption of death is going through the court, be aware that that action is taking place, but be under no obligation to inform the court of the information that they have. They can sit on their hands and do nothing. That is not a proper situation.

I do not foresee any difficulty with proportionality if the obligation is put in such a way that requires organisations, for instance, to provide relevant information that is pertinent to the matter that is before the courts, which is whether or not a person is dead.

The Chairperson: Is the issue whether the question should be examined under the aegis of this Bill, because there are all sorts of procedures and investigations in relation to the death of an individual? Is the court trying to establish whether any evidence has been found over a prescribed period of seven years, for instance, that an individual is alive? It is not a question of whether the person is dead; the question is whether any organisation or individual holds evidence that the person was alive in the past seven years. Is that not the pertinent question?

Mr Paulin: That is the pertinent question. Another aspect of the Bill relates to the parties to the case — the families who are trying to establish whether a person is dead. If they think that they need disclosure from the police, for instance, they will have the power to go to the court, and the court will have the power to order disclosure where necessary.

Mr O'Loan: There are two tests by which the court judges on the matter: first, it judges whether there is any evidence concerning whether the person has died; and, secondly, whether the person has been seen in the past seven years. An individual or a public body may well have evidence of whether the person has been seen, and they ought to be under a duty to bring that information before the court.

The Chairperson: I am not taking issue with the Bill; I am merely trying to find a way through this. Last week, the officials set out in some detail the parameters of this discussion. You mentioned a specific group of people who have disappeared, and as a result of their disappearance it is difficult to point to practical conclusive evidence that they are dead. They have disappeared. They could have disappeared because they wanted to, and they may have wished to change their personality and identity, for instance. Do we pursue both lines? Do we argue that the court should have the ability to pursue both questions? Do we seek evidence from agencies, for instance, that the individual has died or is known to be alive over a prescribed period? That would be regarded as the test as to whether a certificate of presumed death could be issued.

Mr Paulin: There are circumstances where it will not be difficult to establish that someone is dead, even

though no body has been recovered. If, for example, a person has been abducted from their home and has not been seen since, there is a reasonable presumption that that person is dead.

Is it proportionate to say that if a court receives that information and is minded to make an order, but to quell any doubts everyone who has information must produce it to that court? That could mean that the court would have to consider a vast amount of documentation. What would that achieve if it is universally accepted that the person is no longer alive?

I suggest that the way forward is for the Department to produce a draft clause for the Committee to consider.

The Chairperson: Mr O’Loan, what do you think about the Department producing a draft clause, which the Committee can then examine?

Mr O’Loan: I have made my points.

The Chairperson: I know, but we do need to make a decision.

Mr O’Loan: My argument to the Committee is that we should support a proactive clause that places a duty —

Mr Hamilton: Perhaps the Committee should proceed on the basis of what has been suggested by Mr Paulin?

The Chairperson: Yes. The Committee will take Mr Paulin’s advice. Mr Paulin, can you come back with a draft clause? Following that no doubt, we will rehearse the discussion again. Are there any other questions arising from the Bill?

Mr O’Loan: There is the other issue that I raised regarding human rights compliance. The explanatory and financial memorandum for the Bill contains a statement:

“The provisions of the Bill are considered compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.”

By whose authority is that statement being made? Who is deemed to say that that is so? Has there been any consultation with the Human Rights Commission, in particular on the requirement to disclose any information?

Mr Paulin: The consultation paper was sent to the Human Rights Commission, but I do not believe that it made any comment.

Mr Lambe: The Commission did not respond.

Mr Paulin: As far as the Bill’s compatibility with the Human Rights Act is concerned, the Departmental Solicitor’s Office is satisfied that it complies with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Mr O’Loan: I am sorry, I could not hear you. Who is satisfied?

Mr Paulin: The Departmental Solicitor’s Office. I — as Departmental Solicitor — am satisfied that the Bill is compliant with the Human Rights Act.

Mr Lambe: Paragraph 69 of the consultation paper included a human rights assessment of the draft Bill. It explains which articles of the convention the Department believed were potentially engaged by what was being proposed. The conclusion reached was that the Bill would be human rights compliant.

The Department sought views and there was a specific consultation question on that specific issue. That question asked whether respondents agreed with the Department’s opinion that the provisions of the draft Bill comply with the convention. The respondents who addressed that particular question agreed with the Department’s assessment.

Dr Farry: Under British law and legal tradition it is — in theory — possible for someone to live their lives totally disengaged from the state. That situation differs slightly different from the European tradition of law. Therefore, presumably someone could decide that they want to disappear from the life that they have led, lead a different life and break off all forms of contact.

Could that person then subsequently make an argument that they have been declared dead by the court and that their rights to personal integrity — or whatever the term is under the convention — have been breached? You may suggest that that is not an absolute right and that there are various limitations that must be balanced.

In essence, my question probably leaves off from what Mr O’Loan was arguing. How does the Bill ensure compliance with the convention in extreme circumstances such as those I have outlined? How is that process reconciled?

Mr Lambe: In an ordinary missing person case, a person is reported missing to the police and the family do not know what happened to them. The police then carry out their investigations according to the established missing person protocols.

They may locate the missing person, who is alive and well and has simply decided that they have had enough of their family and that they want to break contact. A balance must be found to take account of that person’s right to go missing and for his or her whereabouts not to be relayed back to the family. The police have an obligation to investigate all reports of missing persons, but, if they find that the missing person is alive and well — and they are satisfied that no crime or other illegality has been committed — they will ask the missing person if they want their family to be informed of where they are.

If the person does not wish the family to know that, their right, under article 8 of the convention, trumps

the right of the family to be told details of where the person is located. In the case of a child, the parents would be told, but the right to privacy of a missing adult trumps the right of the family to have that information.

Dr Farry: The family's right to have that information is not clearly defined in a way that is equivalent to the missing person's right of privacy. If there is no information about whether a person is alive or not, and that person is declared dead after seven years but returns after 10 years, does the state have any liability for breach of their right of personal integrity for having declared that person dead? What measures can be taken to safeguard against that, given the need to balance other rights in the convention?

Mr Paulin: I am not sure what right a person would have in such a situation. A development of the right to privacy and respect for private life, which is covered by article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, might be that one has the right to be regarded to be alive when one is alive. It is possible to discuss extraordinary scenarios in which people do the most peculiar things. Those scenarios can be accommodated as much as possible, but limits are eventually reached. A person who had deliberately disappeared, not contacted anyone and been declared dead, having done nothing to make known the fact that they were alive, would find that a court would be happy to declare them alive but would be less likely to grant them any particular remedy —

Dr Farry: I suppose the court's response would be that no damage had been caused to the person by the declaration of death. As long as the court vacated that declaration as quickly as possible, the person could not claim any damage on the part of the state arising from the declaration.

Mr Paulin: It might be considered defamatory to say that a person is dead when they are alive, but the position would be understandable.

Dr Farry: Such a person might have no reputation to defame.

Mr Lambe: We took into account the fact that the state has an interest in knowing whether its citizens are alive or dead. In addition to respect for private life, an argument might arise from the convention in relation to the property rights of the missing person. If the missing person were presumed to be dead, their property would transfer as if they were dead. Clause 6 of the Bill relates to property variation orders, and it allows some scope for property to be returned to the missing person. It properly balances the interests of the family left behind, the interests of the state, and the interests of the missing person who may subsequently turn out not to be dead.

Mr O'Loan: Useful background information has been given on compliance with human rights legislation, and I will give consideration to that.

The Chairperson: The Committee's deadline for receipt of submissions is 15 October, so we may hear from agencies.

I presume that you are satisfied that the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains received and considered the correspondence and entered a nil return.

There was an issue around the proposal from Wave about the disappeared, regarding whether the Commission would assist the families and the court in making a declaration. Has the Department considered that proposal from Wave?

Mr Paulin: We gave it some thought and wondered whether the disclosure provisions may assist with that. Beyond that, was there an issue with another aspect of it?

The Chairperson: There may have been an issue in relation to assisting the families to engage with the process if that involved legal costs.

Mr Paulin: My understanding is that the Commission is either in the reserved or excepted fields, so that would be outside the powers of the Assembly. If the powers and duties of the Commission were to be amended, that would be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr Lambe: The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains was established by treaty, therefore there are specific issues about obliging it to fulfil a function, and we are unable to impose any statutory obligation on it. That is not to say that in taking an application to the High Court, the Commission would not, if it felt that it wanted to, assist the families in the production of their affidavit evidence. Similarly, the families may include in their affidavit evidence reference to findings or determinations already publicly made by the Commission in relation to a specific, named member of the disappeared.

The Chairperson: Your interpretation is probably correct but, nonetheless, the issue has been brought to our attention. Therefore, does that imply that there should have been at least a follow-through meeting, even if all that involves is mapping out where the respective jurisdictions begin and end and deal with questions such as whether you have met the Commission or talked to Wave about their proposal, and whether people have a consensual understanding of where responsibility lies?

Mr Paulin: We have had a discussion with Wave, we have not met the Commission.

Mr Lambe: I have been in contact with the Commission's family liaison officer and have kept him fully informed of the project as it has progressed, because he provided the initial point of contact to the families of the disappeared, and helped to arrange our meeting with them.

I have not raised with him formally the question of whether he or the Commissioners would consider themselves to have any formal role in assisting the families in that way. The difficulty is that the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains has a very specific statutory remit and that does not extend to providing financial assistance — that is a matter that we could discuss with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office.

The Chairperson: Depending on the time available for consultation, the Committee may or may not have a further evidence session on that matter. Again, I thank you both for your expert assistance.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

25 September 2008

GOODS VEHICLES (LICENSING OF OPERATORS) BILL (NIA 15/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Osborne	}	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Gregg Shannon		
Mr Harry Sinclair		
Mr Bailey Thompson		

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The Committee will be briefed by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. Members received an update on the Bill at the meeting on 11 September, when it agreed to invite oral evidence from the UFU and the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland. The Committee also agreed to take evidence from the Department's enforcement and planning officials.

At its meeting on 18 September, members subsequently agreed to invite Beverley Bell, traffic commissioner for the north-west traffic area, to brief the Committee on the Bill.

Today, the Committee will hold its first oral evidence session, when representatives from the UFU will present their views on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill.

A copy of the Goods Vehicle (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995, and relevant extracts from the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, have been

added to the master file. It will largely, but not wholly, replicate the Goods Vehicle (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995.

I welcome Mr Harry Sinclair, deputy president of the UFU, Mr Gregg Shannon, chairman of the UFU legislative committee, and Mr Chris Osborne, UFU policy officer.

Mr Osborne has given the Committee one amendment to the UFU's submission. There has been an omission in its notes, and a line should have been included before the exemption stating that those were the exemptions in place in GB, and not a UFU wish list.

Mr Beggs: Can the Committee Clerk clarify whether I need to declare an interest each time as my parents run a family farm and may be affected by the proposed change, and they are members of the Ulster Farmers' Union as well?

The Committee Clerk: I will get back to the member on that.

The Chairperson: I welcome the representatives from the Ulster Farmers' Union.

Mr Harry Sinclair (Ulster Farmers' Union): We have brought along another witness. Bailey Thompson, who is a fruit and vegetable grower from north Down, has come to give a practical view on how the Bill will affect him.

The Chairperson: The Committee usually gives witnesses a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes to make a presentation — or less if they prefer — and then members will ask questions.

Mr Sinclair: Thank you for the invitation. Our members have already been introduced, except for Bailey Thompson, who is a practising producer.

Although the UFU acknowledges the importance of road safety, any initiative is only as good as the drivers who operate the vehicles. In many cases, accidents are caused by the operator, and not through any fault with the vehicle. Chris will explain, first of all, why agriculture is treated differently from other industries.

Mr Chris Osborne (Ulster Farmers' Union): As the legislation stands, there is the potential for a lot of agricultural vehicles to get caught up in the legislation — for example, a tractor carrying a trailer. For the purposes of this presentation, they will be described as dual-purpose vehicles and their trailers, which can include 4x4s and Land Rovers. In 2006, 10,586 tractors in classes 40 and 44 were registered, compared to almost 25,000 heavy goods vehicles.

Many everyday farm practices will be caught up in the legislation, for example, bringing input onto a farm, which could include fertiliser, manure, and so on — I will not get involved in the detail of waste — and

a farmer taking his livestock from one field to another in a trailer pulled by a Land Rover.

The UFU has forecast that, if the current proposals were implemented, it would create over 15,000 operating centres — essentially, farms where vehicles would be stored. Harry referred to the acknowledgement of road safety. The PSNI's statistics for 2007-08 show that there were 9,748 road casualties in Northern Ireland and, of that number, less than 1% involved other vehicles, which includes tractors. Northern Ireland transport statistics for 2006-07 show that 21% of roads are urban and 29% are rural.

The Committee will ask why farming should be treated differently to other industries such as haulage. In economic theory, there is the concept of the public good, which is defined as a good that is unrivalled and non-excludable. That public good is provided by farmers. Once that good is consumed, it is immediately replaced, and, for as long as that process is uninterrupted, it will continue. For example, when I will eat a potato, it will be replaced.

By securing that particular line, food supply is secured, and that takes care of local needs and export and trade needs. That is why we believe that we should be treated differently. Although we may not have considered it 10 years ago, there is a real prospect of food shortages, especially compared with the past 35 years.

Mr Bailey Thompson (Ulster Farmers' Union): The existing legislation governs the weight and width of farm vehicles. Currently, that is heavily inspected by the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), the police, the Department of the Environment and, for fuel, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). If legislation is introduced for agricultural vehicles, how will that affect tachographs? One tractor may have four drivers — is each driver expected to fill in a tachograph every morning and carry that during a day's work? That is my concern.

Mr Gregg Shannon (Ulster Farmers' Union): A section of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is responsible for enforcing legislation that pertains to goods vehicles, buses, taxis, private cars and agricultural vehicles. There is, already, a substantial organisation that — if it does its job properly — covers the safety aspect and ensures that vehicle owners and insurance companies know the regulations. Therefore, the Department's proposal for the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency to undertake that function is unnecessary. That measure will increase costs. What costs can be introduced legitimately? That matter has never been dealt with properly; everybody considers their own costs and assumes that they will continue. The proposal does not consider the increase or decrease in the number of people who need licences,

and it does not take cognisance of other people's involvement and whether they are doing their job.

There is no competition with hauliers. In the past couple of years, we have had substantial discussions with HMRC about red and white diesel. Red diesel is used for agriculture and off-road purposes only, and in certain other cases. That regulation is enforced strictly by HMRC, with the effect that farmers use vehicles on the road for agriculture purposes only. It is clear that that is outside the remit of goods vehicle licensing, and hire and reward.

Furthermore, we are concerned that the proposals, in their current form, would increase bureaucracy and red tape. Although the cost of writing a cheque for £100 for a licence might be insignificant to some operators, the cost of maintaining records — which can be forged — could be expensive. For example, if a fellow just walks around a lorry, and signs off that he has completed its six-weekly inspection, who is to say that he actually did it? The crux of the matter is that, if stopped, the vehicle must be up to standard, and that will not be achieved by someone coming to examine my, Harry's or anybody else's records.

This proposal far exceeds the system currently operating in GB. If the Department of the Environment (DOE) were asked to report on arrangements in other EU countries, it would be interesting to hear the reply. At a recent meeting, DOE representatives assured me that these proposals are not EU driven. Therefore, why should this country, which must compete on equal terms — perhaps not even equal terms, because of its distance from markets — with all the other food producers, bear extra costs in advance?

If the spot checks required by existing legislation were properly carried out — bearing in mind that that legislation is concerned with public safety and not just operator safety, and the cost of carrying out those spot checks is therefore part of normal Government costs for protecting public safety — it would not be necessary for the farming industry to bear those additional costs, which would be applied inefficiently.

Mr Sinclair: Transport for hire and reward must be treated differently from transport of necessity and occasional use. Generally, farmers haul their own products; they do not use transport for hire and reward.

Gregg mentioned increased bureaucracy and red tape, which, as everyone knows, involves extra costs. The agriculture industry runs on fine margins, and any additional costs must be passed down the line. The last thing that any politician, or anyone else in society, wants is increased food prices, and the proposals would result in additional costs being passed along the system. That would be the only way to pay for complying with the new legislation, and that is the last thing that the industry wants, which is why we are

calling for the exemption of all vehicles involved in agricultural activities.

Mr G Shannon: It is tremendously important to note that agricultural vehicles are not on the road for 12 months in a year. Silage trailers are used perhaps for three days over a six-month period. Combines are used, at most, for a couple of months in a year. All such vehicles would require exemptions. Why spend time producing those exemptions, when existing exemptions serve the same purpose?

The Chairperson: We hear what you are saying: as with most things, a bit of common sense is required.

Mr T Clarke: I welcome the Ulster Farmers' Union to the Committee. The witnesses have touched on the nub of the matter, although they did not go far enough. The Bill is bureaucracy gone mad. From the start, I have totally disagreed with it.

Harry did not mention a matter that I raised concerning agricultural contractors, and there is an argument that such work should be treated as hire and reward. However, if we look at the casualty and injury statistics related to farm vehicles, it is clear that those injuries do not come about because a vehicle is not parked in a locked yard. The Department is attempting to create something for which there is no justification. There is no reason for it. We have received injury statistics, but those injuries did not happen because a vehicle was parked in the wrong place; they relate to road-traffic injuries. Consequently, I cannot understand how legislation requiring farmers to have a licensed yard would make the roads any safer. As you said in your submission, the MOT test that we have here is good; vehicles must be brought up to the required standard, and they either pass or fail. That goes far enough towards meeting operational safety requirements. This legislation is bureaucracy gone mad, and I support you on that.

Mr G Shannon: I am glad that someone sees things the same way as we do.

I could talk for hours, if necessary, on recoupment of full costs, because nobody has defined what they are. In fact, in that situation, every Department wants to recoup full costs. Farmers want to recoup full costs for their agricultural produce. However, they do not get them. When they look for that, the first question that they must ask is whether they can effectively reduce the cost of what they do and produce the same result. The Bill, as we see it, does not begin to deal with that issue.

Mr Ford: I want to ask you about a reference that you made in your earlier remarks. What is the position under the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995 — the equivalent legislation — in Great Britain as it relates to agricultural vehicles?

Mr Osborne: GB has full exemptions.

Mr G Shannon: It has four pages of them.

Mr Ford: At the end of your submission dated 22 September, under the heading 'Operational Considerations', you have listed the matters that you believe should be exempted. Does that follow broadly the list of exemptions that are available in GB, apart from the fact that you have listed them on less than half a page, rather than on four pages?

Mr Osborne: Yes.

Mr Ford: It seems to me that there are other issues that you have not entirely acknowledged. Your submission is written for the fellow who puts a pallet of manure on the trailer behind his Massey Ferguson 35 and potters two miles along the road from his neighbour's field to his own land. However, a certain number of such vehicles are used to do similar work to that which is done using lorries. It may be useful to examine exemptions in that area under operational considerations. It will be difficult to find exemptions on a wider basis than that which the Department will accept, because that would create a gaping hole whereby people might sell their lorries and replace them with fast tractors.

Mr Osborne: Very much so.

Mr G Shannon: We have already agreed the matter with HMRC. It accepts that people who carry out contract work are on the road more often than the man, of whom you painted a good picture, who tows a pallet of manure. He still carries agricultural produce from one guy's field to his farm or storage area out of necessity. These days, the size of farms requires farmers to go on the road. However, a tractor is not the type of equipment that would be used for hire or reward in the broad sense, like the 24,000 lorries that move stuff about in Northern Ireland.

Mr T Clarke: Gregg is saying that fast tractors do not go to the Continent and lorries do not lift silage.

Mr G Shannon: In fact, fast tractors have been well and truly stamped upon by HMRC; quite rightly, in our view. Put it this way: we are here to argue for our exemptions. There are good economic reasons why they should be made. For a while, everyone was chasing everyone else up and down roads because fast tractors carried everything. HMRC then stopped the use of red diesel. Red diesel was all that made fast tractors economical. When its use was stopped, fast tractors disappeared.

Mr Ford: That was the further point that you made in your submission when you referred to HMRC policy. Do you and HMRC agree fully on what is red diesel allowable and what is not at this point in time?

Mr G Shannon: At this point in time, yes.

Mr Osborne: In our eyes, yes. We relay that to HMRC. On occasion, it approaches us and asks our view on what constitutes —

Mr Ford: My understanding is — at the risk of mixing metaphors — that there are still a few grey areas between the red and the white.

Mr Osborne: Yes, but our users are always fully aware of what they are entitled to use.

Mr G Shannon: The matter is always open for discussion, Mr Ford.

Mr Sinclair: Generally, those grey areas are on the borderline of agricultural activity. Ultimately, the Ulster Farmers' Union represents farmers and agricultural activities. If people venture into other activities, they do so at their own risk. We feel that they jeopardise the entire industry.

Mr Ford: Do you consider the HMRC rules as appropriate guidelines on how the DOE might apply this particular piece of legislation?

Mr G Shannon: I think that that is putting things slightly back to front. HMRC runs its own show, and it will approach us and tell that a certain vehicle should not have the advantage of using red diesel. As Harry said, if it is not for agricultural activity, we would not support it.

Mr Ford: The point I am making is that if the Committee advised the Department that agricultural activity should be exempt, it would be easier to use existing rules to determine that exemption.

Mr T Clarke: It would be easier to throw it out. The Bill is a waste of time.

Mr Ford: You have lost the principle of the Bill, Trevor.

Mr T Clarke: The principle of the Bill is road safety, and the Department claims that the Bill will prevent road accidents. No one can convince me that parking vehicles in a secure yard will make roads safer. The whole Bill is a piece of nonsense and should be scrapped as soon as possible.

Mr G Shannon: We were not surprised to learn that 70% of vehicles that were checked were not up to standard. However, checks had not been conducted prior to that occasion. If checks had been ongoing, that 70% figure would be useless — it is only a spot check. Spot checks should be conducted regularly. After an MOT vehicle test, the standard of the car is not questioned for the next 12 months unless it is involved in an accident. The whole Bill is loose.

Mr Beggs: Large numbers of hauliers are unfit to be on the road, and the Bill must tighten existing regulations. However, the farming industry does not contribute to many road accidents, and, therefore, the numbers seem disproportionate.

Is a detailed breakdown of those other vehicles available? How many are steamrollers? How many are other vehicles unconnected to the farming industry? A breakdown of the number of agricultural vehicles would be useful.

The Chairperson: If that breakdown can be provided.

Mr Beggs: A letter from the Department indicated that the Bill will include powers to exempt certain vehicles and that the regulations will be provided for scrutiny. Has that been provided? Has it already been agreed to exclude —

The Chairperson: Mr Osborne's letter outlined that DOE had assured the UFU that, because only enabling powers are involved, exemptions will be dealt with at the subordinate stage and, at that time, the UFU's views will be considered. Therefore, the process has probably not reached that stage.

Mr Beggs: I have experience of the rural community. One of my neighbours frequently uses his tractor to cross the road from one part of his farm to the other — that is the extent of his road usage. It would be draconian to create operator licences to enable people to cross the road. Furthermore, given the statistics that have been provided to the Committee, it is unnecessary.

The Department has been talking about tractors; 4x4 vehicles are used infrequently to travel to a market or abattoir, and most farms do not use those vehicles every week. Has the UFU discussed with the Department whether it intends to include 4x4s in the operating-licence criteria?

Mr Osborne: My understanding is that 4x4s may be included. We have not spoken to the Department — that is based on reading the proposed legislation and, if we do not speak up, those vehicles could be included. The UFU is asking that if 4x4s are being used for agricultural purposes — that is, a dual-purpose vehicle with a trailer — they should be exempt.

The Chairperson: To give a quick synopsis, is the UFU saying that it would prefer that agricultural activity be exempted in line with GB?

Mr Osborne: Yes; we could have said that in one sentence.

The Chairperson: I am just trying to capture the mood of what has been said.

Thank you all very much for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

25 September 2008

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (REFORM) BILL (NIA 21/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Sam Gardiner
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mrs Claire McGill

Witnesses:

Mr Richard Dixon } Eastern Health and
 } Social Services Council

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Richard Dixon, who is well known to the Committee as the chief officer of the Eastern Health and Social Services Council. I invite Richard to make a presentation, after which I will invite members to ask questions.

Mr Richard Dixon (Eastern Health and Social Services Council): I thank the Chairperson and members for inviting the health and social services councils to present their views on the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill to the Committee. My presentation is based on the response to the four councils' consultation, which is a consensus view reached by the councils after careful consideration of the proposals, particularly the proposed establishment of a patient and client council.

In general, the four councils are supportive of the proposals. We believe that the new structures will offer the people of Northern Ireland a much-improved system of accountability and involvement.

We welcome a structure that has a clear line of management responsibility from the Minister and the

Department, through the commissioning board, and to the providing trusts. The accountability of trusts to the regional health and social care board is a key strength of the proposed structures. The previous arrangement, in which commissioners and providers were jointly accountable to the Department but in which providers were not clearly accountable to the commissioners, was not ideal. Customers want a simple transparent system in which they can see how, where and by whom decisions are made. The proposed new structures will deliver that.

Over many years, the health and social services councils have represented patients and the public within the health and social care system. Therefore, we welcome the priority that the legislation gives to engagement with patients and the public. We welcome the creation of the patient and client council. We also welcome the representative nature of the new bodies, particularly the local commissioning groups. Above all, we welcome the new duties in the legislation on engagement with patients and the public, which are applicable to all the health and social care organisations.

I will now comment on our response to the proposed creation of the regional health and social care board and the regional agency for public health and social well-being. Our concern for a simple, clear and accountable structure is reflected in the comments that we made in our response to the proposed creation of those two bodies. Although we strongly support the creation of local commissioning groups and the delegation to them of significant commissioning responsibilities, we wanted it to be clear that they operate under the direction of, and are fully accountable to, the regional health and social care board.

Underlying central authority will help to ensure equity in the allocation of resources and access to services, will guard against the risk of a postcode lottery in Northern Ireland and will ensure that regional, as well as local, interests are taken fully into account. A regional authority will benefit those in small and dispersed communities, such as those who live with a rare condition who may — and I emphasise “may” — fall below the radar of local commissioners and their priorities. For a similar reason, we said that the regional agency for public health and social well-being should be accountable to the regional board. We were concerned that a separation of the public-health functions in that manner would lead to silo thinking — a territoriality among organisations that could work against the best interests of patients and the public.

However, we are comforted by the Minister's recognition of those concerns in his response to the consultation and by his commitment to the production of a framework document that makes abundantly clear the respective functions and interrelationship of the new health and social care organisations.

The proposals for the patient and client council are in line with the views expressed by all four health and social services councils throughout the planning process. We welcome the clarity of the proposed patient and client council's functions, the place it will be given in the new structures, its independence and the duty placed on all health and social care organisations to engage with it, which is enshrined in the legislation.

The issue of most concern to members of health and social services councils in the development and delivery of the patient and client council is how local representation will be preserved and maintained. Regardless of how that is worked out in secondary legislation and in implementation, members of health and social services councils will want an organisation that is clearly rooted in local communities and which equitably hears the local voice. Notwithstanding that, the members of health and social services councils recognise the importance of having a single co-ordinated organisation to formulate and express diverse local views and, consequently, welcome the broad consensus of opinion, in response to the consultation, that the patient and client council should be a single body rather than five local and autonomous groupings.

In conclusion, the collective view of the health and social services councils is that they are able to support the structures that are set out because they are, in principle at least, capable of delivering fully accountable services and seeking the involvement of patients and the public in all their functions.

Dr Deeny: Thank you for the presentation, Richard. I have worked in the Health Service for many years and am very interested in this issue. Are you in favour of one patient and client council or one patient and client council that has five offices?

Mr Dixon: We are in favour of one patient and client council that has five local offices.

Dr Deeny: As with any consumer council, the patient and client council is a patients' advocate. How many members will a patient and client council have? How much clout will it have to stand up for patients? I assume that the five offices will be in the confines of the five trusts; how many people will be employed in those five offices? As a GP, people visit me to discuss health issues. For example, someone rang me at lunchtime with a complaint. Should people who complain be directed to one of the five offices, which will then refer them to the patient and client council?

Mr Dixon: There are a number of issues there, and I will try to take them in turn. Matters relating to membership and structures are currently under debate and discussion.

We imagine that there will be a regional patient and client council, which will have a membership of at

least 15 people. However, it will be difficult to balance the need for the council to be representative with the need for it to be a board of governors that looks after an independent organisation. The members of the four health and social services councils currently work on a voluntary basis. We have no executive functions, and we are looked after by the boards, hence I am called an officer rather than an executive. Nevertheless, we anticipate that the regional patient and client council may have a similar make-up, and there will be a genuine attempt to ensure that it is representative of local groups. We are unsure about the size and composition of the local groupings in each of the trusts and local commissioning groups areas, but we may be less constrained, provided we have the freedom to recruit people that the patient and client council regards as appropriate or representative of an area and provided a clear link is created between it and the regional body.

We imagine that regional body members will be paid. The local groups may remain voluntary, and that would provide more latitude, but there would have to be an absolute link between those local groups and the regional body.

We imagine that the patient and client council will have five offices that will deliver three core functions for their respective areas. Those functions are: advocacy for individuals with complaints; liaison; and working, and maintaining a relationship, with the local trust, the local commissioning group and other relevant bodies, including the voluntary and community sector. Furthermore, the offices will actively engage with communities. It is reflected in our response that representation will be contained within committee membership, but it is always augmented, whether by a local commissioning group or a patient and client council, by an active ongoing programme of engagement with communities. The officers will go out and meet people and bring back their views, as well as take in the views of members of local committees.

Access requires work, because, with the best will in the world, even with five local offices, they will not be accessible or local to everyone in that patch. We hope that serious consideration will be given to ideas such as accessible clinics for advocates, access to the Internet and to new technologies to a greater extent than was ever the case with the health and social services councils. You are correct to point out that access is of primary importance.

Lastly, the powers of the patient and client council are greatly augmented by the Bill. A duty is placed on all health and social care organisations to engage with the patient and client council and to listen to what it has to say and to have due regard for it. That is a significant additional power that gives the patient and client council influence to a greater extent than the health and social services councils now have.

The requirement that all health and social care organisations produce consultation and engagement strategies will address how they are communicating and working with the people whom we serve. Those strategies will be approved by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety only after consultation with the patient and client council. Again, that is another significant additional power.

Mr Gallagher: Richard, you spoke about people working for the patient and client council, but most of its members will be unpaid. Is that correct? If so, it will be important for members who take time off work to receive appropriate remuneration, as they are making a valuable input into council discussions, formulation of plans, and so on.

In your submission, your response to clause 8(2) of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill is that the regional board's functions do not include any reference to balance of regional, strategic commissioning and locally responsive commissioning.

It is important for that issue to receive a good deal of attention as the Bill progresses, because the public have many questions about disparity. People in the west, for example, ask why home helps there are paid at a different rate than in other areas and why, across all the trusts and boards, some areas provide vulnerable groups with more support than others. It has always been difficult to obtain accurate information about such variations, and figures must emerge to identify how much money has been allocated to different areas.

Is that what you were getting at? If so, have you any ideas about how to improve that situation, because the subject has been discussed in Committee and no answers have been forthcoming. How could more balanced commissioning be achieved?

Mr Dixon: The theme of the councils' response was to make a clear statement on the need for central leadership and direction that will, and should, provide equity across Northern Ireland. In saying that, we do not wish to detract from the important local agenda that requires local responsiveness. We clearly stated our support for those structures that involve locally elected representatives, engage with communities and decide what people in the area need and want.

However, any proposals should arrive at a central point at which someone makes a decision. Among the duties of that individual should be to ensure equity of access, so that a person in Strabane will have the same experience of a service as a person in Newtownards. That is the business of decision-making; it is why a central authority is necessary, and it is the underlying theme of our response. Until now, such an authority has not existed.

We stated in our response that the fragmented nature of the planning and delivery of care through multiple organisations in the old system was a disadvantage and should not be replicated in the new structures.

Mrs McGill: Thank you, Richard, for mentioning Strabane; I am grateful to you for doing so. I want to put on record that I welcome that and the fact that equality of service, provision, and so forth, that has not existed thus far, will happen.

The Chairperson: That was a fairly simple and straightforward comment. Members have no further questions. Thank you, Richard, for taking the time to meet the Committee and for your presentation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

25 September 2008

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Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mrs Claire McGill

Witnesses:

Mr Dominic Burke	} Western Health and Social Services Board
Dr Paula Kilbane	} Eastern Health and Social Services Board
Mrs Fionnuala McAndrew	} Southern Health and Social Services Board
Mr Stuart MacDonnell	} Northern Health and Social Services Board

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Dominic Burke, acting chief executive of the Western Health and Social Services Board; Paula Kilbane, chief executive of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board; Stuart MacDonnell, chief executive of the Northern Health and Social Services Board; and Fionnuala McAndrew, director of social services in the Southern Health and Social Services Board. You are all very welcome. I invite you to make a brief presentation, and I will then invite questions from members. I will allow around 40 minutes for the evidence session.

Dr Paula Kilbane (Eastern Health and Social Services Board): Thank you, Chairperson. I am the current chairperson of the chief executives' group, so I

will briefly outline some points in our submission, because the main purpose of our visit is to answer questions.

We welcome the underlying themes of the review of public administration (RPA), including the reduction of bureaucracy through simplifying systems and avoiding duplication. We particularly welcome public health and well-being's significantly enhanced profile in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, because, although we all recognise that it is very important to cure, and care for, those who are unwell, it would be better if we could prevent them from becoming unwell in the first instance.

It will be very challenging to deliver the reforms in the Bill. We are attempting to reap the benefits of reduced bureaucracy in the context of new organisational arrangements. There is a particular challenge in bringing together those different interfaces, particularly that between the regional health and social care board and the regional agency for public health and social well-being. The functions that the health and social services boards currently carry out will be transferred to one or other of those two bodies. Indeed, some will be transferred to a third body, the regional support services organisation (RSSO). The core functions of the regional health and social care board itself are: commissioning; performance management and improvement; and financial management. The regional board must have primacy in commissioning, taking account of, and paying due emphasis and regard to, input from the regional agency.

The range of commissioning activities and functions to be carried out should equate to what the health and social services boards are currently doing — those activities and functions should be both regional and local. The commissioning arrangements should deliver improved health and well-being, and reduce inequalities. That will depend on how efficiently the regional board interfaces with the regional agency. Importantly, the board will be a regional body with an intense local focus. The Bill contains a major and welcome emphasis on the views of service users, communities and the public, and, in particular, it provides for local representation from locally elected councillors.

The regional board will be multi-professional; that is absolutely essential when dealing with the complex range of services that will be commissioned. However, there will also be adequate provision in the commissioning arrangements for specialist and vulnerable services. The local commissioning groups (LCGs) will be fully involved in performance management and improvement, and, importantly, the Bill recognises that the regional board should be accountable for the management of family practitioner services. I remind Committee members that 20% of

all resources are spent on family practitioner services. The strategy and policy is to move increasingly from providing services in hospitals to providing them in the primary-care arena and in communities themselves. It is very important that that be seriously represented in the structure of the regional board.

The local commissioning groups should play a lead role in engaging communities and in identifying local priorities for improving health and well-being. The majority of services should be commissioned locally. Only very specialist or vulnerable services, or services that cater for small numbers of people, should be commissioned regionally.

In order to do that, people must be located locally. One cannot be in touch with the needs of one's local community, and with its activists and representatives, unless one is co-located and close to the ground. We firmly believe that staff from the board, the agency and the regional support services organisation, whose jobs directly relate to local issues, should be co-located in order to ensure that they work together properly — that should be done locally. Over-centralisation of those structures would not be a good idea.

As far as the regional agency for public health and social well-being is concerned, the three domains of public health should also be integrated and co-located in order to facilitate local working. The first of those functions is health improvement — including initiatives such as Investing for Health — and health promotion.

The second function is health protection — including vaccination — against outbreaks of communicable diseases. Health protection also covers environmental hazards, which is an issue of increasing importance and of public interest and concern, and emergency planning — ensuring effective responses to pandemic outbreaks of flu, major outbreaks of communicable diseases or a major emergency event such as the disastrous aftermath of a dirty bomb. Responsibility for the aforementioned should lie with the regional agency.

The third function is to provide input into the commissioning process, which will assist integration of the regional agency with the LCGs.

There is a need for the LCGs to be properly informed, so important links must be made with the regional agency, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and bodies such as Ireland and Northern Ireland's Population Health Observatory (INIsPHO), the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry and relevant departments at Queen's University. Yesterday's announcements about the increase in melanoma rates will not have been lost on Committee members. It is important for a public-health agency

to have that kind of intelligence and information, enabling it to monitor progress against targets.

I will now move from structures to people. People are a vital resource in making the changes work. There will be fewer of them, and we must ensure that we have the right people in the right places. We welcome the fact that, at this stage of the proceedings, the chairpersons' positions have been advertised and the appointment panels will sit in early October. As well as that, the advertisements for the posts of chief executive have been published. That is all about trying to meet an exacting timetable and moving to a position in which people can tell their staff that, all things being equal, and assuming that the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill passes, they will be able to transfer on 1 April 2009. In bringing people along, it is important to be able to tell them where they are likely to be situated and what they will be doing.

That takes me to the next point, which is all about location, location, location. We support the need to implement the reforms as quickly as possible. We recognise, however, that if we have regional bodies with local outworkings, it is important to ensure the equitable distribution of local employment opportunities to match. We understand that there are some policy issues outstanding, and Sir George Bain and his team are currently reviewing those in another place.

We expect that, although the new bodies' headquarters will comprise more senior staff, they will have to be supported by people in lower grades, who may be much less mobile. We must be careful that nobody feels that they are being asked to work in places that are unsuitable for them for practical, and other, reasons. Many women in the lower ranks have other responsibilities that tie them near to where they live. There are issues of equity and fairness, but those issues differ from issues that arose at the time of the trust mergers. In that instance, staff largely stayed where they were, particularly those who were working at the coalface.

The Minister is fully committed to avoiding compulsory redundancies, but no guarantees have been given. ICT and modern ways of working, in a remote sense, can enable those changes to happen.

Accountability is about having clear lines of distinction among the roles of the new organisations, and among the Department, the Minister and the trusts. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will retain financial accountability for the trusts, while the board and the agency will have responsibility for the commissioning of performance management. The operating framework, which underpins the legislation, must be clear about who does what and when, in order to prevent a situation in which the commissioners pursue the implementation of targets

and priorities, while performance and financial accountability is pursued on different lines. It is vital that there be crossover.

Although we welcome that fact that local councillors will be represented on the regional agency and the local commissioning groups, the issue of dual mandates should be considered against the number of councillors required under the latest proposal to establish 11 new councils. The roles and responsibilities of members of the LCGs, the regional agency, and the patient and client council should not be duplicated. There may also be issues around how local councillors are identified and selected to serve on those bodies. However, that is not for us to comment on.

In conclusion, we recognise the huge scale of change. The process is more complicated than the trust mergers. We are creating four new organisations, whereas the trusts were merged to form bigger organisations that performed the same functions. As leaders of our boards, we are committed to managing that transition. We try to maintain the morale and knowledge base of our staff. We want them, albeit in fewer numbers, and their expertise to transfer to those new functions.

The Department has set up a number of work streams aimed at planning the fine detail of the operating framework. There is a number of projects groups. For the Committee's information, I appended a communications document, issued by the Department, which lists the names of who runs what and who belongs to which work stream. A further 19 pages may be downloaded from the Internet, if members want to know exactly who does what.

In the background, people are working hard to produce the essential operating details, which will underpin the structure and help it to work. Clearly, communication is vital in order to keep everyone on board and to deliver the reforms to the timescales.

My colleagues, who have also contributed to the process, will wish to discuss a variety of issues.

The Chairperson: How is staff morale? Are staff being kept informed of developments?

Dr Kilbane: Every attempt is made to keep staff informed. However, we await movement on some issues. Staff enquire about what kinds of jobs they will have to apply for and where those will be located. Some of those questions cannot be answered. Structures are being worked on at a departmental level. The working groups are building up a head of steam, and we expect staffing issues to become clearer soon.

Our staff see the end point approaching, and that is helpful for them. Our vacancy rates being what they are, I do not pretend for a minute that staff do not struggle daily to get everything done — they do

struggle. However, my general sense is that, as we approach the end point, people who were in a dark place a while ago are now beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. My colleagues may not agree with that comment.

Mr Dominic Burke (Western Health and Social Services Board): No, that is the situation. Staff fall into two, if not three, categories. One category is those people who are charged and ready for the new world; they want to be involved, and are clearly up for it and ready to go. Many of them will continue to do the jobs that they currently do to the same standard as before.

Some staff are coming to the end of their career and are getting ready to leave. The people whose morale is most significantly hit are those who are uncertain at present. People who are leaving see the end in sight and are up for delivering in this transitional period to ensure that the 2008-09 activity is carried out to a high standard. Those who will be in the new world will join the new teams and get on with planning for 2009-10 and beyond. As is to be expected, it is those who are uncertain about what is happening who have a degree of anxiety.

The Chairperson: Has there been a mass exodus of professional staff in any significant healthcare areas to the private sector or elsewhere?

Mr Stuart MacDonnell (Northern Health and Social Services Board): There has been a significant exodus, but I would not say that it has occurred at any particular grade. Like my colleagues, I try to meet staff informally once they have handed in their resignation to find out their reasons for leaving. A mixture of reasons is usually involved, with the need for certainty featuring most often. Some people are moving horizontally to a place of certainty. Small numbers are moving across the water, with others moving to the private sector.

A significant number are moving into the trusts — they are further down the road in the restructuring process. They may have reached a point in their restructuring whereby they have been unable to fill some posts in what they call the legacy trusts — the previous trust in that geographical area. In those cases, the trusts open the posts to the wider RPA group, and people apply for them simply because they are the first jobs to become available. We have suffered as a result of that trend. I hope, however, that it is coming to an end. In November, three years will have passed since the first changes under the RPA were announced — that is a long time. We assume that, once the senior staff take up their posts in the new agencies over the next couple of months, matters will begin to speed up.

The Chairperson: Let us hope so.

Mrs O'Neill: You said, Paula, that the effectiveness of the local commissioning groups will hinge on local

input. Should there be a statutory requirement for them to carry out proper consultation? I know that they will have a public consultation role, but should a statutory requirement be placed on them to consult publicly on their decisions?

I also want to know about the role that the Department will have in drawing up frameworks and in establishing aims and objectives for the different health and social care organisations. Will that give the Department a mechanism through which it can exercise control over the new bodies?

Mr S MacDonnell: It was a politician who said that all politics is local — I think that it was the late United States senator Tip O'Neill. The Minister is clear that a significant number of elected local representatives will sit on the boards of the local commissioning groups — perhaps four. An issue may arise with the establishment of the groups when the outcome of the new Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's review is known. However, let us assume that that has all happened. The local commissioning groups will technically be committees of the regional health and social care board, which will be accountable to the Department. The regional board will be bound to implement the wishes and policy of the Minister of the day, and, in turn, it will ask the local commissioning groups to ensure, through service frameworks and the like, that they are working to that policy.

However, that said, there should be a large range of issues within the local ambit of a local commissioning group. There should be scope for difference rather than adopting a uniform approach.

Key to how the new system will work is how much autonomy those LCGs are afforded, after they have dealt with the pressures of the Minister of the day and the financial situation, which is not of the LCGs' making. I believe that there is a requirement in the Bill for the regional board to consult widely on any plans. I am sure that it, in turn, could by management instruction bind the LCGs to do the same. However, whether enshrined in legislation or not, I am convinced that the LCGs will do that anyway.

Mrs Fionnuala McAndrew (Southern Health and Social Services Board): Having a statutory duty to consult does not necessarily mean that that consultation is more effective. Sometimes consultation can be tokenistic, even when required by statute.

Stuart is saying that if there is a duty on local commissioning boards to consult, and if the framework document or plans for how the LCGs should conduct their business are clear, that will encourage creative consulting methods. That consultation would then be conducted with a range of people with an interest in health and social services, and could be more

productive than through statutory duty, where some people just tick the box.

Mrs O'Neill: What about the creation of framework document? Clause 5 of the Bill states that the Department must work with each new health and social care body to draw up a framework document that establishes that new body's functions. Will that be advantageous and defeat any further problems down the line?

Dr Kilbane: That will ensure that all the boundaries join up, which is very important. We must know who is accountable for what, what the rules of engagement are and what it is that people must do when working with one other. Furthermore, if certain functions are not delivered, we must know who takes action and what the sanctions, or, alternatively, the rewards, may be. It is essential to have a framework document, and that document must be thoroughly developed and tested. That will ensure that the people who work in the different arenas are quality-assured.

Dr Deeny: First, I declare an interest in LCGs. My question relates to what Stuart was talking about.

The regional health and social care board can overrule the LCGs. Therefore, LCGs are really local advisory groups, dealing with public-administration systems. They are not commissioning organisations in the sense that primary-care trusts in England are. Given that, do you not feel the term LCG to be misleading?

You have both referred to the fact that decisions are best made locally. My concern is that people on the LCGs will believe that they can be overruled by the regional board at any time. What do you think about that? Do you think that that should be the case, or do you believe that the LCGs should have the same clout as primary-care trusts in England? There, the primary-care trusts commission only in exceptional cases, and only very exceptionally are they overruled by a central body.

Mr S MacDonnell: Dr Deeny has hit on a pivotal issue. There need to be checks and balances in any system. Wearing his MLA hat, Dr Deeny expects the Committee to hold the Minister to account for what happens in health and social services, and, in turn, for him to have control over the various agencies that act on his behalf. As MLAs, you would not accept it were the Minister to say that a matter has been delegated to people for whom he has no responsibility. However, if everything is controlled from the centre — the point that Dr Deeny makes — what scope exists to have creative and energetic people working locally to resolve local problems?

It is more to do with the style used to operate the arrangements than it is to do with the statutory basis on which the different agencies are established. If

the centre is very controlling — I am sure that all members are aware of organisations that operate like that — parts of the organisation, on the peripheries, may feel marginalised. Equally, I am sure that it would not be acceptable, certainly not to the Northern Ireland Audit Office or to the Assembly, if the centre were relaxed and did not know what was happening on the peripheries. There are, therefore, checks and balances.

The framework document, which is intended to wrestle with those checks and balances, is what we are all interested in seeing. None of us has yet seen it, Dr Deeny. Therefore, when the document emerges, I want to bench-test it to see how it deals with the issue of autonomy versus the mandatory requirement to implement the Minister of the day's wishes.

Dr Deeny: I know some GPs who sit on local commissioning groups, and not only on the group on which I sit in the west, who would like to think that they are accountable to a regional body yet have the power to commission locally, and with the necessary financial backup. That is a concern at LCG meetings that I have attended, and in other LCGs. If commissioning groups do not have the clout and financial resources to back their decision-making, I do want to see GPs or other primary-care representatives walk away from local commissioning groups.

Mr S MacDonnell: What you have said is what, in principle, the policy direction is trying to achieve. My colleagues and I are beaten down by the pragmatism of our experiences. Sometimes the pressure of the issues of the day is such that, by the time that one has dealt with them, it is the end of the day. One then goes home, only to come in the next day to encounter more issues.

The framework document will, therefore, have to address the freedom to manoeuvre that you seek in the system, and I urge you to make your suggestions, whether as an MLA or through the British Medical Association (BMA), or both, in order to ensure that those freedoms are there. As I said, however, much will be in the style of operation as opposed to what the framework document says.

Dr Kilbane: I am more optimistic, because the intention — although we will have to wait and see what emerges — is that there will be devolved local budgets. The emphasis is that only those functions that can be commissioned regionally should be commissioned regionally — the power should lie locally. That is the intention, and I believe that people are genuine in that intention.

Furthermore, locally elected representatives on the LCGs will undertake a great deal of scrutiny; therefore, decisions will not be taken in darkened rooms. There will exist real power for LCGs to commission within the scope of the policy framework. They cannot send rockets to the moon if that is not the

purpose of the enterprise, but they will have enough power to make decisions about local issues.

There is another side to that coin, which is that some of the decisions that LCGs make may not be popular locally. Therefore, be careful what you wish for, because living in the straitened circumstances of a confined budget means that it will be possible to do some things and not others, and some things will have to change — all of which is difficult to achieve.

The object of the exercise is that if everyone is on board and given the freedom to make decisions, that represents an important step change, and one that is genuinely expressed in anything that I have seen so far.

Mrs Hanna: The rationale behind the framework document is, I suppose, to reduce bureaucracy and bring services closer to people and patients. The bodies must, however, have members with the necessary expertise and knowledge, particularly on public-health matters. I am thinking particularly of health inequality, which is a big concern for everyone, because the gap it is getting wider all the time. Therefore, people must be in place who can make the necessary decisions, and we do not yet know that that will be the case. I will have a concern until more is known about what is happening.

The Chief Medical Officer is talking up prevention, rather than talking of picking up the pieces, so it is important that the expertise is in place, and that expertise must be joined-up. Bottom-up and top-down approaches must be taken, in order that the groups on the ground, such as those concerned with healthy living, are properly involved. Everyone is concerned about how that will all come together to make a difference.

Mr Burke: You are absolutely right. The important point concerns working together, and Dr Kilbane made that remark in her opening statement. The regional agency for public health and social well-being must work with the regional health and social care board. People who are currently involved with Investing for Health and health action zones will work as part of the regional agency. Local commissioning groups will include local representatives and will have the voice of the people.

Those people will come together to ensure that effective local health-improvement initiatives are running. The test will be whether joint planning emerges at the top level that is informed by local commissioning and by local groups. People will recognise that working together at ground level results in the implementation of the most effective plans.

Mrs Hanna: Therefore, it is not only about consultation. The people who are closest to the problems must inform the legislation.

Dr Kilbane: We understand the concept of a joined-up approach in the local areas to mean that the

relevant folk from the regional agency — representatives from organisations such as Investing for Health and Wellnet — will work alongside the regional board at a local level to ensure that informed and sensible decisions are made. Otherwise, they would not be able to write a local commissioning plan, part of which requires them to outline what they are in doing, for instance, to invest in community groups and narrow inequalities.

At the regional level, the chief executive of the regional agency will have to ensure that that adds up to something that will deliver on inequalities across Northern Ireland. On that regional level, work must take place on an inter-agency basis. We acknowledge that that is not simply the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's baby; the work is also concerned with housing and education. Whoever gets the interesting job of chief executive of the regional agency for public health and social well-being will have to fulfil that role regionally, and that will be on the basis of joined-up local arrangements.

Mr Burke: Community planning, on which local councils will lead, will have a key part to play. That will bring more people to work together by statute in order to deliver that agenda.

Mr Gallagher: How do you see the reforms progressing? You talked about the importance of a balance that allows for grass-roots involvement in the regional board. Local influence on service delivery is important. How do you envisage that happening? The purpose of the exercise is to trim down our Health Service and to try to ensure that money is spent on front-line services rather than on bureaucracy. If the two elements are to be the regional board's central function and local influence, can that be done, and can savings be achieved at the same time?

Dr Kilbane: The aim, and the challenge, is to cut 25% of the current cost of the health and social services boards and the other legacy bodies in Northern Ireland over three years. Therefore, the new designs will be based on a target of having 25% fewer staff by the end of that period, or whatever equates to a 25% reduction in costs, which is between £12 million and £13 million. That is achievable. It is happening already, because a vacancy-control programme has been in place in recent years — that is, since the changes were mooted — with the result that organisations are already operating with significantly fewer people in permanent positions. Therefore, even before the point of change, we have started managing the numbers downwards.

Earlier, we referred to the fact that some staff will decide not to stay with the health and social services boards. As present, our assessment of the numbers shows that we are well on target to achieving those savings, which, paradoxically, could result in a scenario in

which we lose more of the necessary expertise than we should. We have lost a number of key people to organisations that seem to have a more certain future, so we must be sensible and make appropriate decisions about enabling people who need to work locally to do so. We will not be in control of the process after 1 April 2009, but, from where we are standing, we are definitely on target to achieve the reforms.

Mr S MacDonnell: To set that in context, the comprehensive spending review's three-year target for the entirety of health and social services in Northern Ireland is £343 million, which is a huge sum of money. The target for the organisations that we represent, as well for the Central Services Agency and the Health Promotion Agency, is £13 million, which is approximately 4% of that target.

The RPA saving from reform of the first-phase organisations — the trusts — is £39 million. Therefore, the overall RPA target for Northern Ireland's health and social care sector is £52 million. I agree with Paula that the £13 million target is achievable. We are halfway through the first of the three years and, as I said to you earlier, Chairperson, because so many people have left ahead of the change, we are almost ahead of the wave of change.

However, that target only equates to 4% of a very large figure, and, as the Committee is well aware, freeing up that amount of resources is a task that the trusts are wrestling with. It is a huge challenge for them. Our £13 million saving is welcome because it is a significant sum of money, but it remains a small part of a very big challenge for the entirety of health and social services in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton: Are there any functions that the trusts are concerned about losing to the regional board, the regional support services organisation or any other agency?

Mr S MacDonnell: In time, some functions will migrate. From memory, those will include financial systems management, HR, recruitment, processing, some aspects of estate management, and so on. Those are outside my remit, but I am aware that seven or eight trust functions have been highlighted as moving to the RSSO. In turn, those may be grouped together in different sectors in Northern Ireland rather than their all moving to some kind of central administrative factory.

When it is appointed, the RSSO management team will have to liaise and negotiate with the trusts. A document setting that out has already been published and consulted on. I am sure that, in due course, the Committee will want to hear from the people who are driving that. That is not something that we are driving; however, one of the work streams that Dr Kilbane mentioned is dealing with that issue. A small number of board staff will migrate to the RSSO

The entire Central Services Agency will migrate also. However, the greater number will come from trusts, and I expect that to happen over the next three to five years.

Dr Kilbane: We do not believe that any functions will be lost as a result of the reforms. As custodians of the boards' functions, we must perform due diligence to ensure that the new structure — although it will have fewer staff — carries out the essential functions. We have no reason to believe that that will not be the case.

The Chairperson: Everyone who indicated that they wanted to speak has done so. Thank you all for coming to the Committee and for answering members' questions. The Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill represents the greatest shake-up of the Health Service in its history, so I hope that we get it right.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

25 September 2008

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (REFORM) BILL (NIA 21/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Sam Gardiner
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mrs Claire McGill

Witnesses:

Ms Alice T Casey	} Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority
Mr Malachy Finnegan	
Mr Jude O'Neill	
Mr Phelim Quinn	

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): The Committee will now hear evidence from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). I welcome Alice Casey, the interim chief executive of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA); Phelim Quinn, its director of operations; and Jude O'Neill, its head of mental health and learning disability. We have set aside 40 minutes for you to make your presentation and to take questions from Committee members. I will now hand over to you.

Ms Alice T Casey (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority): Thank you very much for inviting us, Chairperson. Malachy Finnegan, our communications manager, is with us this afternoon as well. I will take a couple of minutes to make a few opening remarks, and then Phelim and Jude will talk more about how we will operationalise the Mental Health Commission, subject to the legislation's passing.

The RQIA welcomes the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee on the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, and to clarify, and expand on, the written evidence that we previously submitted. We were established in 2005 to register and inspect health and social care organisations across Northern Ireland. Our powers in the regulative sector include the ability to carry out announced and unannounced inspections of care organisations, nursing homes, residential homes, children's homes, and a whole range of other services that came under our regulation on 1 April 2008.

Our powers include the ability to make recommendations for improvement; to enforce requirements; and to issue failure-to-comply notices. We can also administer the ultimate sanction of prosecution and compulsory closure of those homes. In the statutory sector — that is, hospitals, and community and primary-care services, including dental services — we have the ability to enter premises, to obtain information and to undertake reviews of those services. Some of the reviews that we have already undertaken include the hygiene reviews, which were publicised quite recently; clinical and social-care governance reviews of all trusts, and many more. The review that we are currently finalising is the clostridium difficile review, which is to go to the Minister shortly.

All our reports are made public and are available on our website; everything that we do is published. The RQIA cherishes and will defend vigorously its right to independence. We are the independent regulator for health and social care in Northern Ireland; we are independent of thought and purpose, and we believe that our work to date has demonstrated that. We have no qualms over reporting on what we see when we inspect or review organisations.

We review constantly our practices, we learn from sharing our experiences with other regulators across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and we collaborate and share expertise. We also use clinical experts from across the UK when we review particular services, and we have experts to look at those services objectively. We used experts when dealing with the clostridium difficile outbreak, the hyperlipaemia review and our review on blood safety. We will also use experts for our planned review of maternity services across Northern Ireland and for child protection arrangements, and so on. We have a wholly lay board that is made up of 12 members and a chairman.

The Bill does three things for the RQIA — we shorten the name of the authority to RQIA, because we find it easier to say. First, it tidies up our title and establishes the RQIA in legislation, — in place of the Regulation and Improvement Authority — and that is welcome as it clarifies the situation for many people.

Secondly, the Bill impacts on the organisations that we will review. For example, we will have responsibility for reviewing and regulating the proposed new regional organisations: the regional health and social care board; the regional agency for public health and social well-being; and the regional support services organisation.

Thirdly, it transfers the functions of the Mental Health Commission to the RQIA, and that change is welcome. Since the transfer of the Mental Health Commission was first mooted some 12 to 18 months ago, the RQIA has worked collaboratively with the Mental Health Commission on a range of issues. Over the summer, we took a strategic approach on an operational level to discuss and plan how the services will come together, if the legislation comes into effect from 1 April 2009. We have established a project board, which includes the chairman, the chief executive and the commissioners of the Mental Health Commission with officers of the same rank in the RQIA.

The project board's work to date has included developing an action plan in response to a due diligence report that the RQIA had undertaken; clarifying the legal implications of the change on the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 for the RQIA; clarifying the implications for our board — our 12 lay members and chairman; reaching agreement on the workforce plans and the financial implications with the Mental Health Commission; and developing an appropriate communications plan so that the public know exactly what is happening. The project board's work has also included developing and reaching agreement on how the RQIA will take over the Mental Health Commission's operational work. That was an important piece of work, and I am pleased that we achieved full agreement with the Mental Health Commission at our project-board meeting last week. We have now agreed how we will take the work forward, which is a major step.

The pathway is now clear for the transfer to take place. The RQIA is ready, willing and able to progress that important work, and it has wider powers than the Mental Health Commission. It means that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority will regulate all services in the health and social care family in Northern Ireland. It will also be subject to the necessary vigour that is required under the regulation.

I shall now hand over to Mr Quinn and Mr O'Neill, who will tell the Committee how that will be done.

Mr Phelim Quinn (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority): I shall deal with the discharge of the functions of the Mental Health Commission under the RQIA and the comprehensive model that we have developed in conjunction with the Mental Health Commission's senior management staff.

In developing the comprehensive model, we have worked in partnership with the mental-health commissioners. We have also used the resources of senior psychiatric professionals across Northern Ireland. Establishing the dedicated mental-health and learning-disability team under that model has been an important factor in developing and delivering the functions of the Mental Health Commission, as set out in the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. I will speak in more detail about the model as I go along.

That model enshrines several factors. First, the specific care, treatment and human rights of individuals are embraced in the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. It has been stated that the RQIA concentrates on systems and organisations, but the authority also fully acknowledges its requirement to focus on individuals.

Secondly, it is stipulated that there must be engagement and consultation with wider service users, their groups and advocates. The RQIA is concerned about the context in which care is provided. In a previous submission to the Committee, the authority was told of concerns about psychiatric-unit environments in which care is provided in Northern Ireland. I will address that issue later.

Thirdly, there must be an assessment of the level and availability of care using quality standards, at the same time as considering clinical- and social-care guidelines, legislative regulations and legislative standards.

All those elements will be incorporated in the RQIA's work under the 1986 Order and the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Account must also be taken of enforcement action in response to non-compliance. With both organisations working in tandem under the two relevant pieces of legislation, the responsibility for enforcement lies with the RQIA. Therefore, to some extent, the circle will be squared when it comes to discovering what is going wrong. We can then make recommendations and take any required enforcement action.

The RQIA is committed to promoting and protecting the core functions of the Mental Health Commission. In order to do that, key issues in several areas must be addressed. Those issues include independence, multidisciplinary working, investigative action, inspectorial action, advisory and advocacy work, and protection of patients and the public.

Finding a new way forward involves using the powers that are combined after the transfer in a manner that reflects the Bamford Review's aspirations. Any work that the RQIA does will be future-proofed in line with that review's aims, objectives and legislative recommendations. The RQIA will retain and develop

its commitment to focus on the individual and the rights of service users and of their carers, incorporating enforcement powers.

The authority will promote multi-professional and lay working. The RQIA wants to include the lay concept in its work under the Mental Health Commission, and in the broader remit to the RQIA itself for inspection, review, governance and service reviews.

Extra emphasis must be put on the promotion and sharing of good practice across mental-health and learning-disability services. Once found anywhere else in the rest of the UK, in the Republic of Ireland or, indeed, in the rest of the world, examples of good practice will be shared with services.

There will be a drive to encourage wider promotion of service-user engagement on mental-health advocacy. That means more than simply looking at mental disorder and learning disability *per se*; it involves the promotion of good mental health in the Northern Ireland population.

The RQIA seeks to enshrine respect for everyone's human rights and the right to timely, high-quality care. It aims to promote choice and to listen to the needs of individual service users and the views of their carers in order to develop a culture of learning and innovation. The authority will find and challenge deficient practice, and it will show integrity, and be open and transparent, in its work with service users.

The RQIA wants to work in a more accessible, responsible and targeted manner. It will engage more with the public. The RQIA is about to close consultation on its public-participation strategy. Among the key factors to be inserted into that strategy is the authority's work in the areas of mental health and learning disability. It is also hoped that two external reference groups with service users will be established — a specific one each for mental-health service users and learning-disability service users. That will enable the RQIA to obtain both constituencies' views, which will further inform all aspects of its service provision.

On the issue of operational alignment, the RQIA regards the transfer as an opportunity to build on existing resources by adding an expert specialist team of full-time and paid sessional multi-professional officers. Mental health commissioners are currently part-time members drawn from a range of professions. The commission has always aspired to have full-time officers. There is now the opportunity to employ those full-time officers and to supplement skills and expertise with sessional workers, such as psychiatrists, approved social workers and other care workers, who may not be represented in the full-time workforce.

In line with the Bamford Review recommendations, the RQIA visiting programme will include annual

announced and unannounced reviews and inspections of mental-health and learning-disability hospital facilities in Northern Ireland.

An additional aspect of that programme that we wish to emphasise is that it will not just comprise visits to hospitals and buildings but will review the effectiveness, quality and safety of the new service-delivery models for mental health and learning disability that are developing throughout Northern Ireland. For instance, we wish to evaluate the effectiveness of home treatment and crisis- and rapid-response services, and consider how they address the needs of individuals who use them.

We are conscious of the high suicide rate in Northern Ireland, and, therefore, we wish to specifically focus on that. We have just completed a risk-assessment and risk-management review of adult mental-health services, and we wish to maintain that focus in order to ensure that health and social care organisations in Northern Ireland are working in line with the Northern Ireland suicide prevention strategy.

There should be a specific focus on services for people with learning disabilities — whether those services are in hospitals or in the community — and we are committed to maintaining a specific review programme for visits to, and inspections of, learning-disability services in Northern Ireland.

The Committee may also be aware that, following the transfer of responsibilities for the commissioning and provision of prison health, part of RQIA's remit means that it now has oversight of those services. Given the incidence of mental-health problems in the prison population, we are required to continue to review the quality, safety and availability of mental-health services in Northern Ireland's prisons.

Another area, which I touched on earlier, is our recent programme of unannounced hygiene inspections. Although called "hygiene inspections", they consider the general environment in which care is provided. Resonating from our previous discussions with the Committee, we wish to extend those inspections to mental-health and learning-disability facilities in order to help us make robust recommendations about how such facilities should be improved for service users.

Those measures consider service provision. We wish to protect the rights of individuals in the service and to maintain a focus on people who are subject to guardianship orders, whether such people be in hospitals, in the community or in regulated sector services in the community. Furthermore, we want to maintain and deliver a service that enables us to monitor the key function of detention under the 1986 Order.

We will employ a sessional medical panel to continuously review treatment plans. That panel, under

the Order, will appoint part II and part IV doctors. We will also employ a sessional panel of approved social workers to ensure that guardianship is closely monitored in Northern Ireland.

We wish to develop a revised code of practice for governance. Work on that has already started as part of the project plan for the transfer of functions, and it will reflect our responsibilities under the 1986 Order. The code of practice will also take account of the relevant elements of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

The functions arising from the 1986 Order will be subject to rigorous, internal performance management in RQIA. We will produce quarterly reports for our board that will reflect activity and outcome measures arising from RQIA's work on mental-health and learning-disability services. Furthermore, in order to help our board understand the issues for mental-health and learning-disability service users, we propose to develop a mental-health advisory group that will take advice from senior professionals and will reflect the mental-health and learning-disability population in Northern Ireland. Further to our meeting with the project board last week, development of that has already started.

Communication is a significant issue, which was also discussed at our project board meeting last week. Up until now, the Mental Health Commission has always used distinctive blue writing paper. When the mental-health and learning-disability services received blue letters, they were always very mindful that those were letters of significance that could have highlighted any issues or problems that arose in those particular services. As a proven brand, the RQIA proposes to use the same blue paper and envelopes that were previously used by the Mental Health Commission, so that that message continues in the services across Northern Ireland.

We are very happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Do you want to say anything at this juncture, Jude?

Mr Jude O'Neill (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority): To build on what Alice and Phelim said, the RQIA will endeavour to protect and promote the core functions of the Mental Health Commission, as enshrined in the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, as they transfer across to the RQIA. That includes a commitment to maintaining the spirit of the view of the 1986 Order — an approach that reflects a body that is independent, multidisciplinary, investigative, inspectorial, advisory and protective.

The Chairperson: We had a tour of Muckamore Abbey earlier today and discovered that there is 100% occupancy, which means that people are being turned

away. Some of the families of inpatients, who may have been here for 40-odd years, think that those inpatients could be put into the community. There is a feeling that that is the way to go, because Paul Goggins said that nobody should be institutionalised by 2014.

However, the Committee holds the view that one size does not fit all. We have heard from families and friends of Muckamore Abbey patients who would be loath to see family members who have been here for perhaps 40 years being put into the community — particularly older parents, who could not manage to care for their son or daughter. They would need a 24/7 service, and the cost of providing that is over £100,000 a person.

What is the RQIA's role in a situation in which people feel that their family members should stay in a secure environment rather than being put out into the community? Do you have powers to become involved and make recommendations to reflect the fact that not everyone wants to go into the community?

Mr Quinn: The quality standards for health and social care, as published by the Department, are mindful to reflect the views of service users and their carers. They form the basic framework against which the RQIA assesses services. I am in absolute agreement with the Committee: one size does not fit all. In the regulated sector, we find people who regard their placement in that sector as their own home. To some extent, the long-term residents or patients of Muckamore Abbey and their carers regard it, or some of its wards, as their own home.

Currently, we have the right to assess those services to find out whether adequate views are taken from service users about how their care packages are being planned, and whether it is appropriate for people to be placed in the community. Through any review process, we will ensure that there is robustness and an evidence base, as well as an engagement with residents and their carers in placing people in alternative services. We will assess those services, and we will make recommendations on the back of those assessments.

The Chairperson: There are over 200 people in Muckamore Abbey at the moment, and it is planned that the number of beds will be reduced to 87. However, people are not being placed in the community. Bed blocking and 100% occupancy already exists.

How can you argue for resettling patients into the community when, currently, you cannot cope with getting them out of the care facilities? There are people in Muckamore Abbey who should have been out in the community a couple of years ago; they still cannot get out because the facility and back-up to do that is not available. I am interested to hear your views on that, and I welcome the fact that you will examine the issue.

Unannounced visits are also an issue. The Committee has asked for its members to be able to examine standards in their own communities and in one another's communities, collectively or individually, because it is us, the politicians, who get it in the neck. As elected representatives, we are on the front line; our constituents fill mail bags with letters about the state of our hospitals, the lack of hygiene and the non-implementation of the policy of staff not wearing their uniforms outside work. I still see physiotherapists and other healthcare professionals shopping in my local stores while still wearing their uniforms. My understanding is that there is a Health Service-wide policy about not wearing uniforms outside the workplace.

Do you think that elected representatives should be allowed to make unannounced visits? Members of the community come to us first, telling us, for example, that their relatives are in a hospital ward that has blood splattered on the walls and floor, that the ward is never cleaned, and so forth. I know that this issue is a hot potato.

Mr Quinn: It is, and it is not, a hot potato, in that we believe that patients' experience is probably the first indicator of their perception of their quality of care. To some extent, the public-observed experience of what is happening in hospitals is the only valid view. Having said that, I think that that must be complemented by the professional view on infection-control practices and other forms of estates management relating to infection control.

I am sure that elected representatives do go into hospitals, and I am sure that they make comments. We are happy to take those comments on board. The RQIA can take direction about unannounced visits to specific facilities. I am conscious of the Chairperson's comments at our last meeting, which have been at the forefront of our minds concerning unannounced hygiene inspections.

I will give you some background. We were asked by the Minister to conduct a series of unannounced hygiene inspections. We did that without any additional resources, and those inspections were, to a certain extent, a test bed. We have started to recruit a specialist team of inspectors, and we intend to run a full programme of annual unannounced inspections from November. Those inspections will go beyond acute hospital facilities; they will extend into mental-health and learning-disability facilities, community facilities and will also provide advice to the regulated sector. There will be no hiding place from our unannounced hygiene programme. We will be there, and we will report. The inspections may take different forms at different times. We hope that we can do them in clusters, so we will do a round of visits in, for example, a maternity service or in a group of acute

mental-health hospitals. We will report on that very openly, as we have done previously.

The Chairperson: As elected representatives, we also have a duty of care to our constituents. When we take a phone call telling us that we should see the state of the bed, the ward or the toilets that someone's relative or loved one is having to put up with, I think that we should be able to do something about that, thereby complementing one another. There is the possibility of overstepping demarcation lines that have been set by professionals, but elected representatives are not going to cost the Government anything by doing this. We are elected and paid representatives, and, therefore, it will not drain financial resources. Thank you for your points; I will take them on board.

Dr Deeny: I commend the RQIA. When we met previously, I asked Phelim whether the authority could hold the Department and the trust to account. Since that occasion, you have conducted three unannounced hospital visits.

Mr Quinn: We have conducted five visits.

Dr Deeny: I can recall the visits to Downe Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital. Where were the others?

Mr Quinn: They were at Belfast City Hospital and the Causeway Hospital.

Dr Deeny: I commend you for arriving unannounced, inspecting the premises and publicising your findings. It demonstrates that the RQIA can hold trusts to account and, furthermore, justifies the motion that the Committee tabled in the Assembly. Although the Minister wanted to focus on one trust, you visited different trusts. Indeed, four of those visits took place outside the Northern Health and Social Trust, and deficiencies were found on every occasion.

Alice mentioned the organisation's independence. What is your role within the structures? It is difficult for the public, the Committee — and even a healthcare professional such as me — to understand all the acronyms, and so on. Who guides and instructs you? Will you remain independent? That will enable you to hold the Department to account.

I reiterate the Chairperson's comments. Although I have travelled the road to the airport many times, today is my first visit to Muckamore Abbey. I am impressed with the standard of care received by people with learning disabilities. You mentioned that you will assume the remit and duties of the Mental Health Commission. Will you be involved in commissioning mental health?

Ms Casey: No, we will not.

Dr Deeny: Will you have an influence?

Mr Quinn: We will influence the shape of the quality safety agenda for mental-health and learning-disability services. Our focus will be on individuals because, under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, loss of liberty will be a major issue. We must defend people's liberty and ensure that, when people lose their liberty under the Order — through a detention or guardianship — it is done within the law, and every technical detail is checked and monitored. Until now, that has been the Mental Health Commission's role. However, we value the fact that it will be our responsibility from 1 April 2009.

Dr Deeny: I have worked in the community for years, and the services at Muckamore Abbey could not be matched or afforded in the community. The services are wonderful, and I am delighted that I came today. Some of the people here are severely disabled and have left the community because they could not cope with the stigma or had been picked on. Moreover, safety is an important consideration. Those people live in a safe environment and in a happy comfort zone. We have all learnt from today's visit. Will you explain your independence?

Ms Casey: The RQIA believes that it is independent. We are a non-departmental public body that is funded by the Department. Therefore, we use public funds. However, beyond that, we determine our own journey. We have a lay board that comprises 13 significant people from Northern Ireland, who, rigorously, hold us to account on our independence. Although some of our work is commissioned by the Department and the Minister, we determine the majority of it ourselves. We establish our own agenda and work, and we are currently planning a three-year programme of reviews of health and social care services and the regulated sector. That review will be unveiled at a board meeting in November 2008.

Nobody influences our reviews, which we send to the Department and to the Minister. For the sake of factual accuracy, reports go back to the trust or organisation that we reviewed, but the findings are our findings. That has always been clear to us, and, judging from my discussions with the Department and with the trust chief executives, that approach is recognised and respected as being necessary for governance purposes.

As the Bill states, the RQIA currently reviews the health and social services boards and other agencies. We believe that we will review the new regional health and social care board, the regional agency for public health and social well-being, the regional support services organisation and any other new organisations. Although we believe that we are, to a large degree, our own masters, we recognise that we cannot all be our own masters in this world. We will, however, have some element of independence.

Mrs Hanna: The RQIA's subsuming the Mental Health Commission will mean quite a change from its present role; it is an additional responsibility. The commission is concerned with people whereas the RQIA is, perhaps, more concerned with institutions. Phelim listed the endless issues involved; are extra resources available? Much more expertise will be required for the RQIA to go in a different direction. It is interesting that the Mental Health Commission is to become part of the RQIA, and I can understand why that decision was taken. However, will it be within the RQIA's remit to consider any proposed legislation for competence for patients? Users and healthcare professionals have concerns.

Ms Casey: The current budget for the Mental Health Commission will transfer to the RQIA. There will be a slight reduction in that budget because Lombard House, where the commission is currently based, will not have to be maintained. There will be greater economies of scale because there will be no duplication. As Phelim explained, the plan is that a distinct team of people will be employed who are resourced to undertake this important work. The budget is adequate, and we will decide how to use that money.

Mr Quinn: As Alice says, we are considering a radically different model of delivery for the functions of the Mental Health Commission under the Bill. We are moving to an employee-based model, which may look slightly more expensive but is, in fact, built within the confines of the existing Mental Health Commission budget. There have been early indications that the Department is committed to that budget, with an in-year uplift for any cost-of-living increases. The money is there; however, if we find that our ability to discharge those functions is challenged by budget restrictions, we will make representations to the Department. The transfer of functions must be done properly; we do not want to cut corners and risk individuals' human rights.

It is a different departure for us, but we are working closely with our colleagues in England and Wales, who are currently undergoing the same type of transfer. From 1 April 2009, in England, the Care Quality Commission is assuming the responsibilities of the Healthcare Commission, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, and the Mental Health Act Commission. Similarly, in Wales, Healthcare Inspectorate Wales is assuming the responsibilities of the Mental Health Act Commission, and something similar will happen in Scotland under the Crerar Review. It is useful to have that peer group working to the same timescale in developing models of delivery for a piece of work that is focused on the individual in organisations that have formerly been focused on institutions.

Mrs Hanna spoke about the capacity legislation to which reference is made in the Bamford legislative

framework. I will be honest; we will have to consider the details, but it is our view that the RQIA, in subsuming the functions of the Mental Health Commission, will have a role to play in the protection of individuals. I cannot say how that will play out. That legislation has not yet been made, so we do not know the details.

Mrs Hanna: When you make those recommendations, you will find — as we and everyone else does — that the resources are not available for their implementation. Will you then act as champions for mental health? I suspect that you will make recommendations, but, as we saw here in Muckamore, the resources are not available, even for good recommendations that everyone supports. That is the situation.

Mr Quinn: There is the potential for that to happen.

People continually warn that the budget is not available to do x, y or z. However, I will give you a small example. The RQIA happened to be in Craigavon Area Hospital for a *clostridium difficile* review a fortnight after the unannounced hygiene inspection. We were pleasantly surprised that the chief executive and the chairperson had walked the floor of the hospital after the inspection to ensure that all the estates issues that had been identified as a result of the inspection were being addressed. When we were there a fortnight later, they had been addressed. At times, it had been said that the money was not there to address those estates issues, yet — by virtue of the fact that we were going to publish the findings of that report, which includes photographs of the state of the facilities — action was taken. We were very pleasantly surprised by that.

Ms Casey: It is important to remember that not all recommendations cost money and that sometimes we can cut through all of the financial issues and simply get people to do their jobs properly.

The Chairperson: Sometimes that is the answer: doing the job properly.

Mr Gardiner: Ms Casey, you represent the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. For the benefit of the public, I give the full title, as you were directed to do by the Chairperson but failed to do so.

I am disappointed by what you said in relation to your organisation. It has responsibility for the hygiene and cleanliness of hospitals. Blame me as being the culprit of Craigavon. I visited the hospital and made public the state it was in, because I had been made aware of the dangers of *clostridium difficile*, and I know of a lady who died as a result of that infection. That fact was not even recorded on her death certificate, which represented a risk to the undertakers who handled the body. That is under investigation.

I met the chief executive of Craigavon Area Hospital, and also the chairperson of the trust, who

arrogantly maintained that she knew what she was talking about and asked how I dared to criticise her hospital. It is not her hospital: it is there to help and to cure people. Since the hospital is in my constituency, I represent the people who use the hospital and who work in it. I drew attention to what I had observed: children were going in and out — with their parents, admittedly — at all times, and visiting hours were not regulated. Fortunately, that issue has now been brought into perspective, and visiting times are now enforced. Children were climbing over and under the beds, when *clostridium difficile* was rife in the hospital. That should not have been permitted, and it has now been brought under control. I spoke with the Minister — blame me again — and voiced my concern about what was happening. He acted, and he told me that he had ordered an independent visit to the accident and emergency department, which was still not up to standard.

Had your organisation been on top of things, it would not have been necessary for me, or any member of the Committee, to bring that to the Minister's attention or to make the public aware of the situation.

The Chairperson: Ms Casey, do you have any comment?

Mr Gardiner: Guilty.

Ms Casey: We are not guilty. The *clostridium difficile* review required us to examine the state of Northern Ireland's preparedness for an outbreak. Across Northern Ireland, we found good and bad. Some trusts were better than others. That is what we found, and that is what we reported to the trusts and to the Minister.

We are not complacent. There is no doubt that all the trusts can improve, and some show more room for improvement than others. We did a good job on that first part of the review. We saw what we saw on the day that we visited the hospital. We did not, and could not, visit all areas of the trust. We did not visit for a longer period of time because that would have required far too many resources. On the day that we visited Craigavon Area Hospital, what we saw was quite reasonable. Undoubtedly, however, there was room for improvement.

Mr Gardiner: Was that on your second visit?

Ms Casey: Do you mean was it on our second visit or on the visit that we made in order to carry out the hygiene report?

Mr Gardiner: On which visit was the matter first drawn to your attention?

Ms Casey: The hygiene report was carried out around two weeks before we visited the hospital to conduct the *clostridium difficile* review.

Mr Gallagher: It is important that you clarify a little comment that is made in Alice's letter to the Committee Clerk, which states:

"The RQIA recognises that it must make provision in its governance structure for an increased emphasis on mental health and learning disabilities."

That recognition is important and welcome. First, can you clarify whether it will be your responsibility, or that of the Department, to make an appointment? Secondly, how do you envisage that that will work? Will it involve one individual or several? What do you seek to achieve? It would be best if someone were involved on the board who is a powerful advocate for people who suffer from poor mental health or who have learning disabilities.

I am trying to make the point while having every respect for you. We often come across that type of phraseology. Often, the outcome is simply a token gesture. How do you imagine that that will work?

Ms Casey: I can say clearly that the board will not have a member who represents mental health and learning disabilities. That is not in the plan. The board consists completely of lay people. It does not have representation from any group at all. It examines how the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority carries out its work and whether it does so appropriately in all circumstances. However, strong governance arrangements will ensure that we do what we should do in respect of that new area of care.

Part of our responsibility is to establish the team that will undertake that work. Although it will be led by Jude, it will be managed by, and accountable to, me. Therefore, a team of people will be dedicated to undertake that work, which will fit into our governance and quality-assurance arrangements, and will be scrutinised by one of our other executive directors. Regular reports will be made. The board currently receives regular monthly reports on work progress with the Mental Health Commission to effect the transfer properly. Those reports will continue after 1 April 2009 so that the board can discuss how progress is being made to absorb the Mental Health Commission's work.

The main focus of Phelim's earlier point is that an expert advisory panel will be appointed to guide the board and the senior officers of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority on how we conduct our work on mental-health and learning-disability services. Therefore, governance checks will be carried out at all levels of the organisation.

The Chairperson: Everyone who indicated has been given the opportunity to ask questions. I thank Alice, Phelim and Jude for coming along and giving their presentation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

2 October 2008

GOODS VEHICLES (LICENSING OF OPERATORS) BILL (NIA 15/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr David McClarty
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Eve	}	Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland
Mr Robin McKee		
Mrs Bernie Cosgrove	}	Department of the Environment
Mr Richard Lee		
Mr John Martin		
Mr Simon Kirk	}	Department of the Environment

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): I welcome Mr Robin McKee, the chairman of the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland, and his colleague Mr Colin Eve, who are here to give evidence on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. Gentlemen, you will have 10 or 15 minutes to make your case, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions and elicit any further information if required.

Mr Robin McKee (Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland): For members who are not familiar with the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland, it is a consultative committee that was set up by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to represent apple, mushroom and vegetable growers, and nurserymen, landscapers and gardeners. The forum represents mainly small businesses, many of which are family businesses.

I thank members for taking the time to listen to our views on the Bill. I emphasise that all members of the forum fully acknowledge the need for a Bill to increase road safety, and they already adhere to the current legislation, the MOT and PSV monitoring, by keeping their vehicles roadworthy. Colin will now make a presentation to the Committee on our views.

Mr Colin Eve (Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland): To avoid drastic note-taking, I will leave copies of the presentation for the Committee. The current legislation allows for exemptions for the agriculture, horticulture and forestry industries. At the time the legislation was brought in, those exemptions were introduced with good reason, because we are not hauliers. Our vehicles are not on the roads daily, and we do not make a living from haulage. The majority of the forum's members may have their vehicles on the road for a small percentage of the year and, through carrying out their tasks, inadvertently fall into the category of carrying goods for reward. Some examples are: the apple grower who uses a vehicle to transport his harvest for eight weeks a year; the farmer who cuts and collects a neighbour's silage once or twice a year, and the landscape gardener who cuts the grass and prunes the shrubs for Mrs Smith and removes the cuttings to a registered waste centre.

In no way can those activities in our industry be used to imply that we are the same as hauliers, nor can it be claimed that our activities on the road are a risk to road safety. According to PSNI statistics, collision casualties resulting from other road users, including tractors, is less than 1% in any of the last five years. That is a strong indicator that the current regulations work.

The Road Haulage Association is arguing strongly for all-in legislation. Its argument is that some companies that should currently be operating under an operator's licence are not, thereby endangering lives on the road. I cannot emphasise strongly enough that those lawbreakers should not be confused, or grouped, with those industries that work legally and safely within the current legal exemptions. Our members are not lawbreakers.

The association's concerns are already addressed in current legislation that provides for the prosecution of those companies that break the law. However, the truth of the matter is that, with only approximately 20 enforcement officers in Northern Ireland, it is not the lack of legislation that allows individuals to continue breaking the law, but a lack of manpower on the ground to catch them.

It has been quoted that the preferred number of enforcement officers is 50, and we suggest that drawing in new industries, such as horticulture, farming and forestry, under the legislation is intended not to improve road safety but to spread the cost of

enforcement. The problem with that plan is that by adding all those industries, an increase of enforcement officers from 20 to 50 will be completely lost. The implementation of the new legislation, without including exemptions similar to the current ones, will mean that every single one of the approximately 15,000 farmyards will become an operational centre, as will all premises of landscapers, gardeners and growers. The percentage increase of the population to be policed would far outstretch the percentage increase of law enforcers.

Given that the current number of law enforcers is stretched and unable to catch the lawbreakers, what chance would they have when required to police virtually everyone? The individuals who dare to operate illegally, daily, will simply disappear into the massive sea of bureaucratic visits and policing of all the new operational centres. Surely, it makes more sense to increase the number of law enforcers from 20 to 50 in order to enforce current legislation.

We are wary of the Department's suggestion that this legislation will cost so little to our members that it is not worth worrying over. The amount quoted to the Horticulture Forum, and probably to the Committee, is approximately £47·62. That quote is indicative of how loaded this new legislation is to the advantage of the haulage industry, and to the disadvantage of those represented by the Horticulture Forum.

The figure is based on those companies that have 10 vehicles with a cost of £2,381 for a five-year licence. That does amount to £47·62 per vehicle per annum — a figure which is frequently bandied about as being the cost of a tyre, and not very much at all if someone's vehicle is out each day making money from hauling. However, our members are not hauliers, and do not fall into that category. Some will fall into the category of three vehicles, but the majority fall into the category of one vehicle, costing them £152·20 per vehicle — a vehicle which they may use for only one month of the year or even less.

There are those who believe that £152 does not sound very much, but the additional and real cost will not stop there. There is additional record keeping, auditing, additional vehicle maintenance requirements — despite the fact that we are already paying for annual MOTs and PSVs — and the required proof of sufficient financial resources.

For haulage companies, all those requirements are already part and parcel of their daily administration. Indeed, the majority are already required under current legislation. To haulage companies, therefore, the cost and impact is minimal. For our industries, it is all new, and additional to the costs and overheads under which we are already straining.

According to statistics from the Federation of Small Businesses, Northern Ireland is unique in its very high percentage of small businesses, particularly small, family-run businesses for which a large and experienced administrative team is an unknown luxury. The cost of this proposed legislation to our members is by no means simply the cost of a new tyre every year. Those extra costs constantly add to the bureaucratic noose.

The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill research paper of May 2008 states that the impetus for change comes from the freight industry, whose concerns include the "extent of illegal operations" and the "need for more and better enforcement". They are losing business to illegal operators. Their concerns may be justified, but why are our industries, which are entirely unlike the freight industry, being asked to contribute to the cost of responding to those concerns? Our industries do not ask for the freight industry to share the cost of legislation affecting us.

If more and better enforcement is needed, why is the freight industry seeking to increase the numbers of operational centres out of all proportion? If you cannot find a needle in a haystack, you do not make the haystack bigger.

It is claimed that Northern Ireland has much weaker freight licensing enforcement powers than GB. Statutory agencies have complained about the standard of Northern Ireland vehicles crossing to GB. Farmers do not go over to GB in order to bring in their neighbour's silage, and gardeners and landscapers do not take the boat over to England and Scotland in order to landscape Mrs Smith's garden. It is not the vehicles belonging to our industries that are raising those concerns.

With regard to road safety, according to PSNI statistics, collisions and casualties resulting from other road users, including tractors, amounted to less than 1% in any of the last five years.

On the subject of environmental standards, the Bill research paper states:

"Present licensing arrangements offer no effective safeguards against operators who pay no attention to the environmental standards of their operating centre".

By all means change legislation in order to give enforcement officers that facility, but how can that be achieved by creating in excess of 15,000 more operating centres? Law enforcers will be overwhelmed, the cost to decent law-abiding people will be increased, and lawbreakers will be hidden in the sheer volume of operating centres.

The members of the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland welcome effective legislation that brings about road safety. However, the proposals will not achieve that by roping in our industries, and we are being rounded up and herded in to reduce the financial

burden of addressing the dissatisfaction of the haulage industry.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation. Do members have any queries?

Mr I McCrea: The views of the horticulture industry have been made very clear. Obviously you will raise some of the relevant issues directly with the Department, but we will also include them with the other matters that we wish to raise. There are important issues concerning whether horticulturalists should be included in the scope of the Good Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill, or even — taking account of Trevor's opinion — whether the Bill should be passed at all. You have probably added to my colleague's desire to see the Bill fail. I welcome your presentation; it provides some more food for thought on the issue.

Mr Boylan: Thank you for your presentation. I understand that, if the Bill is to be passed, you would like there to be exemptions, but you must realise that the hauliers should not carry the entire burden. The purpose of the Bill is to achieve road safety, and a balance must be struck. I speak from a rural point of view, and 70% of road fatalities occur on rural roads. I take on board the points that you make about the industry, but, at the end of the day, it is for the Committee to scrutinise the Bill and ensure that it can achieve its aims. You have made it clear that you would like there to be exemptions, but currently the road hauliers are carrying the entire burden. Can you respond to that?

The Chairperson: I should mention that last week the Committee heard a presentation from members of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), who requested that there be a range of exemptions to the Bill more or less equivalent to the exemptions in Britain. I have sympathy with your view, and you make many of the same points made by the UFU, because we are dealing with more or less the same issue — agriculture — although in a different form. Are there exemptions in GB that apply to horticulturalists; people growing apples, or mushrooms, or whatever the case may be? Are there exemptions over there that could read across here? Perhaps it is unfair of me to ask that; you may not know.

Mr McKee: There are exemptions for Land Rovers and trailers, etc; those would cover quite a range of vehicles. However, there are a number of details that are unclear. A landscaper, for example, may have a van with a small trailer attached; we are unsure whether that would be exempt. There are also a lot of small 7.5-ton lorries; we are not sure whether those would be exempt.

The Chairperson: I am thinking specifically of people engaged in horticulture in Britain. What are the exemptions there? Perhaps you do not know. The

UFU, last week, made a strong case for a range of exemptions for people engaged in farming. Are there a number of exemptions in Britain that could simply be applied here, or, if not, why should the law be different here? Take some time to think about that, and if there is any information that you can offer, please do.

Mr Boylan: That is the point that I was making. You have mentioned apple growers working eight weeks a year, and so on. Have you thought about the issue of exemptions mentioned by the Chairman?

Mr Eve: We have discussed exemptions. Primarily we would like to see a total exemption for the local horticulture industry; that would be our main concern. There are exemptions based on the distance from the operating base. I believe that, currently, operators working within 50 km of their base are exempt. If there are to be exemptions, we would like to see those transferred across. There are other minority details concerning, for example, a landscaper taking topsoil to and from sites. I think that there is legislation being passed by the EU; topsoil is currently classed as a waste product.

The Chairperson: That is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

Mr Boylan: You mentioned enforcement in your presentation, and, obviously, there is a need for more enforcement; the question is how that enforcement can be generated. We have heard a number of presentations, including from the road-haulier groups, and they are calling for more enforcement. How can that be achieved?

Mr McKee: Do you mean how can it be financed?

Mr Boylan: That will be part and parcel of it, if the Bill is to be passed. That issue must be taken on board as well.

Mr Eve: I do not understand why the current enforcement officers — I think that there are 20 of them —

Mr T Clarke: They do not understand either.

Mr Eve: Currently, there is no effective enforcement; generating new road-haulage operational centres is not going to achieve any more enforcement.

Mr Boylan: We are not disagreeing with you, and that is why we are challenging the Bill. There can be exemptions in place that will apply to the horticulture sector but, if there is going to be enforcement, we need to ensure that it is effective.

Mr T Clarke: I am totally opposed to the Bill, and I do not see how it is going to do what it is meant to do. Keeping slow-moving tractors in an operating centre or charging a fee for an operator's licence is not going to make the roads any safer; I cannot see how the Bill is going to do that. We all want to see an improvement

in road safety, but every time I read the Bill I get more apprehensive. People will be charged for having a certain number of vehicles, which must be kept in a special yard, and, after someone has invested money, the Department can review that yard every five years — I have major reservations about that. I support, initially at least, the call for the agriculture and horticulture sectors to be exempt; I would go further than that, however. I think that other members of the Committee know my view.

Mr Ford: In your presentation you talked about people who inadvertently fall within the regulations, and the Committee has great sympathy for the man who puts his neighbour's hedge trimmings into a trailer behind a tractor. Last week, I was talking to the Farmers' Union about what might be regarded as a red-diesel exemption; if something can be legitimately done with red diesel in a tractor then the question arises as to whether that should be exempt. It seems to me that once you start talking about landscape contractors travelling around a fair bit in 7.5-ton lorries, then you are into a completely different style of use. Although we could all agree on the exemption for the low-key, local, tractor-based activity, the Horticulture Forum seems to be trying to make the case that the 7.5-ton lorries used by its members are different from everybody else's. I do not see that point.

Mr Eve: Landscapers are part of the Horticulture Forum, but we represent —

Mr Ford: I am looking at that particular sector and I cannot see how it can easily fall within, what could be broadly termed as, an agricultural exemption.

Mr Eve: The landscape industry is probably more commercial than the other industries that we represent. I apologise that I keep going back to the same point, but the landscape companies that are operating perfectly legally today and are maintaining their vehicles, generally tend to be small companies. The cost of the licence is relatively OK; however, the issue is the administrative burden on those small companies and the bureaucracy that comes along with that licence.

Mr Ford: Within half a mile of me there are two businesses in adjacent yards: one is a landscape contractor who employs four or five men; the other is a single-manned meal and fertilizer business who does a lot of haulage on his own account. Why should the landscape contractor be exempt when the fellow carting meals and manures is clearly not going to be exempt?

Mr Eve: Regarding the chap who is carrying the meals and manures, that is his daily haulage business, Monday to Friday. Generally, a landscape contractor — if he is sowing out a lawn, pruning a bed or building a deck at the back of somebody's house — is not a road haulier.

Mr Ford: Nonetheless he is at times hauling quite significant loads in a vehicle of substantial size. If he were merely running a tractor around the townland, I could see what you are talking about.

Mr T Clarke: Surely, the authorities have a comprehensive list of all vehicles. If enforcement procedures in the past were right, you could go to any vehicle and carry out a spot check. An MOT or PSV is only as good as the day you get it — we are all aware of that. If you drive the vehicle down the road and something falls off it, and if you take it back in again, it will not pass the PSV or MOT test. A proper enforcement regime in Northern Ireland should have a database and be able to check those vehicles. If vehicles are not roadworthy, they should be stopped. However, operating centres are created to provide some other form of mechanism. That is totally wrong. The mechanism is already there. An MOT or PSV certificate is accurate only for the day of the test. There is nothing to prevent enforcement officers from spot-checking vehicles. How often have any of us been stopped on the road within the last few months or have witnessed spot checks on lorries? Yet, here we are, bringing in a Bill to try to —

The Chairperson: I hear what you are saying, Mr Clarke, but I am anxious to clarify one point. We all know that there are different people involved. The people in the agriculture sector — represented by Mr Clarke — are only one category. However, to tease out Mr Ford's point, we all know people who are engaged in laying lawns, cutting, clipping, and so on, and we all know that trailers are attached to small lorries or vans for those operations. You can clearly see that there is a distinction between those two types of operation. We are trying to establish whether there is some sort of clear read-across that is consistent. We will ask the Department about that, and if it can supply us with that detail without too much difficulty, so much the better.

I like what we are hearing from the Horticulture Forum because you represent an interest that is slightly different to all the other cases presented to us. I want to know how this aspect has been handled in Britain.

Will you clarify for the Committee your response to Mr Ford's question about people involved in landscaping, and so on?

Mr Eve: The Bill has been driven by the haulage industry. The average landscape gardener is not a haulage company and should not bear the same burden of administration that hauliers pay for running lorries. To turn that around, if another 20,000 or 25,000 operators' licences are issued, those companies may legally haul goods on the road. That is probably not good, competitively, for the haulage industry.

The Chairperson: I do not think that that point follows. Because those firms are defined as such does

not mean that they will engage in the same activity as the freight people.

Mr Eve: They could, though.

The Chairperson: The basis of your argument until now has been that they are doing something different to the freight companies.

Mr Eve: Yes; that is why I say that the current situation should not change. We do not see why growers of mushrooms, apples or vegetables, or landscape gardeners should be brought under the same umbrella as the haulage industry.

The Chairperson: I accept that point. However, we are teasing out the point, and we need a little more —

Mr Ford: The argument that Mr Eve has just made could be made by anyone hauling goods on his own account. The point of the Bill is to bring those hauling goods on their own account under the same licensing regime that those who do so for hire or reward are already under. That is my difficulty. Certain types of vehicles could be exempted: a slow-moving tractor, involved in agricultural operations and using red diesel may be identified as distinct. However, a certain section of your members' vehicles are no different from those operated by others who come within the scope of the Bill. That is assuming that the Bill goes ahead — Trevor may kill it off completely.

In those circumstances, I am trying to see how you can create a case for all your members, as distinct from those who seem to be quite close to what is being done by other people who come within the scope of the Bill.

Mr Eve: We need to go back to our industry, back to the Horticulture Forum.

Mr Ford: When you have another paper, please send it in.

Mr T Clarke: There is another way to ask that question, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Is this a follow-up question?

Mr T Clarke: Yes. David asks how the distinction will be drawn. You could turn the question around. The figures from the 2005 road freight compliance survey show that some 44% of vehicles were not roadworthy; 18% were guilty of tachograph/drivers' hours offences; 2.4% of loads were overweight; motor tax offences were running at 3%; and 2% of drivers were not properly insured. How will the Bill change that?

Mr Ford: You will need to ask the Department that question.

Mr T Clarke: I look forward to that.

Mr Ford: Given that the Assembly approved the Second Stage of the Bill, I thought that we had accepted its premise.

The Chairperson: We have a long list of questions to ask officials from the Department, including the enforcement officers who will give evidence to the Committee after this session. The Horticulture Forum representatives are welcome to stay to hear their contributions.

Mr Beggs: The Bill has appropriate balance. Do you want a blanket exemption for the horticulture industry? Multimillion-pound companies such as Emerald Lawns and Monaghan Mushrooms, although not in our jurisdiction, have a large number of employees who transport goods by road every day. Do you accept that there is a risk associated with carrying heavy goods? Do you accept that a blanket exemption for your industry is not feasible because the risk is there?

Mr Eve: The companies that you mentioned use HGV lorries.

Mr Beggs: If there were an exemption for the entire horticulture industry, that would apply to them. Is that what you are asking for?

The Chairperson: I do not think that that is what they mean.

Mr McKee: No. Of course horticulture companies that use HGV lorries should be subject to the legislation.

Mr Beggs: How will that distinction be drawn?

Mr McKee: All lorries that weigh 7.5 tons or less should be exempt. Vehicles that require the driver to hold only a normal driving licence should be exempt. However, vehicles that require the driver to hold a HGV licence should be subject to the new legislation.

Mr Boylan: I want to come back to the matter of enforcement and road safety — and I thank Mr Beggs for introducing an all-Ireland element to the discussion; it saved me from doing so. Road hauliers feel that they are carrying the burden of enforcement. We must strike a balance. Some of the points that you have raised about exemption have merit. Overall, we must address that issue as well as the section on enforcement.

Mr Eve: Given the size of the horticulture industry, it will not generate much revenue under the new legislation. I would have thought that the other industries that you are going after would make up the bulk of your finances.

Mr Boylan: In your case, you are fighting for your members.

The Chairperson: Mr McKee, Mr Eve, thank you very much for your time. You are welcome to stay to hear evidence from the Department. If you have any further information please forward it to the Committee.

I now welcome Bernie Cosgrove, John Martin and Richard Lee from the Department of the

Environment's Driver and Vehicle Agency. Thank you for attending. Obviously, you did not hear what was said beforehand. It is a pity that you were not present to hear the issues that members raised. Would you like to start your presentation?

Mrs Bernie Cosgrove (Department of the Environment): First, I apologise on behalf of Brendan Magee, chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency, who is unable to be here because he is out of the country on business. I thank you for inviting us to appear before the Committee.

We have scrutinised the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill closely. We broadly support the enhancements and measures that the Bill will introduce, particularly in levelling the playing field between hire-and-reward operators and own-account operators. The Bill will also give us additional enforcement powers to tackle non-compliance in the industry.

The Chairperson: Is that the end of your presentation?

Mrs Cosgrove: We are willing to answer any questions that members may have.

The Chairperson: It is a pity that you were not here earlier. If you had been, you would have heard representatives of the industry expressing their concerns about enforcement.

Mr T Clarke: I will go straight for the kill: what difference will the Bill make to enforcement practice?

Mr John Martin (Department of the Environment): The Bill will give us additional enforcement powers in both the hire-and-reward sector and the own-account sector. The own-account sector is not licensed, and, therefore, it is not subject to the same regulatory requirements as the hire-and-reward sector. The Bill will enable us to acquire more information from the own-account sector.

The Bill also proposes to introduce a requirement for operators to keep maintenance records. Currently, operators are not required to keep maintenance records for their fleet, and we have found that quite a few operators do not maintain their vehicles. Indeed, our fleet compliance survey indicated that upwards of 40% of those vehicles were not roadworthy. The new requirement means that operators will be obliged to keep records and ensure that vehicles are maintained throughout the year, rather than just once a year for the vehicle test.

The current provisions for the suspension and revocation of operators' licences — as outlined in the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 — are too weak to properly regulate licensing. The Bill proposes to bring our licensing into line with that in GB, where the traffic commissioners have additional powers to regulate the industry in cases of non-compliance.

Mr T Clarke: Do you feel that the Driver and Vehicle Agency is adequately resourced to tackle enforcement?

Mr Martin: No, we are not adequately resourced to deal with enforcement. The problem is a combination of a lack of sufficient resources and the inadequacy of the regulation regime.

Mr T Clarke: Forgetting the regime for one moment, are you adequately resourced to enforce licensing in Northern Ireland?

Mr Martin: Currently, as we stand, no, we are not.

Mr T Clarke: You are not adequately resourced at the moment. You will be even more inadequately resourced if you are granted more powers; the problem will become twofold.

Mr Martin: We are trying to align our regime with the GB regime. We bid for additional resources for goods-vehicle enforcement under the comprehensive spending review (CSR) process last year. Those resources would enhance our ability to deal with some of the enforcement issues, but they have not come into play yet. However, resources alone are not enough; we need a much tighter regulatory regime to deal with people who continually ignore the legal requirements.

Mr T Clarke: The industry is concerned that current enforcement is inadequate. I do not know whether that concern was raised today, but I have certainly heard it in the past. We should not be going from A to Z so quickly. People who use the roads have said that the enforcement is inadequate. Indeed, I cannot remember the last time that I saw vehicles being stopped. I am greatly concerned that enforcement is not adequate at the moment. We are trying to get to the point at which it is excellent, but we do not even have a good standard of enforcement.

Following on from that, there is the issue of vehicles that are not roadworthy. We have statistics here about illegal operations: 44% of vehicles were not roadworthy; 18% were guilty of tachograph offences; 2·4% were found to be overweight. What difference will the Bill make to those statistics? If enforcement is not happening at the moment, that will not change.

The Chairperson: I wish to have a little more clarity about that issue. What potential percentage increase is there likely to be in the number of vehicles that fall within the remit of the Bill?

Mr Martin: The own-account sector, which is unlicensed, makes up approximately 75% of the fleet in Northern Ireland. The other 25% comprises the licensed fleet — the vehicles that fall within the licensing regime. We have been working with our counterparts in GB. The level of non-compliance is much lower in GB, but that is not solely because of the enforcement action that is taken at the roadside, where the vehicle is stopped and the person prosecuted. There

is a much more robust licensing regime in GB to back up enforcement. That means that if people are found to be non-compliant on a regular basis, they will lose the right to carry out their business as a licensed operator. It is a combination of effective roadside enforcement and a licensing and regulatory regime to back that up.

The Chairperson: To go back to my point, what is the anticipated increase in the number of operators that will fall within the remit of the licensing regime set out in the Bill? Is it a 75% increase? You mentioned a 75-25 split. Do you anticipate a 75% increase in the number of enforcement officials? We have heard today from one area of the industry that there is currently no effective enforcement here.

Mr Martin: We do not envisage a 75% increase in enforcement staffing. Seventy five per cent of the fleet does not fall within the licensed sector. However, those vehicles are still used on the roads, and we will continue to stop those vehicles in order to determine their roadworthiness and vehicle weight. We still encounter those vehicles at the roadside despite the fact that there is no licensing regime to regulate them. We stop those vehicles and deal with issues as we encounter them.

Mr I McCrea: What resources are currently in place? How many enforcement officers are there, and how many should there be?

Mr Martin: The total staff complement of the section is 28. Under the CSR process, we bid for resources for an additional 33 members of staff. Not all of those staff would be dedicated to goods vehicle enforcement, but we are talking about a 100% increase in the staffing complement in order to put us on a par with our counterparts in GB. The bid was approved in its entirety because of the issues in the industry.

Mr Gallagher: We are all trying to improve vehicle safety on the roads. The problem is that there may be an operator who regularly has four or six heavy vehicles on the roads that are not compliant, and which pose a risk to the safety of other road users. We are trying to arrive at an agreement about a Bill that will deal with such problems and achieve the objective of vehicle safety.

You propose to include in the new legislation certain operators who might do some seasonal lawn mowing or hedge cutting, usually for a very small return. Those people could now be regarded as operators and as running operator centres. In addition, there is the licence, the costs, and the additional bureaucracy involved in complying with the new arrangements under discussion. The range of operators covered by the Bill seems unfair. What exemptions might be possible, and what is the situation in Great Britain? Is there anything that we might learn from the experience in Great Britain?

Mr Martin: From our perspective, and from our knowledge of the GB licensing regime, exemptions are provided that are worth considering. However, we want to ensure that there is a level playing field for anybody who operates a vehicle on a commercial basis to carry goods for either hire and reward or for their own benefit. The procedures could be worked back from the starting point to see whether certain sectors of the industry would be worthy of an exemption. However, the underlying requirement is that, irrespective of whether people are in the licensing regime or not, they must still maintain their vehicles and comply with all the other legal requirements.

Difficulties would arise if vehicles or operators were outside the licensing regime. What action could be taken against them to allow them to continue to operate within that sector? In other words, if someone is continually non-compliant and completely ignores the legal requirements about roadworthiness, etc, that could cause danger to other road users, should that person be allowed to continue in the business? That is where the weakness is in the current system: if people completely ignore the legal requirements there are no effective licensing sanctions that can be used against those operators to take them out of the industry. The difference between the system here and the system in GB is that the authorities there have the autonomy to suspend or revoke an operator's licence. That is why the GB's level of non-compliance is much lower.

Mr T Clarke: I disagree, John. You referred to a level playing field and the weakness in the system. The weakness lies with the enforcement. The current legislation allows for a proper enforcement regime, and there are fines to support that. However, the DVA is not conducting its role properly. It is unfair to blame the industry because it is not comparable to that in England.

With respect to the level playing field, the land border with the Republic is another difference between Northern Ireland and England. Operators in the Republic can come and exploit Northern Ireland because the Republic will not have the same licensing regime as it is hoped to introduce here. You want fairness in the system and yet you are creating unfairness. The operators here will be at an unfair disadvantage to those in the Republic of Ireland.

The Chairperson: The point about the relocation of industry was raised before.

Mr Martin: In respect of Mr Clarke's point about the enforcement responsibilities, the unfortunate fact is that when we prosecute people, the fines may not necessarily be a deterrent. We have lists of operators who have been prosecuted on countless occasions — well into double figures — but those who operate those types of fleets seem to view the fines as a

running expense and a cost that must be borne. Some operators have a horrendous list of offences, both in the own-account sector and, maybe fewer in the hire-and-reward sector, but, obviously, effective enforcement has not been able to deal with that. We are taking cases to court and getting prosecutions. We are taking unroadworthy vehicles off the road. However, that is not acting as a deterrent.

In our discussions with GB, we are asking why that is the case, and why the operators continue to operate despite the fact that we are taking them to court regularly. What is missing in Northern Ireland is an effective licensing regime to back up enforcement at the roadside. Quite a number of people have been prosecuted for a lot of offences through our process of prosecuting at the roadside, but it is not acting as an effective deterrent. People's attitudes to compliance will change if the prosecutions are fed into the licensing regime and result in the suspension or revocation of a licence.

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, can we be provided with the statistics for the enforcement cases that have been taken in the past five years, the convictions, and the number of those that were duplicate or triplicate?

The Chairperson: We can certainly get that.

Has the relocation of industry come up as an issue — or, perhaps, I should ask the Planning Service about that? Through your correspondence or any of your dealings with the industry, have you been given cause to believe that there will be displacement of industry as a result of potential enforcement?

Mr Martin: The hire-and-reward sector is subject to the enforcement regime from a licensing perspective and on the roadside. We have not seen any great displacement of the industry to Southern Ireland as a consequence of that. It is not necessary to be based in a particular location to be part of the hire-and-reward sector, but people who run quarries or building-supply businesses in the own-account sector cannot really operate from another jurisdiction.

The Chairperson: They can operate from another jurisdiction. We heard this argument before, particularly in relation to issue of rates and industrial deregulation. Businesses, especially in Derry, can just go down the road to one of the big industrial estates in Letterkenny. That is business; that is how those businesses can operate to cut costs.

Mr Martin: I am not saying that it would not be a problem, but, up to now, we have not seen any evidence of that, and I do not know whether it will happen. The hire-and-reward sector is licensed currently, and we have not seen much evidence of that. I cannot predict whether it will be the case in the future.

Mr Boylan: The question of how this will be enforced keeps raising its head. You are talking about 75%; but there is an issue about the 3·5 ton vehicles. A large percentage of those vehicles will be operating from home. There should be a level playing field, but, perhaps, tractors should be exempt. If this legislation progresses, somebody will have to pay for it, but it should be the same across the board. How should we deal with the actual enforcement? Will there be a database of the people who have paid? Will there be a manned mobile unit on the side of the road? We are talking about 3·5-ton vehicles and big vans that are operating from homes. How will you enforce the legislation and ensure that every operator and vehicle is licensed.

Mr Martin: Under the proposed regime, vehicles up to 3·5 tons — the like of builders' vans, for instance — will be exempt.

Mr Boylan: I know that, but there are bigger vans than 3·5-ton twin-axled vehicles. How will the issue be addressed, realistically?

Mr Martin: Recently, we purchased new equipment, including automatic number-plate recognition equipment. Four or five years ago, our main focus was on checking high numbers on vehicles. However, we found that we were focusing more on checking vehicles than on checking vehicles that had offences. We reduced the number of vehicles that we check and try to focus our attention on vehicles that are non-compliant; we target our resources at the most non-compliant.

Over the past 12 to 18 months, the number of non-compliant vehicles that we have detected has increased, despite the fact that the overall number of vehicles that we checked had reduced dramatically. The percentage of the vehicles that we have seen has increased as well. We are more effective now in targeting the non-compliant operators. Any information or intelligence that we have on a non-compliant operator is fed into our database, and that enables us to target the vehicles as they travel along the road.

Mr Gallagher: My point about providing details on vehicles that had been apprehended has already been raised.

Mr Beggs: The purpose of the legislation is to try to improve road safety. That is the main reason why the legislation is being proposed. Mention was made of potential displacement in an attempt to avoid some aspects of the legislation. Are you talking to your counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in order to avoid the risk of an increased amount of accidents or poor vehicle maintenance because of the difficulties that could arise with operators in that part of the world.

Mr Richard Lee (Department of the Environment): We run a lot of joint operations, both

with the Road Safety Authority in the South, and with the Garda Síochána. We have regular contact with those bodies; it is not the case that we sit alone and do not have intelligence from our colleagues in the South.

Mr Beggs: Is similar legislation being proposed in the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Lee: I am not aware that similar legislation is being proposed on operator licensing.

Mr Beggs: Therefore, a single operator who wanted to avoid the legislation could displace his location.

The Chairperson: An operator could, for instance, move from Newry to Dundalk.

Mr Beggs: Given that the legislation is concerned with road safety, are you pressing that issue with your opposite numbers in the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Martin: Colleagues in the Department of the Environment have had several meetings with our counterparts in Southern Ireland to discuss that. A few more meetings have been scheduled to try to tease out the issues and identify whether an enhanced regime will be introduced in the South.

The Chairperson: I thank the witnesses for their time.

The next briefing will be from the Department of the Environment's Planning Service on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. I welcome Mr Simon Kirk, who has been sitting at the back and taking in everything.

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, the need for a level playing field has been mentioned. The Department has provided a comparison of the fees for Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. A licence for an operator with 10 vehicles costs £2,381 in Great Britain, £3,150 in Northern Ireland and £772 in the Republic of Ireland. That is, supposedly, a level playing field.

The Chairperson: Mr Kirk, thank you for your attendance today. A number of issues were raised initially on the implications for planning. Will you provide a brief overview of that?

Mr Simon Kirk (Department of the Environment): The Planning Service would only be involved if someone proposed to establish a new haulage business, or if they used a site that was not authorised. Once a haulage operator is operating from an established centre with the benefit of planning permission, or because it has established-use rights, there is no issue for the Planning Service.

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, can we cut to the chase? That is nonsense.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that Trevor is anxious to speak, but we will wait until Mr Kirk is finished. Please continue.

Mr Kirk: If an operator were to park a vehicle at a dwelling overnight, that, on its own, would not constitute development.

Mr T Clarke: Can I have that in writing? A lot of people would love to have that written down.

The Chairperson: You will have it in writing, because the Committee meeting is being covered by Hansard.

Mr T Clarke: Brilliant stuff.

The Chairperson: Trevor, please let us hear what the man has to say.

Mr Kirk: That is the essence of what Planning Service has said. If a haulage business is operating with the benefit of planning permission, there is no issue for Planning Service.

Mr T Clarke: That is missing the point.

The Chairperson: I know, but do you have something further to add?

Mr Kirk: No, I have nothing further to add.

The Chairperson: We will hear what the point is.

Mr T Clarke: Under the new legislation, a small operator with a medium-sized van that is 3.5 tons would need an operating centre. What if he is operating from home? What will the Planning Service's view be on that arrangement?

Mr Kirk: The parking of a vehicle —

Mr T Clarke: No, he is running a business from his home. The operating centre is establishing his business from his residential property. What is the Planning Service's view on that?

Mr Kirk: There are certain instances in which a person can run a business from home — as long as the principal use remains as a dwelling house and no material change has been made to part of the curtilage or the dwelling. Parking and running a vehicle from home does not constitute a business.

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, could I get that in writing? I want that in writing from the Planning Service, because that is utter nonsense. I know of cases in which owners of small businesses have run businesses from their homes, and the Planning Service has taken enforcement cases against them to prevent them from doing so. They have had to move their business and establish proper premises. Therefore, what you are saying today totally contradicts what has happened in the past.

The Chairperson: Mr Kirk, let me put our concern to you. Say, for example, a self-employed man who works in the haulage business parks his lorry at the side of his house. At the moment, all he is doing is parking his lorry at the side of the house and perhaps

writing out a few invoices from inside the house. The concern is that, under the provisions of the Bill, his home could be classed as a business.

Mr T Clarke: It would be classed as his operating centre.

The Chairperson: Yes, it would be classed as his operating centre. Therefore, in the Planning Service's eyes, the use of his home would change: it would no longer be a place to park the lorry but an operating centre or a business. Can you give the Committee an assurance that that would not happen?

Mr Kirk: We are talking about a material change in the use of land. It is a matter of fact and degree. Simply parking a vehicle in your driveway overnight does not constitute —

Mr T Clarke: Do you see this title "operating centre"; that is an establishment. That is nonsense, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Hold on a minute, Trevor.

Mr Kirk: It is not nonsense.

Mr T Clarke: It is utter nonsense.

The Chairperson: Hold on just a wee minute. I want to get this matter clarified; just bear with me a minute.

Mr Kirk: Sorry, Mr Chairman.

The Chairperson: Under current planning law, that is the case — parking a vehicle at the side of your house is no problem. The issue being raised is that, under the proposals in the Bill, the house would become an operating centre, and that that could be interpreted as a business as opposed to a private residence. Thus, that proposal would have important consequences. The Committee is seeking an assurance from the Planning Service and the other wing of DOE that the term "operating centre" will not automatically be interpreted as a business. That is what we want clarified.

Mr Boylan: Let me put it another way — and Simon, I have your notes. A large number of vehicles are over 3·5 tons. A driver may park his vehicle at his house, offload the goods, put them in a garage overnight and reload them in the morning. Where does the Planning Service stand on that issue? Would it class that activity as operating a business from home? Clearly, that could happen. From what you have told us, I understand that it is alright if the driver leaves the goods in the vehicle overnight and drives away the next morning. However, on some occasions, the person may have to offload the goods in the garage, yard or wherever. In those cases, would they need to register a change of use of their building or garage under the terms of the new legislation?

Mr Kirk: It is sometimes difficult to establish that a change of use has occurred. It is a matter of fact and degree. In a case where goods are occasionally being

taken off the vehicle and put in the garage, it might be concluded that change of use had not taken place.

I must point out that anyone who is subject to enforcement action will clearly have the right to an appeal before the Planning Appeals Commission. The first ground on which anyone will challenge us is that the development does not require planning permission. If we say that a man is just parking a vehicle at the side of his house, but we have decided that there has been development because there is some other licensing operation, the appeal would fall.

Mr T Clarke: I declare an interest in this issue, because I had an enforcement case taken against me for parking cars in my yard. I lived in the dwelling for eight and a half years and parked cars in the yard for eight and a half years, but an enforcement case was taken against me for doing so.

The Chairperson: What was the case based on?

Mr T Clarke: I was parking vehicles in my yard that were then taken on to auction houses, but what is the difference between that and someone using a van for their business and parking it at their house? It is still an operating centre.

The Chairperson: We need written clarity from Planning Service in the context of the operating centre and the potential for it being interpreted by a planning official as a meaningful change of use from a residence to a business. That is the key issue.

Mr Kirk: If someone is living in the house, it remains a dwelling. Are you asking what would happen if part of the curtilage changed? In other words, what would happen if there were a partial change of use?

The Chairperson: No, I am not asking that. We have been involved with councils long enough to know the situation. If another wing of the Department decides that a dwelling is an operating centre for the purpose of that business, somewhere along the line, a planning official could interpret that as an operating centre for business, when it is supposed to be residential. That would bring people into an area where they do not want to be. Therefore, that issue must be verified.

Mr Boylan: It is vital to clarify whether goods stored on a property would definitely mean that the building is being used for a business. The issue relates to the operator's licence and the need to have an operating centre. I would like you to clarify the issue relating to storage and movement of goods from operating centres.

Mr Kirk: I will clarify that. I can point to pages of case law, but it will very much depend on fact and degree, the amount of times that it happens, the size of the goods and where they are being stored.

The Chairperson: I appreciate all that. The nub of the matter is that it will boil down to some planning official deciding how an operating centre impacts on the interpretation of whether a property is used as a dwelling.

Mr Kirk: If the Bill becomes law, we will clearly have to brief and give guidance to our staff.

Mr T Clarke: Not guidance, because guidance is interpreted in different ways by different councils. Guidance does not work for Planning Service, because the Minister sent guidance notes to Planning Service relating to Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14), but it did not understand them either, because everyone interpreted them differently. Guidance does not work.

The Chairperson: The Committee needs clarification on the key issue of the operating centre and the potential for impact in interpretation of planning law, from tipping the balance between residential and business. Committee officials will be in touch with departmental officials on the matter. That is really the nub of the issue.

Mr Kirk: I would like to make one final point: even if it was a business, if it has been established for a period of time, it is lawful.

Mr T Clarke: The issue also relates to how the Department would count that.

Mr Kirk: It is simple. It is four years for a building and 10 years for change of use of land.

Mr Boylan: There will potentially be numerous businesses operating in the countryside because of this Bill

Mr T Clarke: Is it 10 years for a business?

Mr Kirk: No, it is four years to enforce against operational development of a building and 10 years for change of use of land.

Mr T Clarke: I parked vehicles at my yard for eight and a half years, and I still lived in the property.

The Chairperson: I am sure you have a fair idea about the issue here, Mr Kirk. We would be grateful for written clarity on it, but I am not sure whether you can provide it in isolation; you will certainly have to liaise with your departmental colleagues on the operating-centre issue. Thank you for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

8 October 2008

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES (REFORM) BILL (NIA 19/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Jim Hamilton	}	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Neill Jackson		
Mr John O'Neill	}	Department for Social Development
Mr Peter Toner		

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy): I welcome Neill Jackson and Jim Hamilton from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), John O'Neill from the Department for Social Development (DSD), and Peter Toner from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). You are very welcome, gentlemen; thank you for your attendance. Do any of you wish to make an opening statement?

Mr Neill Jackson (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): If members would find it helpful, I will recap the main purpose of the Bill. The Bill has three main elements. First, there is the abolition of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the transfer of its functions to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Secondly, there is the abolition of the Northern Ireland Disability Living Allowance

Advisory Board. Thirdly, there is the removal of several redundant provisions from the statute book relating to bodies that have already been abolished, such as the Pig Production Development Committee, Enterprise Ulster and the Laganside Corporation.

OFMDFM has been facilitating the Bill on behalf of the relevant Departments with a policy interest in the matters contained in it. Colleagues from DSD and DARD are here today, we believe, in relation to the response received from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and answer any questions in relation to that matter.

The Chairperson: The position of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) seems to be the controversial issue. The other Departments appear to have accepted the logic behind the abolition of other bodies, but the Agriculture Committee has come back to us about the AWB. Mr Toner, do you wish to provide a perspective on that?

Mr Peter Toner (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I wish to reiterate the DARD Minister's position and her rationale for holding that position. The Minister has indicated that she does not propose to abolish the AWB and has therefore not sought inclusion of any related provisions in the Bill. Last year, the Minister considered the case for the abolition of the AWB in the context of the national minimum-wage structure and decided not to abolish it for the following reasons. First, the national minimum-wage structure does not offer farm workers the same protection afforded by the board; in particular, regarding wage rates. Secondly, although wage costs are slightly higher, that has to be balanced against the need to retain suitably skilled agricultural workers in Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, the level of bureaucracy associated with the board's rates is not significant and is no different in the North than anywhere in these islands. Fourthly, and finally, the board is a valuable forum for wage negotiations and, importantly, is used as a benchmark for the wider agrifood industry and other rural occupations. In short, the Minister is of the view that the abolition of the AWB would place agricultural workers here at a disadvantage when compared with those elsewhere on these islands and that her decision was made in the interests of sustainable farming and to protect the rights and continued availability of farm workers, including migrant workers, in the North.

The Chairperson: Are there any comments or questions?

Mr Shannon: Can this Committee put forward a proposal today relating to the AWB, or are we just being informed of what is being recommended?

The Chairperson: The Committee has two options. We can refer the matter to OFMDFM — for example,

we could say that this Committee has a view that the AWB should be abolished —

The Committee Clerk: No, the Committee would not have to do that.

The Chairperson: The Committee Clerk will advise us.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee can accept what the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has said; that it is concerned, and that it would like the AWB to be abolished. We could pass that request and recommendation to OFMDFM and ask whether the Department wishes to include the abolition of the AWB in the Bill. Alternatively, the Committee could decide that it has already dealt with the matter at draft Bill stage; whereby we noted the concern, forwarded it to OFMDFM, and the Department noted that concern but did not include any provision in the Bill. The Committee could then inform the Agriculture Committee that it could propose an amendment to the Bill at Consideration Stage or introduce its own Committee Bill. Those are the Committee's options; forward the response to OFMDFM and wait for a reply, or send it back to the Agriculture Committee informing it that it should proceed by itself.

The Chairperson: We would be leaving the responsibility with the Agriculture Committee to handle the issue as it chooses to do so.

Mr Elliott: Just for clarification, can this Committee recommend to OFMDFM that the abolition of the AWB be included in the Bill?

The Committee Clerk: That would not be part of the remit of this Committee.

The Chairperson: We have been advised that it is not within our remit.

Mr Elliott: Then, what is the point in the Committee consulting on the matter?

The Committee Clerk: OFMDFM is responsible for the Bill as a whole because it comes under the review of public administration (RPA). However, the AWB is part of DARD's remit.

Mr Spratt: Is it not OK for this Committee to say that it agrees with the Agriculture Committee?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee can do that if it so wishes.

Mr Shannon: I believe that the Committee Clerk indicated that we could do so.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee can do so, if it wishes. However, the matter is not within the remit of this Committee. The Bill has come to this Committee as a result of RPA, and it refers to the abolition of several bodies.

Mr Shannon: However, under the Committee's RPA remit, it could make a recommendation and say that it agrees to the abolition of the AWB.

The Committee Clerk: Yes; if that is the Committee's wish.

Mrs Long: My assessment is that this Committee was acting as a clearing house for the views of other Committees on matters that are within their remits — in the same way that we do for the Budget and Programme for Government. Therefore, individual Committees take forward issues that are within their own remits. My only concern about forwarding the response to OFMDFM is that we have done so at draft stage, at which point the concerns were noted but not included in the Bill. If we do that again, the process would be the same.

It might be better if the Agriculture Committee were to deal with the matter proactively: for example, by moving an amendment. I do not foresee that there will be a major change of heart on the issue. We would be forwarding the same argument on behalf of both Committees to OFMDFM, and that argument did not convince the Department to make any changes at draft stage. It would be better if the Agriculture Committee took the argument forward. That Committee might be more successful and achieve a better result.

The Chairperson: The Principal Clerk of Bills has joined us. He may wish to share some insight on procedures. You are welcome. Sorry to call upon you suddenly. I am grateful to you.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: At present, the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill is before this Committee, which can decide to propose an amendment if it wishes. The Committee Clerk has already pointed out that the matter under consideration falls within the remit of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. That is the appropriate Committee to deal with that subject matter. However, this Bill is before this Committee, and this Committee has the power to make amendments if it so decides. If the Committee decides not to move in that direction; there is nothing to stop the Agriculture Committee proposing an amendment. Therefore, there are several options available.

Mr Shannon: If this Committee decides to make an amendment, will that become part of the Bill, or must it go to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their ratification? I would like to know what happens from the procedural standpoint.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: No, a proposal today will not become part of the Bill. The Committee will conduct clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill and will, eventually, produce a report. In that report, the Committee would suggest that the Bill be amended appropriately. The Committee Chairperson would put forward the amendment, which would be considered at

Consideration Stage. However, in view of the evidence that I have heard, the amendment would most likely be opposed by the Executive. That is my speculation. Therefore, it would be for the Committee to persuade the Assembly in plenary session.

The Chairperson: Would the amendment be opposed by the Executive or by the Department?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It would be opposed by the Executive, I would say.

Mr Shannon: It might be a reason for the Executive to meet again.

The Chairperson: I am afraid that we will not sort that matter out today.

Mr Elliott: I have a question about procedure. If the Agriculture Committee decides to submit an amendment, will that be at a later stage of the Bill or at the same stage?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It will be at the same stage — Consideration Stage. At that point, it is open to any Member to propose an amendment.

Mr Elliott: My second question is whether, at this stage, this Committee can recommend to OFMDFM that it amends the Bill without our putting forward an amendment?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Committee can certainly record that suggestion in its minutes. The Committee can write to the Department in an attempt to persuade the Ministers to take the amendment on board and include the AWB in the Bill. However, the decision would be entirely up to the Ministers.

As regards Assembly procedure, that option would be effective at Consideration Stage. Whether Ministers or the Committee recommend the change does not matter; it must be introduced as an amendment for debate.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that it cannot be a suggestion; it must be an amendment?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It must be an amendment proposed by somebody. The Committee may suggest that the Ministers take forward the amendment. However, if they do not take the amendment —

The Chairperson: It would, potentially, slip.

Mrs Long: Based on the work that was done at the draft stage, I assumed that OFMDFM and the Executive would oppose any amendment. I suggested that it might be better to recommend taking forward the change through the Agriculture Committee because that is where the bulk of the detailed discussions is taking place.

If this Committee moves an amendment, then it would be for us to drive it through, even though the issue is well outside our area of expertise. It may not be outside individual members' expertise — I am

not questioning that. The question is how to most productively pursue the matter that has been raised by the Agriculture Committee. It may be that the matter would be more effectively followed up by that Committee, because its members will debate the issue in the Assembly more effectively.

The Chairperson: I presume that this Committee, in referring the matter back to the Agriculture Committee for action, could make its view known.

Ms Anderson: The opinions of Committee members are known. The issue falls within the remit of the Agriculture Committee. I agree with Naomi about the degree of expertise on the matter in that Committee in comparison to that which exists in this Committee.

The issue does not matter to me, as a republican. However, boards exist in England, Scotland and Wales. I do not oppose the scrapping of any quango, but the evidence presented shows that the AWB does not deal only with wages. One of the arguments put forward in the Assembly during the Second Stage debate was that there would be some minimum wage protection for agricultural workers. However, the board also deals with items such as holiday pay and holiday entitlement. Therefore, arguments concerning the minimum wage alone do not cover those issues, and for that reason, Sinn Féin opposes the board's inclusion in the Bill.

Mr Spratt: Will Mr Toner explain the position of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU)? The Committee knows the views of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Toner: When the Minister took up office last year, the UFU called for the abolition of the board. The Minister considered the issue on foot of that call. The UFU called for the abolition in the context of the national minimum wage structure.

Mr Spratt: Does that mean that the Minister's decision is opposed by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Ulster Farmers' Union, which represents the vast majority of farmers in Northern Ireland?

Mr Toner: Yes. The Minister decided to retain the board on foot of the UFU's request that it be abolished.

Mr Spratt: On what did the Minister base her decision to retain the board?

Mr Toner: For the reason —

The Chairperson: Order, please. I am having difficulty in hearing what is being said.

Mr Toner: The Minister considered the abolition of the board last year on foot of a call from the UFU to do so. That was in the context of a national minimum wage that the UFU considered protected agricultural workers' rights sufficiently.

For the reasons that I outlined earlier, the Minister decided not to abolish the board. If members wish me to, I will repeat those reasons: there are four of them. First, the national minimum wage structure does not offer farm workers the same protection afforded by the board, in terms of wage rates in particular. Secondly, although wage costs are slightly higher — and the farmer perspective comes in here — that must be balanced against the need to retain suitably skilled agricultural workers in the North. Thirdly, the level of bureaucracy — again where farmers come into it — associated with board rates is not significant and is no different in the North to anywhere else on these islands. Fourthly, it is considered that the AWB provides a valuable forum for wage negotiations and, importantly, is used as a benchmark for the wider agrifood industry and other rural occupations. The Minister considered the abolition of the AWB on foot of a UFU request.

Mr McElduff: Jimmy Spratt said that the UFU represents the “vast majority” of farmers. I presume that it represents the majority of farmers, but I am unsure whether it could be described as the “vast majority”. What stance did the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) — another farmers’ union — adopt on that matter? It has been brought to my attention that serious adverse circumstances would accrue for low-paid workers. Has an equality impact assessment (EQIA) been completed?

Mr Toner: An equality impact assessment has not been carried out, because there has been no decision to change the policy. If such a decision were taken, we would pursue an EQIA. I cannot recall what stance NIAPA adopted.

Mr Elliott: I declare an interest as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. As Mr McElduff mentioned, I would welcome an EQIA because the national minimum wage is lower than the minimum wage set by the AWB. I understand that a decision was taken to include the AWB as part of the abolition of several quangos in the Province, which was then changed. Is that so? Furthermore, I understand that, over a year ago, all parties in the Assembly supported the abolition of the AWB.

Is the information on wage differences accurate? For example, someone who digs potatoes on a farm comes under the remit of AWB regulations. However, if that person then packs those potatoes the next day, they would come under the national minimum wage. That situation is an absolute nonsense and it is one of the reasons for supporting abolition.

The Chairperson: I remind members that this is not the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Elliott: We are discussing the AWB today.

The Chairperson: I accept that, and, on that basis, I allowed the question.

Mr Toner: The 2003 review of public administration recommended the abolition of the AWB. However, around that time, a subsequent decision was taken to retain the board, because the UK Government had given such assurances to trade unions in the UK. There are boards in the rest of the UK.

Mr Elliott asked about wage levels. A 22-year-old worker who is employed for more than 40 weeks — that is, an experienced agricultural worker — is paid an AWB hourly rate of £5.92, as opposed to a national minimum wage rate of £5.73 an hour. That constitutes a 19 pence difference. Although that may seem insignificant, it results in a difference of £7.60 a week or £30.40 a month when multiplied by a 40-hour week — not an inconsiderable difference.

Mr Elliott’s comments in relation to agricultural work and non-agricultural work were correct. Workers in the field, planting potatoes, etc, would attract an AWB rate. Workers packing potatoes would attract a rate at the national minimum wage level. The difference in wage rates is explained by the fact that agricultural activity is being undertaken.

Mr Elliott: Does any other industry or employment sector in the Province have its own wages board?

Mr Toner: I am not aware of any.

The Chairperson: Are members content that they understand the options available to them? There seem to be a number of options available. We have debated the issue, does anyone wish to make a proposal?

Mr Elliott: I propose that the Committee makes a recommendation to OFMDFM that the AWB is included for abolition in the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill.

The Chairperson: Does anyone wish to second the proposal?

Mr Jackson: At this point, it might be helpful to record what junior Minister Kelly said during the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill. He said that OFMDFM could not include in the Bill legislation that has not been requested or approved by another Minister of the Executive.

The Chairperson: Therefore, in other words, if we forward Mr Elliott’s proposal to the Department, we will receive a letter referring to that ministerial view?

Mr Jackson: That is the position the junior Minister took during the debate and I am not aware of it having changed.

The Chairperson: Mr Elliott; in light of that, do you wish to revise your proposal?

Mr Elliott: No. There are other Ministers in the Executive. That view was obviously expressed by OFMDFM —

The Chairperson: Yes; but Mr Jackson has said that the junior Minister made that statement on behalf of the Executive. Is that correct, Mr Jackson? Is that your understanding?

Mr Jackson: Yes. The Bill was approved by the Executive. It has been advanced on their behalf by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and in turn by the junior Ministers. The First Minister and deputy First Minister do not think it appropriate to unilaterally introduce legislation that has not been requested by another Minister of the Executive.

Mr Shannon: Is that contrary to information that the Principal Clerk of Bills gave to the Committee earlier today?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: That is the position of the Executive. As far as procedure is concerned, this Committee is entitled to make its own decisions and propose an amendment that it feels is correct to any piece of legislation. Any Member of the Assembly may also do that, and those amendments would then be dealt with during Consideration Stage in the Assembly. That is the Assembly procedure. There is no bar.

Mr Shannon: Therefore, there is nothing to stop the Committee from doing that?

The Chairperson: Is it fair to say that it is unlikely to be sponsored either by the Department or by the Executive?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: From the evidence that has been given, that would seem to be the case.

Mrs Long: That is the key issue. The only way that such a recommendation can be included in this Bill is if an amendment is tabled, debated in the House and a majority of Members vote in favour. That is the only way that it can happen. However, the question is how that can happen.

The Committee already knows that OFMDFM is not going to sponsor the amendment: therefore, asking it to do so is essentially a waste of time. We would be better either tabling an amendment ourselves — if members choose to do so — or refer the proposal to the Agriculture Committee, asking it to propose an amendment. Realistically, those are the only ways that an amendment can be included. My suggestion was that it would be more effective for the Agriculture Committee to advance the amendment. It is closest to the subject matter and best placed to have the debate.

I propose that we write to the Agriculture Committee, saying that we do not see merit in our approaching OFMDFM based on the Department's

previous responses. However, the Agriculture Committee would be able to bring —

The Chairperson: We would be giving that Committee the option of tabling an amendment.

Mrs Long: Yes.

Mr Elliott: I am happy if Naomi wishes to add that suggestion to my proposal. That would demonstrate to the Agriculture Committee that they have our support on the matter. Whether OFMDFM do what we ask is up to them —

The Chairperson: It would then become a two-fold approach. The Committee would write to OFMDFM, and, given the likely response we will receive, we would then refer the matter to the Agriculture Committee.

Mr Elliott: We should also take up Naomi's suggestion of referring the matter back to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with our support.

The Chairperson: Yes, but we would have to await a formal response from OFMDFM first.

Mrs Long: The difficulty with that proposal is that we would have to wait until OFMDFM responded before referring the matter back to the Agriculture Committee. As we already know, essentially, what OFMDFM's response will be, we could include its previous response with our reply to the Agriculture Committee as the evidence on which we are basing our decision. That would make it clear that we are not making a judgment on the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Development's position and are simply referring the matter back to that Committee. I understand where you are coming from, Chairperson, but my concern about combining the two proposals is that we will end up elongating the process. I want to get to a point at which something is likely to happen.

The Chairperson: Is there a time consideration?

The Committee Clerk: The closing date for tabling amendments at Consideration Stage is 4 November 2008. If the Committee has to write to OFMDFM and await its response, we would require a motion to be passed in the Chamber to extend the Committee Stage.

Ms Anderson: Surely this matter comes under the role of the Agriculture Committee. It has made a recommendation to us, and we know what OFMDFM's decision will be. Therefore, Naomi is correct in saying that we should refer the matter to the Agriculture Committee so that it can take action.

Mr Spratt: Paragraph 10 of the paper from the Agriculture Committee states:

"The Committee for Agricultural and Rural Development asks, therefore, that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister recommends that the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister reintroduces an

amendment to include the Agricultural Wages Board as a body to be abolished under the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill.”

It seems that we will just be kicking the ball back again.

Mrs Long: Notwithstanding that, we know that OFMDFM will refuse the request. We are trying, therefore, to short-circuit that process to give the Agriculture Committee an opportunity to formulate an amendment that will subsequently be debated in the Assembly when the Bill reaches Consideration Stage. That is the only opportunity that I can foresee for any change being made to the Bill. OFMDFM has stated that it is not prepared to consider such an amendment.

I understand why the Agriculture Committee made the request, but we could end up simply stringing the process out and being no further forward in four weeks’ time.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The normal process is that by the time the Committee reaches the stage of clause-by-clause scrutiny, it will have had to consider whether this is an issue and whether an amendment should be made. By not including an amendment, this Committee would be saying, effectively, that it is not in favour of it. The Committee would be assuming that another Committee will then make a concrete decision. However, the Bill is before this Committee alone, and these are issues that this Committee should be considering.

Another Department is involved but, in this instance, a single Department is taking forward a piece of omnibus legislation that covers several matters. As a civil servant, I was involved in progressing legislation, and I know that it happens regularly. It is within the remit of this Committee to consider the issue: indeed, it would be normal practice to do so. It just so happens that the legislation covers more than one Committee, and the expertise on the matter in question lies with the other Committee. In addition, several Ministers are involved in the legislation. However, let us be clear that the responsibility lies with this Committee, because this is the Committee Stage of a piece of legislation that is before only one Committee.

The Chairperson: The other option is for us to refer the matter back to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with our view on how it should be handled.

Mr Elliott: Is that appropriate within the legislative process?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Committee can decide that it will not take a view on the matter, but will decide to —

The Chairperson: The Committee may take a view but it will not take action. It will refer the action to another Committee.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Yes — the Committee can do that.

Mr Elliott: How long will the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development have to submit its amendment?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: That is entirely up to the Committee. There will be a period of time between the end of the Committee Stage and the scheduling of the Consideration Stage. My guess is that it is likely that the Agriculture Committee has already considered that kind of issue. Another member of the Bill Office is dealing with that issue, because separate advice must be given to each Committee about what can be done. There will be an adequate period of time during which the Agriculture Committee would be able to propose amendments. It is at least a couple of weeks, so time is not an issue.

The Chairperson: OK. Mr Elliott had an earlier proposal that was seconded.

Mr Elliott: The proposal still stands, because that is what the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee asked us to do. The proposal is that this Committee should ask the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to introduce the abolition of the AWB as part of the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill.

The Chairperson: Does anyone second the proposal?

Several Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are there any amendments to the proposal?

Members indicated dissent.

The Chairperson: Do members agree with the proposal?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: The Committee has agreed to write to OFMDFM.

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Chairperson: OK. Are there any other issues that members want to raise with the officials, or that officials want to raise with members?

Mr Elliott: I assume that the Fisheries Conservancy Board will continue to operate until it is abolished?

Mr Hamilton (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): That is correct.

The Chairperson: As there are no further questions, thank you very much for your attendance, gentlemen.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

9 October 2008

GOODS VEHICLES (LICENSING OF OPERATORS) BILL (NIA 15/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

Witness:

Mrs Beverley Bell	} North Western Traffic Area
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The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The Committee, today, holds its final evidence session on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill and will hear from Beverley Bell, Traffic Commissioner for the north western traffic area. The Committee has heard the views of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), and last week, it heard evidence from departmental enforcement officers and planning officials, as well as from the Horticulture Forum.

A copy of Mrs Bell's written submission on the Good Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill is included in members' packs. It makes reference to the requirement in statute for Traffic Commissioners to produce an annual report. Members have also been provided with a copy of the Senior Traffic Commissioner's annual report 2006-07, which include statistics on goods vehicle operator licensing. An electronic copy of the report has also been issued to members.

Tom Wilson, Freight Transport Association, has forwarded a paper regarding the function of an independent regulator for the licensing of goods vehicle operators, which is included in the pack.

I welcome Beverley Bell, Traffic Commissioner for the north western traffic area. It is good to see you. You are very welcome indeed. Thank you for making a submission to the Committee. You have around 15 minutes in which to make a presentation. We are flexible and will not press you to stick rigidly to the time limit. There will then be a question-and-answer session with members.

Mrs Beverley Bell (North Western Traffic Area): I hope that this will not be like the European Court where the microphone is switched off after 15 minutes.

The Chairperson: No, but I think that that is a good idea. I can think of a few cases where that would be very helpful and a few cases where an electric shock could stimulate witnesses into giving more information.

Mrs Bell: I could use that for some of the solicitors who appear before me. I would love to be able to shut them up after 15 minutes. There is no danger of my speaking for too long, I assure you.

Thank you very much for inviting me. I love coming over here, and I love your Building; it is fantastic. I welcome the opportunity to speak with you and possibly engage in some debate, rather than make a formal presentation. I will say a little about my background: who I am, where I am from, what I do, and how I approach regulation.

My first point is that I have two factors: one is aggravating and one is mitigating. I will let you decide which is which. I am not a civil servant, but I am a lawyer, so I will let you decide which is aggravating and which is mitigating. It is important, as far as I am concerned, that the regulation that I do is independent and is not linked to the Civil Service.

I used to be a solicitor in private practice doing prosecution and defence work, criminal work, and transport law. That is where I first became interested in transport law. I was appointed in 2000. At that time, as I have mentioned in my written submission, the north-west traffic area had suffered from under-regulation for a long time, for a number of reasons. My job was to improve and increase the standards of the operators in the north-west traffic area. Having done so over the last seven or eight years, we are now moving on to the promotion of best practice. We have upped the skills of operators in making sure that road safety and fair competition are not jeopardised.

I am sure that when the Committee scrutinises a piece of legislation, it questions the purpose of the legislation, why it is being examined, and why it is being brought into play. That is what I talk to operators about when they see me at public inquiry. I tell them that my job is never about red tape; it is about the promotion of road safety and fair competition. Although I tend not to get too passionate in my work, it really is the driving force behind everything that

I do, and everything that the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) does. I welcome debate on road safety and fair competition.

An aside to that is the environmental protection aspect of the legislation. We examine that when we look at operating centres. I will not talk about that in great detail in my presentation, but I want to flag it up and if you want to ask questions around the issues of environmental protection and operating centres, then I will happily do what I can to inform you how we implement that in the north-west traffic area.

The other key point for me is what we say to operators, and what operators say back to us, which is that ours is regulation with a light touch. I say that that is absolutely fine, but it is not with a soft touch — more on that later.

Another key feature included in my written representation is that I regard — and I speak for my fellow commissioners here — exercising of discretion as key to my role. I came over about five years ago when I first became involved in looking at what happens here, and spoke to some civil servants about regulation: how they regulate; how they grant licences; and how they take licences away. They asked me how that could be done without exercising discretion. My answer was the same then as it is now — I do not think that that can be done without discretion. It is a matter of how that discretion is exercised. That leads me to look at the separation of those powers.

I am completely naive as far as politics is concerned, and that is absolutely right, as my job is non-political. The commissioners and Government regard it as essential that we are not part of any political process, interference, pressure, or influence. For that reason, the licensing authorities — let us remove the word “commissioner” for the moment — have the respect and confidence not only of the industry but, most importantly, of the Government. We are currently going through a process with regard to the implementation of the Local Transport Bill [HL], and commissioners have appeared before the parliamentary Transport Select Committee. In a recent debate, Rosie Winterton, the Transport Minister, spoke about the high regard in which the Government hold Traffic Commissioners. Our independence of Government and the respect that we have from the industry puts us in a very strong position.

I have spoken about regulation in the north-west of England, but Traffic Commissioners regulate in generally the same way right across Great Britain. We adopt a two-pronged strategy, which I call the carrot-and-stick, or enforcement-and-education, approach. We try to both enforce and educate.

At public inquiry yesterday morning, I dealt with two operators who had not been not been doing what

they should under the terms of their licences. One of the operators did not bother attending — which is always a bad start to a public inquiry — so I took his licence away from him. The other operator did attend the inquiry because I had recently taken his vehicles off the road for a few days. We were able to resolve matters — he is back on the road and everything is as it should be. That is an example of the enforcement aspect of our regulation.

However, education is also key to our regulation. Yesterday afternoon, I made a presentation to around 170 operators from all over the country to alert them to the new initiatives that are being introduced by VOSA and the European Parliament and to ensure that they are complying with what is required.

As I said in my introduction to those operators, commissioners can suffer from their press. We are reported in the trade magazines ‘Commercial Motor’ and ‘Coach and Bus Week’, and it can seem as though we are harsh or strict and wanting to take action against operators. The advantage of engaging with the industry — and attending meetings such as this one and the Select Committee — is that people can see us as individuals who are committed to promoting road safety, fair competition and, just as importantly, making operators’ jobs easier.

In my annual report last year, I wrote that the work of operators and commissioners is similar in some respects — we can both run things properly with the right staff and systems. It is only when those systems and procedures go wrong that difficulty arises. If our system goes wrong, it might mean that an operator gets a licence a week late. However, if an operator’s system goes wrong, a wheel may come off the vehicle and someone could be killed.

There is something that I had not appreciated was such an issue here, and that is the use of commercial vehicles for criminal activity. I have been talking to the police in the north-west traffic area about that, and having done a bit of research, I see that there are some big issues regarding the criminal activity that surrounds some specific types of commercial vehicles. A quality operator-licensing scheme — whether own account or hire and reward — would go a significant way to addressing that criminal activity.

Those are the key issues that I wanted to flag up to the Committee. However, I am more interested in debate than formal presentation, and more interested in answering the Committee’s questions and hearing what members think is good and, perhaps more importantly, what is bad about Traffic Commissioners.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for your presentation and for coming to give us the benefit of your experience. In your written submission, you indicated that you have become increasingly frustrated by the illegitimate

haulage industry's attempts to circumvent your orders and by its continued unsafe and unfair competition. One of the ways in which they do that is to operate from a Northern Ireland or Republic of Ireland base. Can you give us more information about the sort of things that have been happening, and what experiences have you had on your patch of vehicles with poor safety standards?

Mrs Bell: Do you mean with regard to vehicles operated from here?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mrs Bell: The Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association have already provided statistics for unsafe vehicles in the UK. However, I can tell you that, in the north-west traffic area, when VOSA targets vehicles from Northern Ireland or the Republic, its hit rate for prohibiting vehicles and drivers is substantially higher than for operators based in the north-west.

Heysham docks provide another example on my patch. When operators that are licensed by me attach trailers that have come from Northern Ireland to their tractor units, the chances are that those trailers will be in such poor condition that the operators will immediately incur a prohibition. Consequently, before allowing such trailers to operate on a vehicle that I have licensed, operators in my patch employ mechanics at the docks to submit them to a safety inspection.

Mr Beggs: Have your efforts to drive up industry standards had an impact on road-safety figures for accidents involving heavy goods vehicles?

Mrs Bell: It is not for me to justify my existence, but others who work with me tell me that there has been a significant improvement in the state of the fleet and in the culture of compliance by operators, and that is the key.

When I started eight years ago, I was worried because I was the youngest, and the first female, commissioner, and I thought that operators might think that I was just a sappy girl. Therefore, in order to hit the ground running — being reasonable, of course, and, given that I am a lawyer, going through all the necessary legal procedures — I took away a few licences just to show them who was boss so that they would sit up and take notice. I did not revoke licences just for the sake of it, but I did take robust action, because it was important for the operators to be aware that the relevant body — whether a commissioner, a licensing authority or a Government agency — was prepared to take such action.

Moreover, if you look at the report, the statistics for the number of licences that I and my colleagues revoked speak for themselves, and that is what makes the operators sit up and take notice. Operators can be

prosecuted by VOSA, or your equivalent, until the cows come home, but that means nothing. However, they can be given a fine of a couple of hundred quid for a defective brake, and I can take the vehicle off the road until the brakes are mended. That is what they listen to.

For me, it is not just about banging a drum; it is about winning operators' hearts and minds. Generally, they grow to understand that it is not good customer service to say that goods cannot be delivered because an examiner has put a vehicle off the road and that it must remain parked up until its braking system is sorted out. Maintaining a safe and efficient fleet improves operators' bottom line and enables them to get on the road and do their business.

Mr Beggs: You said that you have recently been advised that commercial vehicles are sometimes caught up in illegal activity. If an operator has a track record of illegal activity, presumably that is grounds for removing the licence, which, in turn, prevents the abuse of vehicles for such activities.

Mrs Bell: Absolutely. A couple of years ago, I had a case involving an operator from Liverpool, and I was concerned that his business was a front for illegal drug smuggling and money laundering, and — joy of joys — I saw on television that he got nine years. That is a good example of somebody using his business as a front for illegal activity.

Mr Ford: I welcome you as well. Your written submission states — and you have just re-emphasised it — that the key to effective regulation is to grant discretion to the regulator. Do you believe that you have greater discretion than a civil servant doing the same role would have, and if so, why?

Mrs Bell: I am not subject to influence — be it good, bad or indifferent — from a line manager. I am free to make the decisions that I feel are appropriate, subject to the checks and balances that apply when I sit in a quasi-judicial capacity. That is so different from the way in which a civil servant would work. That is why there is a real value in what we do as regulators.

Mr Ford: How do you liaise with VOSA regarding your almost parallel responsibilities?

Mrs Bell: We do it all day, every day in many and different ways. I will give some examples. In most cases, VOSA staff deal with the checks and balances of a licence application, such as whether the person has the licence fee, a certificate of professional competence (CPC), and so on. Once the groundwork is complete, I sign off on the case. It might take the civil servants a long time to conduct the admin work, whereas it takes me only a short time to sign off on a case. I have complete trust and faith in what they do. That is the nature of our relationship. I trust them, and they trust me.

I spend a large part of my time dealing with non-compliant operators — the naughty boys. In those cases, the civil servants might have only a small amount of work to do, and I will do the lion's share. They set out the reasons why an operator is bad and hand the case over to me. I then deal with the case through an inquiry, a hearing or an interview in my office.

Does that answer your question, or do you want some more detail?

Mr Ford: No, that is a good start, because the next question I was going to ask is what exactly you mean by “public inquiry”.

Mrs Bell: I am sorry; my apologies. Most of my time is spent in a courtroom-type setting. It is great fun; you must come and watch. I come in, everyone stands up, I go into formal mode, and then they all sit down. I hear evidence from VOSA witnesses about, for example, an incident in which a wheel came off an operator's vehicle but fortunately nobody was killed. Then I hear from the operator about why it went wrong and, much more importantly, what has been done to put it right. The public inquiry is the mechanism by which I decide what to do with the licence.

If an operator has a licence for 20 vehicles, I must decide whether it should be allowed to continue to operate those vehicles or whether its licence should be reduced to 10 or five vehicles, or whether the vehicles should be taken off the road completely, or whether the drivers should undergo training.

It is not my job to put operators out of business — a common misconception; it is my job to make them comply. I do that in a number of ways. I am not a judge, because I have an interest in the outcome of the proceedings. I want to get operators back on the straight and narrow; I want to make them comply. The sort of orders that I might make day in, day out, are that drivers must be trained to perform daily walk-round checks or that they must be trained in the tachograph regulations. I probably spend around four days a week in public inquiry, hearing from the operators and their solicitors.

Mr Ford: You said that you do not have power to compel attendance at the inquiry. Nevertheless, you go ahead and make your determination.

Mrs Bell: The question I ask myself is this: if I do not meet the operators, how can I possibly conclude that their operations are safe and legal to continue? Operating licensing is based on trust. I grant a licence on the basis of promises that are given to me. I must meet the operators to ascertain whether I can trust them. If they are not there, I cannot question them and find out.

Mr Ford: What staff, as opposed to VOSA staff, do you have to carry out those functions?

Mrs Bell: There are two types of staff. However, all the staff who work for me are VOSA staff.

Mr Ford: Are they with you on secondment?

Mrs Bell: No; I do not know how to describe it, but the Government sort it out and all the staff are from VOSA. There are two groups of staff. The first group is the 50 or so licensing staff based in Leeds, who are very efficient. I work electronically with them, because I am 50 miles away, and they cover the whole of Great Britain. The second group is the 10 staff in my office. It is their job to deal with compliance issues, so they prepare the cases for public inquiry and do other preparation. In many cases, we might send operators warning letters to tell them that we have marked their card, that they are on our system and that we know that they have done something wrong. We then check in a year that everything is in order.

Mr Ford: Are appeals against your decisions to a court?

Mrs Bell: There is an appeal process, and appeals are made to the Transport Tribunal. However, that will be replaced by the upper tier, because we are having a shift.

Mr Ford: What percentage of your decisions are appealed?

Mrs Bell: Far too many — the percentage of successful appeals is tiny compared to the amount of work that I do. It is in the statistics. From about 180 public inquiries every year, three or four of my decisions are overturned. If I did not want my decisions to be appealed, I would not be so robust — I would just get operators to agree not to be naughty again. However, because I am not afraid to take robust decisions, I do not mind those decisions being appealed. I do get it wrong sometimes — as a woman, I do not mind admitting that.

The Chairperson: We are all human.

I want to pick up on a couple of points. Who regulates you? If you tell an operator that all of his or her drivers must go on a training course, how do you ensure that that happens?

Mrs Bell: They provide evidence. I am regulated in two respects. First, as I said to Mr Ford, if I make a mistake in a public inquiry, when I have my judicial hat on, the Transport Tribunal, or the upper tier, will correct me. When the new legislation is passed, I will be appealed on a point of law. Second, as a Traffic Commissioner and a licensing authority, I am accountable to the Secretary of State for Transport, which is the equivalent of being accountable to the Department here. That is why we publish our annual report — it justifies what I do. If the Select Committee or the Secretary of State ask for proof that I am

effective as a regulator and that I am doing my job properly, I can give them the annual report.

The Chairperson: That happens once a year. However, if you want advice on how to pursue a matter, who do you contact?

Mrs Bell: We have regular dialogue with the Department for Transport and VOSA. We have tripartite meetings on a quarterly basis. Therefore, if I wanted to implement a new initiative that I am piloting in the north-west, I would contact a senior civil servant in the Department for Transport and the chief executive of VOSA to ask their opinion.

I would proceed only if I had their buy-in, because, although I am not a civil servant, I am paid by, and accountable to, Government. Therefore, I must work with them, and follow and inform their policies.

The Chairperson: So, although you direct your initiatives, they comply with Government policies on matters such as training.

Mrs Bell: Yes.

The Chairperson: Will you elaborate on that point? How do you ensure that that happens?

Mrs Bell: There are two ways. I might, for example, request that driver training be done by a recognised third-party provider, such as FTA or RHA, and I would then simply ask for evidence. Consequently, if FTA sends me certificates to demonstrate that drivers have done the course, then that is fine; it reduces the administrative burden on, and the cost to, the operator.

Similarly, if I have allowed a license to continue, but I have not asked for any undertakings, I would ask VOSA, the enforcement agency, to go back in six to 12 months to check, and I can stipulate whether that inspection should be announced or unannounced. The beauty of operator licensing is the continued relationship between the operator and the enforcement authority.

Mr T Clarke: I, too, welcome you. I am a little alarmed by your response to a question asked by Mr Beggs. You said that trailers coming from Northern Ireland are more likely to be unsafe. I am one of the Committee members who are against the Bill, because I do not understand how having an operator centre would address those problems. Those have nothing to do with such centres or the Bill, but arise from the process through which trailers must go. If trailers possess an MOT or PSV certificate, how do so many leave Northern Ireland and go to England in an unsafe state?

Mrs Bell: First, it is not operating that promotes road safety but operator licensing, based on the operator's reputation, financial situation, professional competence and his undertakings. Operating centres

are a separate matter; granting a licence makes an operator safe.

VOSA has a brilliant slide — which I now wish that I had brought — to demonstrate the MOT standard, which is the absolute minimum for a vehicle to comply with the construction and use regulations. On the day that a vehicle undergoes its MOT, it has had the bare minimum of maintenance. When an operator carries out regular safety inspections of a vehicle, during which a mechanic crawls all over it to check that everything is OK, its standard of roadworthiness should be much higher.

Consider the following: the standard at which a vehicle should be on the day of its safety inspection is considerably higher than on that of its MOT inspection. Every time the vehicle then goes out on the road to deliver its goods, that standard decreases a little, gradually getting worse until, at the end of six weeks, it reaches MOT standard. At that point, the vehicle undergoes another safety inspection, and the standard goes back up to that which was achieved six weeks previously. If, as you suggest, the vehicle merely achieves the MOT standard and then goes on the road, it starts at the bare minimum standard — only just complying — and therefore, over that time, wheel nuts become loose and the vehicle's physical condition will deteriorate. Eventually, it will become an unacceptable risk to road safety —

Mr T Clarke: I do not buy into that —

Mrs Bell: Please let me finish.

Mr T Clarke: Allow me to make my point; this is going nowhere.

Mrs Bell: The vehicle becomes an unacceptable risk to road safety, and that is when collisions happen, and a fatal incident or a serious injury occurs. That is what operator licensing is about. As I said, I wish that I had brought that slide, although I can certainly email it to you.

Mr T Clarke: Having had a motor background and having worked in that environment, I know that someone crawling under a trailer to conduct a visual check will not achieve that big difference in roadworthiness.

Mrs Bell: It will.

Mr T Clarke: I beg to differ. I have worked in the motor industry for —

Mrs Bell: Where is your evidence?

Mr T Clarke: Where is your evidence to the contrary? To take that point further: you said that there have been occasions when wheels have fallen off lorries that have already complied with all the other regulations. So where is the evidence that the gap of six weeks has worked? The evidence seems to point to the contrary — the fact that the wheel fell off suggests that it did not work. They have bought into all this —

Mrs Bell: Sorry, you will have to speak more slowly, Mr Clarke — it is the accent.

The Chairperson: You will have to clarify that point. We started by talking about how a vehicle from Northern Ireland might be in poor condition compared to the vehicles in GB, which are kept to a higher standard because of the inspection process there. Your point is that those cursory, or more detailed, inspections should, naturally enough, improve road safety.

Mrs Bell: It “will” improve road safety, not “should”.

The Chairperson: I said that, naturally enough, it should improve road safety. The way I see it, that almost makes a case for a more frequent MOT or PSV rather than an increased —

Mrs Bell: They are two different things; one is a test and one is an inspection.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. However, my point is that, if there is already a test to ensure that a minimum standard has been met — and officials here would argue that it ensures that slightly more than the minimum has been met — you are taking us in the direction of a more frequent MOT or PSV. We have all put vehicles through MOT and PSV tests and the likes, and we know the scrutiny under which they are placed. The basis of the argument that I am hearing is that we should move to having more frequent MOT or PSV, as opposed to six-week inspections.

Mrs Bell: But would that not be an unacceptable burden on the industry?

The Chairperson: Of course it would.

Mr T Clarke: Sorry, Chairman, a visual inspection will not tell a person whether the trailer is roadworthy — how can a visual inspection determine whether the brakes are up to an adequate standard?

The Chairperson: Can you clarify that point? I am not expecting you to answer as a mechanic —

Mrs Bell: Well, thank God for that, because I do not have the mechanic’s detailed knowledge, and I would not profess to — unlike Mr Clarke.

The Chairperson: Can you talk us through how that approach has worked, based on your own experience?

Mrs Bell: It has worked because the vehicles are now in a much safer condition than they were previously.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that — as a result of the inspection.

Mrs Bell: Yes, they are in a much safer condition as a result of the regular safety inspections and the driver daily walk-round check. As far as I am concerned, the two are the foundation stones of operating licensing. The driver daily walk-round check is a good way of

ensuring that a wheel will not come off. The point of the safety inspection is that, for example, the braking system might need some work or parts replaced because of wear and tear. I am interested that a Committee member does not agree that regular safety inspections — which I have always regarded as accepted policy — improve the safety of a vehicle. I am just worried that the rest of the Committee —

Mr T Clarke: You are making a big difference between —

The Chairperson: Just a minute, Trevor.

Mr T Clarke: Chair, let me clarify this —

The Chairperson: Hold on a minute.

Mr T Clarke: This point is directed to me.

The Chairperson: I know the point that you are making, Trevor, because I was about to pick up on it. The point is that there is a difference between the type of inspection that Mrs Bell has just described and the type of inspection that a mechanic would undertake, for example, to check if the brakes are defective. Such an inspection involves taking off the wheels and cylinders, and so on. Is that the sort of the inspection that those people carry out?

Mrs Bell: Yes. Perhaps Mr Clarke and I are at odds on the difference between the driver daily walk-round check and the regular safety inspection.

The Chairperson: Yes; could you expand on that point, please?

Mrs Bell: Let me explain what we expect in Great Britain. Every day, in an attempt to win drivers’ hearts and minds, I ask them “Have you checked your nuts this morning?” They all laugh at me, but it gets the message across. *[Laughter:]* I am a woman working in man’s world; I have to win their hearts and minds.

The driver daily walk-round check is a vital part of operating licensing, and it involves the driver physically walking around the vehicle. To return to the example that we were talking about earlier, Mr Clarke: the driver will check that the wheel nuts are tight and in the right place, and that the windscreen wipers and lights are working, and so on. We expect that check to be done every day, and, as I say, we ensure that training is provided, and so on.

The other issue I talked about was a proper safety inspection where the vehicle goes into the garage, and the mechanics — the spanner men — look at the vehicle and conduct a full safety inspection. They have a sheet with all the IM numbers, which are the different parts, to ensure that the braking system works, that the tachograph is sealed, and so on, and that inspection is carried out every six weeks. Perhaps we were at cross-purposes. That is what I referred to when I talked about the six-week difference.

The confusion may have arisen when I was talking about the mechanics being employed at the docks. Mechanics can only do so much at the roadside; they cannot possibly do as much as they can with the proper safety inspection over a pit.

There you are: we sorted it.

Mr T Clarke: I have a follow-on question about the so-called safety inspections. Why do the nuts come loose and the wheels still fall off, if people have been bought into the system on the mainland?

Mrs Bell: Generally, because the drivers have not done their daily walk round their vehicles to check them, which is why our job is proactive and tries to get them to check their vehicles in the first place.

The Chairperson: That is the training that you referred to earlier. If an incident were to happen and, as a consequence, it came before you, would that be the sort of instruction that you would ensure goes through the process?

Mrs Bell: Yes. We could talk for hours about wheel loss, but I do not want to get hung up on that subject.

The Chairperson: God, no.

Mrs Bell: It was a bad example. We will use a defective braking system, which is much more likely to happen.

Mr Boylan: Over here, vehicles go through a test centre and the driver has a PSV certificate that lasts for a year, which is what Mr Clarke referred to. There is a big difference between checking for defective tyres, defective lights, etc, and a proper check. That point has been clarified. Is that the main issue of the commissioner? The vehicle is sound only on the day that it is tested. Do we need a PSV certificate every six months or after so many thousand miles?

Mrs Bell: It is not for me to say what you should do. In Great Britain, we have an undertaking from the operator that says that the vehicles will be subjected to regular safety inspections at a specified interval. We have a graph, and inspections will depend on the size of the vehicle, the type of journey it does, and the number of miles it travels. A 38-ton articulated lorry trundling up and down the motorway every day may need checking every six weeks, whereas a farmer carrying his goods to market may need checking only four times a year. We tailor inspections to the size and weight of the vehicle and the type of journey.

The Chairperson: A big issue that has arisen in the evidence gathered so far has been how exemptions have been made for agricultural vehicles and vehicles involved in horticultural activity. What are those exemptions and how do they work?

Mrs Bell: In Great Britain, we have several exemptions that are related mainly to the use of the

vehicle, rather than the type of vehicle: in other words, the type of operation. Those vehicles tend to be used for emergency provisions, such as fire brigades and ambulances. We have a general exemption for agricultural tractors used in certain circumstances. You may, or may not, be aware that the Department for Transport is reviewing exemptions. We have found — and you may have found it here — that once a piece of legislation comes into force, operators try to find a way to circumvent it.

Some agricultural vehicles are being developed in such a way as to fall between two stools, and the use of a fast-track is a good example. A vehicle that we see as a tractor — with big tyres and a farmer driving it — is a fast-track, which is also used as a commercial-goods vehicle.

We have real difficulties with a fast-track vehicle that tows a trailer in which goods for commercial gain are carried. That must be licensed.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the exemptions should be based on the how the vehicle is used?

Mrs Bell: The exemptions should be based on use. However, from my experience, care must be taken to ensure that it can be tied up tightly, so that the operators and the lawyers cannot find a loophole to avoid compliance.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you for your presentation. You described the criminal side of the issue as significant.

It was not clear whether you were implying that vehicles from Northern Ireland are used by gangs involved in criminal activity. If that is the case, will you provide some examples?

My second question deals with the third component, the Republic of Ireland — Britain being the first and Northern Ireland being the second. Are vehicles based there also used by criminal gangs?

Do you co-operate with the regulators in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that vehicles used in the trade are safe when vehicles that are based there come to your attention?

Mrs Bell: First, the problems that the north west traffic area faces in tackling criminal activity, such as fuel laundering and fuel duty evasion, probably mirror those that you face. For obvious reasons, I cannot deal with specific cases by name; however, the information that we received from the enforcement authorities is similar to that included in the representations from the Freight Transport Association about criminal activity and illegal fuel. That is a big issue in the north west traffic area, especially in the metropolitan areas of Liverpool and Manchester. I can say that because I am from Liverpool. There are big issues surrounding the laundering and trafficking of fuel to the north west

traffic area. Given that our licensing regime is based on principles of repute or fitness of own-account operators we are able to take more action. We see that as a big problem; we also see it as a big security issue.

With regard to the Republic of Ireland, the north west traffic area and other traffic areas experience similar problems to you. Although we have the co-operation of the enforcement agency, we are concerned that the regulatory regime is not on a level playing field. Who is the regulator? How does he or she regulate? Does he or she regulate in the same way?

Perhaps this is not as relevant for own-account operators, but my concern as a commissioner is that many operators work in Europe and it is therefore important that the regulators throughout Europe adopt a common approach. That is probably a few years down the line. We have the co-operation of the regulators in the Republic of Ireland; however, we differ in how we regulate.

Mr Boylan: Obviously operating centres will be affected by own-account operators. Although Northern Ireland comprises large rural areas, I am concerned about the people who operate from home and choose to park their vehicles on the footpath outside their homes in residential areas. Will you provide some examples of how to address the issue of people operating from their homes in residential areas? How did you address the issue of planning for operating centres in the north west traffic area? There will be difficulties there with road safety and such.

The Chairperson: I will expand on that. Last week, one of the major issues concerned operators who would be defined under the legislation as operating — for want of a better word — from their own homes, for example, self-employed lorry operators parking outside their residential property. There was some concern about the Bill's definition of an operating centre that could have planning implications for the person so defined. Therefore, we are trying to get a handle on whether, in your experience, there have been planning implications.

Mrs Bell: First, we do not have to consider the planning position and necessarily be bound by it. We are mutually exclusive, so if I define somewhere as being an operating centre, the planners do not have to accept it as an operating centre. They can do what they like, so we are not necessarily going to dovetail. That is because the tests are, quite rightly, different. Our definition of an operating centre is a place where a vehicle or vehicles are kept when they are not in use. Therefore, the centre is basically a place where vehicles go for a rest. Were I to have brought props today, I would have brought a pair of scales, because we have to balance the competing needs of the operator to go lawfully about its business with the

competing needs of residents to the quiet and peaceful enjoyment of their properties. That is why I continually talk about discretion. Operators and residents must peacefully co-exist, and, in many cases, they have done so, even though someone is parking his or her commercial vehicle on a road. However, in other cases, they have not peacefully co-existed, and that is where we come in as the licensing authority to try to resolve the issue. It goes back to my regulation with a light touch but not necessarily with a soft touch.

We have those competing needs; furthermore, we have the overarching aspect of road safety, therefore, when we examine an operating centre, we always look at the impact on road safety if a vehicle were parked there. We try to find or designate a safe place for the operator; for example, a truck stop. In rural areas, we allow farms to park a vehicle if there is space, provided that the vehicle can enter and exit in forward gear. In urban areas, we try to find a regional distribution centre, a truck stop, or a lorry park, where vehicles can be kept when they are not in use.

Mr Boylan: I understand what you are saying, but it still does not explain the matter, because there are complaints here about existing operating centres. For example, what would happen in the north west of England if someone were to operate a truck for 10 years and then buy a house in a residential area and park it on the footpath, as it was the only place that they could operate from?

Mrs Bell: We would not allow that.

The Chairperson: Perhaps parking on the footpath would be the issue there, but what would happen if that vehicle were parked in the designated space associated with the dwelling?

Mrs Bell: If someone were to operate a seven-and-a-half-ton truck, we would look at the parking area and decide whether the operator could enter and exit the space in forward gear.

Mr Boylan: There is not a chance of that happening in a residential area. I do not see a problem with that, but those people will need planning permission. Are they directed to the nearest industrial estate?

Mrs Bell: We would have a look at the surrounding areas. I want you to understand why we do that.

We prefer not to do that, to avoid putting an unnecessary burden on operators, especially when — as in Northern Ireland — those own-account operators have been in business for years, during which time they have, perhaps, parked their trucks on a road or a pavement. Other than for environmental reasons, such as ensuring that people are not awoken at 3 am by the noise of reverse-gear buzzers, the only reason that that is specified is because in urban areas the issues appear to involve large operators. An example would be an

operator with a 24-hour regional distribution centre next to a row of houses. The issues around several thousand own-account operators are not the same.

Mr Boylan: Yes — but twin-axle Transit vans that may not fit on a drive in an average residential estate have been discussed.

To return to the rural issue; permission is not generally granted here for businesses in rural areas. The problem is that parking a vehicle may be facilitated, but how is the issue addressed of changing the designation of a garage in order to enable it to be used to store and distribute goods?

Mrs Bell: We are not bothered about the planning laws. We are simply bothered. I am speaking to two members at the same time —

Mr Boylan: Yes, but if we do that over here there is a bother for planning.

Mr T Clarke: I think that may be unfair —

Mrs Bell: I am sorry, Mr Clarke, your accent is delightful but please speak a little more slowly?
[Laughter.]

Mr Weir: I am from North Down, which sometimes sees itself as being half-way between England and —

Mr T Clarke: It is unfair in the sense that the Committee is not getting both perspectives. Last week members heard from a planning perspective; today the viewpoint is totally different. Therefore, Mrs Bell, you cannot give the Committee the answer it seeks.

Mr Boylan: I totally understand that.

Mrs Bell: I am sorry. I tried.

Mr T Clarke: That is the problem that members will face, Chairperson.

Mrs Bell: It is an important point.

The Chairperson: For clarification; the real point made last week was in relation to operating centres, about which Mrs Bell may inform the Committee through her wider experience with local authorities. The nub was whether there was a correlation between the definition of an operating centre and a local authority's interpretation of an operating centre as an accepted business.

Mrs Bell: When I said that they were not mutually exclusive, I meant that whatever Traffic Commissioners do does not in any way fetter the discretion of the planning authority. I believe that is how it should be.

The Chairperson: Absolutely.

Mr T Clarke: That is what worries members.

Mr Boylan: That is the problem.

Mrs Bell: Why is that a problem?

Mr T Clarke: It is a problem because the Committee accepts and is happy that someone will be granted permission to set up an operator's centre, but the Planning Service will refuse permission because it deems that same operation a business. Therefore, a small operator in Northern Ireland is burdened with an additional expense.

Mrs Bell: Do you mean the expense of having to apply for planning permission?

Mr T Clarke: No — the operator will not be granted planning permission.

The Chairperson: That is the problem.

Mrs Bell: I do not know Northern Ireland's planning laws. However, in the north west traffic area of Great Britain operators need not apply for planning permission. Therefore, I do not know what the situation might be in Northern Ireland.

Mr T Clarke: That must be clarified.

The Chairperson: What I am trying to elicit is how you, Mrs Bell, define an operating centre. I want to know whether any local authority, upon designation of an operating centre, decided that that operating centre required planning permission as a business. Has that not happened?

Mrs Bell: No it has not.

The Chairperson: That is very good. Thank you for that.

Mrs Bell: And similarly, if an operating centre has planning permission for commercial use, we must accept it as an operating centre.

May I just do the hearts and minds thing? The overarching issue of road safety is the only reason that there is an environmental aspect to deal with, because the legislation is drafted in a way that strikes a balance between residents and operators, which is right. However, it also deals with that road safety risk. I have a reputation in the north western traffic area for being strict. I do not know why, but it does not bother me, so long as I am known for being fair.

I am haunted by the case of 12-year-old Gerald Byrne. One day, he was walking home from school and bent down to tie his shoelaces. As he did, a 38-ton truck reversed out of a depot and reversed over him; then it drove forward and killed him. That happened nine years ago, and the case is still outstanding. It haunts me, because it was avoidable; there is no way that anybody should have allowed a 38-ton truck to go in and out at that particular location. Perhaps, a 2.2-ton or 3.5-ton van would be permitted to use the location, because they carry a more manageable and acceptable risk.

In our capacity as commissioners, we are asking what size and weight the vehicles are and what areas are required for them to turn. The requirements for a

38-ton truck are entirely different from those for a 3·5-ton truck. The Committee must be aware of that when they scrutinise the Bill: look at the area and consider whether there is a risk. If there is a minimal risk, there is no difficulty, but you will have to look at it again if there is a bigger risk.

The Chairperson: Thank you for attending this morning's Committee meeting. It has been a lively and informative exchange, and you have answered a lot of our questions.

Mrs Bell: Was it helpful?

The Chairperson: It was helpful, and very good of you.

Mr Boylan: Have you done your checks?

Mr T Clarke: *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Bell: I am glad that we clarified that, because it would have been awful if we had been speaking under a misapprehension. Thank you very much.

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 05 September 2008

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rivers Agency

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development at what time on Saturday 16th August 2008 did Rivers Agency initiate a major Incident Response Regime. (AQW 49/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Following Met Office severe weather warnings issued on Friday 15th August, Rivers Agency was engaged in flood event preparations. This included liaison with other responding Agencies, placing staff on standby and debris removal from inlet grilles.

Rivers Agency staff also loaded crew cabs and lorries with sandbags, pumps were tested, and additional sandbags procured.

Industrial and engineering staff were mobilised on the morning of Saturday 16th August clearing grilles and attending flooding incidents. As the storm event developed towards mid-day, the Met Office issued further weather warnings and the Rivers Agency Senior Management instructed the opening of the Area Offices in response to the increasing volume of calls for assistance. These instructions were issued to the various offices between 12:00pm and 2:15 pm.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Volume of Water in Spelga Dam

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if necessary action was taken by his

Department to reduce the volume of water in Spelga Dam on 16 and 17 August 2008. (AQW 13/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is a regular and normal occurrence when Spelga Dam is at full capacity for it to overflow to the River Bann. During the period 16 -17 August 2008, Spelga Dam was at full capacity and the overflow system was operating as normal. In the circumstances, there was no operational action required or taken by Northern Ireland Water to reduce the level of water in the Dam.

The damage to property and crops in the Hilltown and Rathfriland areas was therefore not caused as a result of any lowering of the water levels in Spelga Dam by Northern Ireland Water.

Volume of Water in Spelga Dam

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the damage caused to property in the Hilltown and Rathfriland areas, as a result of the necessary lowering of the water levels in Spelga Dam on 16 and 17 August 2008. (AQW 14/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is a regular and normal occurrence when Spelga Dam is at full capacity for it to overflow to the River Bann. During the period 16 -17 August 2008, Spelga Dam was at full capacity and the overflow system was operating as normal. In the circumstances, there was no operational action required or taken by Northern Ireland Water to reduce the level of water in the Dam.

The damage to property and crops in the Hilltown and Rathfriland areas was therefore not caused as a result of any lowering of the water levels in Spelga Dam by Northern Ireland Water.

Volume of Water in Spelga Dam

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the damage caused to potato and cereal crops in the Hilltown and Rathfriland areas, as a result of the necessary lowering of the water levels in Spelga Dam on 16 and 17 August 2008. (AQW 15/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is a regular and normal occurrence when Spelga Dam is at full capacity for it to overflow to the River Bann. During the period 16 -17 August 2008, Spelga Dam was at full capacity and the overflow system was operating as normal. In the circumstances, there was

no operational action required or taken by Northern Ireland Water to reduce the level of water in the Dam.

The damage to property and crops in the Hilltown and Rathfriland areas was therefore not caused as a result of any lowering of the water levels in Spelga Dam by Northern Ireland Water.

Incident Response Regime

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what time on Saturday 16th August 2008 did the (i) Roads Services, (ii) Northern Ireland Water, (iii) Department for Regional Development, initiate a major Incident Response Regime. (AQW 48/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

(i) Roads Service

Following the first early weather warning of heavy rain on Friday 15 August 2008, Roads Service activated its flooding emergency response plan and put all four Roads Service Divisions on emergency stand-by, particularly in areas affected by flooding earlier that week. Conference calls were also held on 15 August 2008 with other key responding organisations, including the two other drainage agencies (Northern Ireland Water and Rivers Agency), to confirm that preparations were in hand to deal with any emergency.

As the flooding situation worsened late on the afternoon of 16 August 2008, additional resources were called upon to help deal with the co-ordination of the incident. Roads Service tactical management arrangements were active in the early afternoon, soon after the volume of calls increased. The PSNI also set up a Silver Command at the Traffic Information and Control Centre, with Roads Service staff in attendance. Roads Service was also involved in two further conference calls on Saturday night.

(ii) Northern Ireland Water

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it activated its Major Incident Plan pre-emptively on 15 August 2008 in response to severe weather alerts from the Met Office. Staff and contractors were placed on high alert and a range of measures were put in train which ensured an effective response to the extensive flooding that occurred across the North, in terms of timeliness, resources, incident management and co-ordination.

By 3.30pm on 16 August an upsurge in call volumes to the Customer Relations Centre gave the first indications of possible extensive flooding. Incident management arrangements were initiated by 4.00pm and an Incident Management Team was actively responding to unfolding events from its Head Office

in Belfast by 5.00pm. These arrangements remained active over the weekend and throughout the following week. Tactical management arrangements were already active from 2.30pm from regional offices.

(iii) Department for Regional Development

I and senior staff in the Department were kept fully apprised of the situation and the measures being taken under the Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water flooding emergency response plans and by the emergency services and other agencies involved. The Department's Major Emergency Response Plan would not have provided any additional assistance on the ground and, therefore, was not invoked.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 12 September 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Sustainable Development Commission

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of an appointment of a Northern Ireland representative to the Sustainable Development Commission.

(AQW 137/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): We view the appointment of a NI Commissioner within the Sustainable Development Commission as an important part of our plans to progress the sustainable development agenda both within government and in the wider public domain. We have been in discussions with Departmental officials, and members of the Sustainable Development Commission, with regard to the recruitment of a new Commissioner, and we have taken advice on the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (OCPANI) associated processes. We are currently considering ways in which we can most effectively take this matter forward in support of our long-term plans and priorities for sustainable development.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in the implementation of measure 1.3 of the

Rural Development Programme - Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings. (AQW 38/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Farm Modernisation is well advanced - a draft list of eligible items of plant, machinery and equipment, that may attract financial support under the FMP, has been prepared and can be viewed on my Department's website.

The Farm Modernisation, Focus Farms, Benchmarking, Farm Family Options and Supply Chain Development measures of Axis 1 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13 will be delivered by a single external Delivery Agent. This has caused a delay in the opening of some of the Axis 1 measures but a single contact point will ultimately lead to a more streamlined process for farmers wishing to avail of the various opportunities presented under Axis 1. The tender to appoint the Single Delivery Agent was issued for advertisement in the EU journal on 22 August 2008 and they should be appointed in November 2008.

In relation to the Short Rotation Coppice Scheme element of the measure, since the commencement of the programme, just over 300 hectares of Short Rotation Coppice have been planted and claimed for.

Red Meat Task Force Working Groups

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made by the Red Meat Taskforce working groups; and when a report will be published. (AQW 39/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are two Red Meat Taskforce Working Groups: -

1. Calf Housing Capital Grant Working Group;
2. Wider Considerations Working Group.

The Calf Housing Capital Grant working group was established to consider the possibility of a capital grant scheme to erect specialist calf rearing units to mirror the existing system established by Blade Farming in the South West of England. This system was recommended by the authors of the Taskforce report. A sub-group visited Blade in February 2008 to assess its application to the industry in the North. At present the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) and the NI Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) are developing a business plan to establish the NI Calf Company (NICCO).

The Wider Considerations Working Group was established to explore any 'wider considerations' which may receive Government support since the Task Force report stated that 'there was no economic

case for long-term Government financial support to subsidise suckler-beef or hill sheep production.

The following 'wider considerations have been identified:-

1. Environmental wider consideration

- Consideration of increasing the use of grass / clover on beef and sheep farming systems in the North. Arising out of this consideration was the development of a Grass/Clover Initiative which includes the delivery of 10 Knowledge and Technology Transfer events across the North during the summer of 2008. These events were attended by over 500 farmers.
- Work within this area has also considered the review of the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances (LFACA) Scheme and the new NI Countryside Management Scheme where options are now available for individuals or groups of farmers to focus on special environmental measures.

2. Socio-economic consideration

- The Working Group has taken evidence from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), to consider the socio-economic factors of beef / sheep production and has concluded that there is not sufficient evidence to justify Government support.

Eradication of Scrapie in the Sheep Flock

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in the eradication of scrapie in the sheep flock. (AQW 40/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Considerable progress has been made in the eradication of scrapie from the North's sheep flock through both the NI Scrapie Plan's Ram Genotyping Scheme and the Compulsory Scrapie Flocks Scheme. Results from the Ram Genotyping Scheme show a very positive shift in the genotype profile of participating flocks towards scrapie resistance. The Compulsory Scrapie Flocks Scheme introduced in 2005 puts a two year management programme in place in flocks with a confirmed case of scrapie. Since its introduction 6 flocks have participated in the scheme and no reoccurring cases of scrapie have been identified in any of these flocks. To date this year there has only been one confirmed case of scrapie in the North.

Farmers Affected by Floods

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans there are to help those farmers that incurred losses due to recent flood damage. (AQW 59/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have great sympathy for farmers who have suffered losses as a result of the flooding. However, it has proven difficult to estimate the scale of the damage. Accordingly, I have asked my officials to carry out assessments in areas we know to have been flooded, and in particular where potatoes and cereal crops are grown. This assessment is well underway and I intend to make the results available to my Executive colleagues, so that we can jointly consider the way forward, at the earliest opportunity.

In the meantime, I would encourage farmers whose homes have been flooded to avail of the emergency assistance from the Executive, and to register any crop damage or other losses by contacting DARD on 028 663 43172.

New Entrants' Scheme

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications have been received under the New Entrants' scheme. (AQW 60/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There have been 431 applications received for the New Entrants' Scheme.

Cross-Compliance Regulations on the Loss of Hedgerows

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the impact of the cross-compliance regulations on the loss of hedgerows. (AQW 65/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is a requirement of Cross Compliance (CC) that field boundaries are not removed without prior written permission from DARD. This includes hedgerows.

Written applications for field boundary removal derogations are considered by DARD, Countryside Management Branch.

A Cross Compliance derogation for removal is only issued if DARD consider the field boundary to be of poor quality or the field size to be less than 0.4ha. This is subject to the farm business having a valid reason

for field boundary removal and the field boundary removal having minimal effect on the landscape.

Often field boundary removal derogations are issued subject to the planting of an equivalent or greater length of hedgerow to agri-environment scheme standards.

Since January 2005, DARD have refused Cross Compliance derogations for the removal of 279 field boundaries representing a total length of 24,841 metres.

In addition CC field boundary removal derogations were issued for 6379m of hedge removal subject to conditional planting of an equivalent or greater length of hedgerow.

Prior to "Cross Compliance" and its predecessor "Good Farming Practice" the NI Countryside Survey indicated a net loss of 5489km of hedgerow between 1991 and 1998.

This survey defines a hedgerow as "a line of shrubs covering more than 25% of the length of the boundary". The majority of field boundaries which are approved by DARD for removal would not meet this standard.

Up to the end of 2007, 31 Cross-Compliance breaches have been identified in respect of GAEC 5. This includes field boundary removal without permission.

Hedgerow: Total Length

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the total length of hedgerow planted as a result of the Department's grants since 1st April 2003; and (ii) the total length of hedgerow lost as a result of field boundary removal issued by Countryside Management Branch since 1st April 2003. (AQW 66/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Since 1 April 2003:

- (i) DARD's Agri-environment Scheme participants have committed to 1717 km of hedgerow restoration.
- (ii) The total length of hedgerow lost as a result of field boundary removal Cross Compliance derogations issued by Countryside Management Branch is 35km.

The Felling of Trees

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1374/08, what progress has been made on the

introduction of regulations to regulate the felling of trees. (AQW 68/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: On 19 June 2008, the Executive Committee agreed that a new Forestry Bill could be drafted to replace the Forestry Act (NI) 1953. The Forestry Bill will contain a provision to regulate the felling and regeneration of woodlands, and it is expected that formal, detailed instructions will be issued to the Office of the Legal Counsel shortly.

It is anticipated that the Bill will be ready for introduction to the Assembly in March/April 2009, most likely after the Easter recess.

Tagging of Sheep

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her policy is in relation to the tagging of sheep. (AQW 69/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My policy in relation to the tagging of sheep is clearly set out in The Sheep and Goats (Records, Identification and Movement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2005, as amended. The legislation covers all aspects of tagging from the Natal Tag, Movement Tags, Lost Tags, Total Replacement Tags and Export Tags.

All the legislative requirements, together with a short information booklet on the Sheep and Goat Identification and Movement System, are available on the DARD website at www.dardni.gov.uk

The tagging system which my Department introduced in 2005 is a single tag applied on the holding of birth, with subsequent movement tags. The arrangements are broadly in line with the system currently in operation in the South, which facilitates our valuable cross border trade in sheep.

With regard to the electronic tagging of sheep, it is an EU requirement under EU Regulation 21/2004, as amended, that all sheep must be electronically tagged from 31 December 2009.

Badger Culls

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many occasions her Department has ordered a badger cull due to tuberculosis, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 111/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department has ordered no badger culls due to bovine Tuberculosis (TB) in the last 3 years. The culling of badgers does not play a role in the existing

TB control programme, which is based on measures to limit cattle-to-cattle transmission of the disease.

Animal Welfare Consultation Exercise

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why individual consultation responses to the 2006 Animal Welfare consultation exercise were withheld under Freedom of Information legislation. (AQW 118/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The individual responses to the 2006 Animal Welfare consultation exercise were withheld under the Freedom of Information legislation because the Department deemed that this information is exempt from publication under Section 35 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 because it relates to the formulation or development of Government policy.

The decision to withhold the information requested was upheld by the Department's Appeals Officer.

Those persons who have asked for the information to be released have been assured both verbally by me at a meeting on 19 May 2008, and by my officials in writing on 24 June 2008, that a summary of the responses will be published when I have fully considered the issues raised by respondents to the 2006 consultation exercise, and I have formulated my policy taking into account the comments received.

Chicken Waste Incinerator in Glenavy

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the proposed application for a chicken waste incinerator in Glenavy meets the requirements for an article 31 public inquiry into the proposal; and if she will support such an inquiry. (AQW 148/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am not in a position to comment on Planning legislation as that is the remit of the Department of the Environment. In relation to the proposed chicken waste incinerator in Glenavy, I would support a public inquiry and am eager that the views of farmers, local residents and all those potentially affected by this development are taken into consideration.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Financial Support for Local Deaf Athletes

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial support his Department

will provide to local deaf athletes preparing for the 2009 Taipei Deaflympic Games. (AQW 62/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. To date SNI has received no enquiries in relation to the 2009 Deaflympic Games.

EDUCATION

Donaghadee High School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 pupils have enrolled in Donaghadee High School for this term. (AQW 6/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá naonúr daltaí rollaithe i mbliain 8 i Donaghadee High School don téarma seo.

Nine pupils have enrolled in year 8 in Donaghadee High School for this term.

Year 8 Pupils in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 pupils have yet to find a school place in the North Down constituency. (AQW 7/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt don Roinn go bhfuil beirt daltaí a bhfuil seoltaí acu i mBeannchar fós ag iarraidh áit scoile a fháil i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh. Níl ganntanas áiteanna ann áfach, i scoileanna taobh istigh d'achar réasúnach taistil óna mbailte.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that two pupils with Bangor addresses have yet to find a school place in the North Down constituency. However there is no shortage of places in schools within a reasonable travelling distance of their homes.

Admission to Bangor Academy

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education where the children who failed to gain admission to Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College have now been placed. (AQW 31/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt don Roinn nach raibh áit scoile ag 18 páiste ag

deireadh na bpróiseas iontrála i mí Bealtaine 2008, a chuir Bangor Academy mar thosaíocht ar a bhFoirmeacha Aistrithe. Tá beirt de na páistí seo gan áit scoile go fóill, agus d'éirigh le cúigear acu áit a fháil i Bangor Academy ina dhiaidh sin de réir mar a tháinig áiteanna chun cinn, agus tugadh áit scoile don chuid eile dóibh de réir mar a bhí áiteanna ann nó de réir mar a tháinig áiteanna chun cinn i:

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that 18 children were unplaced at the end of the admissions processes in May 2008 who had expressed a preference on their Transfer Forms for Bangor Academy. Two of these children remain unplaced, 5 children were subsequently able to obtain a placement in Bangor Academy as places became available and the remainder were placed as places were or became available in:

Movilla High School	3
Priory Integrated College	2
Donaghadee High School	4
St Columbanus' College	1
Bangor Grammar	1

Autism Training Strategy

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Education (i) what measures have been put in place to develop an Autism Training Strategy; (ii) what external agencies have been engaged to provide training; (iii) what is the assessment of the quality of external training agencies involved; and (iv) is the role of external validation and accreditation valued by her Department. (AQW 90/09)

The Minister of Education: Following publication of the Task Group Report on Autism in 2002, the Department funded the establishment of an Inter-Board Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Group to promote consistency and commonality of practice across the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

The Group's comprehensive 5 year action plan includes the following targets emanating from the Autism Training Strategy:-

- to clarify collaborative training arrangements between ASD services, voluntary and other statutory agencies and promote commonality of good practice; and
- to develop a 5 Board menu of training for parents involving voluntary and statutory agencies.

Core training in line with the strategy is now available in all ELBs, provided by each ELB's ASD Support Service. ELBs ASD Support Services also

deliver, on request, more specialised training tailored to the needs of individual schools and groups. Much of the training is provided on a 1 to 1 basis and tailored to the needs of the individual child and the staff working with that child.

Teachers have also accessed online training provided by the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP).

For the most part ELB's own specialist staff provide any necessary training. External agencies are, however, also engaged by ELBs primarily to provide higher level, more specialised training. The external agencies who have been engaged by the ELBs include:-

- Autism NI;
- Pyramid Consulting;
- National Autistic Society (NAS);
- Queen's University Belfast;
- University of Birmingham;
- Trinity College Dublin;
- University College London;
- Middletown Centre for Autism;
- Social Care/ Social Services Trusts.

Most of the external training accessed is sourced from or accredited by recognised and reputable providers. The training is assessed post attendance within the ELB in terms of the quality of the training and the effectiveness of the training in impacting long-term on the provision of services. The Inter-Board ASD Group also provides a forum to evaluate quality of training. Where an ELB has arranged a course for a large number of participants, evaluative questionnaires may be used. External organisations may also ask participants to complete evaluative questionnaires and will, if requested, share this evaluative data with the ELBs.

Is bealach é an bailíochtú agus an creidiúnú seachtrach, mar mhodh rialaithe cáilíochta, lena chinntiú go soláthraítear oiliúint ar archaighdeán, a gcuireann daoine aonair agus eagraíochtaí luach uirthi. Aithníonn an Roinn tairbhí an bhailíochtaithe agus an chreidiúnaithe seachtraigh mar an dea-chleachtas a chinntíonn luach ar airgead agus éifeachtacht maidir le seirbhísí a fheabhsú agus cuspóirí a baint amach. Tá Ionad Uathachais Choillidh Chanannáin ag dul i gcomhairle faoi láthair le heagraíochtaí seachtracha maidir le cúrsaí oiliúna a fhorbairt a dtabharfaidh ollscoileanna creidiúnú dóibh.

External validation and accreditation, as a quality control measure, provides a means of ensuring the delivery of high quality training which is valued by individuals and organisations. The benefits of external validation and accreditation is well recognised by the Department as best practice in ensuring value for money and effectiveness in improving services

and meeting objectives. Indeed Middletown Centre for Autism is currently liaising with external organisations in developing training courses which will be accredited at university level.

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils enrolled in year 8 of Bangor Grammar School live outside the North Down constituency.
(AQW 97/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag na scoileanna don Roinn go bhfuil 8 ndalta i Bangor Grammar School, 57 dalta i Bangor Academy agus 20 dalta i St Columbanus' College atá rollaithe i mbliain 8 a bhfuil cónaí orthu taobh amuigh de thoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh.

The Department has been advised by the schools that 8 pupils in Bangor Grammar School, 57 pupils in Bangor Academy and 20 pupils in St Columbanus' College who are enrolled in year 8 live outside the North Down constituency.

Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils enrolled in year 8 of Bangor Academy live outside the North Down constituency.
(AQW 98/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag na scoileanna don Roinn go bhfuil 8 ndalta i Bangor Grammar School, 57 dalta i Bangor Academy agus 20 dalta i St Columbanus' College atá rollaithe i mbliain 8 a bhfuil cónaí orthu taobh amuigh de thoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh.

The Department has been advised by the schools that 8 pupils in Bangor Grammar School, 57 pupils in Bangor Academy and 20 pupils in St Columbanus' College who are enrolled in year 8 live outside the North Down constituency.

St Columbanus College

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils enrolled in year 8 of St Columbanus College live outside the North Down constituency.
(AQW 99/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag na scoileanna don Roinn go bhfuil 8 ndalta i Bangor Grammar School, 57 dalta i Bangor Academy agus 20 dalta i St Columbanus' College atá rollaithe i mbliain 8 a bhfuil cónaí orthu taobh amuigh de thoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh.

The Department has been advised by the schools that 8 pupils in Bangor Grammar School, 57 pupils in Bangor Academy and 20 pupils in St Columbanus' College who are enrolled in year 8 live outside the North Down constituency.

British Association for Early Childhood Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to (i) address the concerns of the British Association for Early Childhood Education; and (ii) provide early education opportunities.
(AQW 108/09)

The Minister of Education: The British Association for Early Childhood Education wrote to me to express their views on the Early Years 0 – 6 Strategy which is currently being formulated by my Department. Officials taking forward this work have also met with the Association. I have invited the Association to participate in the formal consultation process on the draft Strategy scheduled to take place later in the year.

Cuirtear deiseanna luathoideachais ar fáil i réimse suíomh lena n-áirítear, Sure start, naíonraí, creiseanna, grúpaí máthar agus linbh, suímh feighlíochta agus an Clár Leathnaithe Oideachais Réamhscoile.

Early education opportunities are provided in a range of settings including, Sure start, playgroups, crèches, mother and toddler groups, childminding settings and the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme.

Needs of Young Carers in Schools

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education what improvements are needed in schools to achieve a better understanding of the needs of young carers.
(AQW 131/09)

The Minister of Education: Carers, including young carers, have been the subject of inter-Departmental attention in recent years. As part of the action plan, the Departments of Education and Health, Social Services and Public Safety have issued a DVD for schools which raises awareness of the issues confronting pupils while coping with a caring role. The DVD has been used in training and awareness seminars for school principals and other staff.

More recently, the Department has been working in partnership with all key statutory and voluntary and community sector stakeholders and interested parties to develop a 'Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme'.

The agreed Programme will focus on the post primary sector and be expected to address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis. Although the initial focus is on post-primary schools, it is hoped that the outcomes can be adapted through time for the primary and special sectors. It is expected that the resulting programme will have more general application in developing and supporting pastoral care systems in schools.

The Programme will contribute to the building of resilient emotional health and well being of pupils. It is intended to be a vehicle for providing the "glue" to implement individual policies/services for support and curriculum activities such as counselling, pastoral care systems, suicide prevention, anti-bullying, the discipline process and the healthy schools initiative in a consistent and coherent way.

Faoi láthair, tá an Roinn ag leasú na treorach do scoileanna maidir le tréadchúram chun dáta, ina

ENROLMENT FIGURES FOR POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2003/04 – 2007/08

DENI Ref	School Name	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
3210124	Ballycastle High School	363	353	344	336	337
3210133	Ballymoney High School	717	714	717	719	705
3210172	Cullybackey High School	703	703	697	673	687
3210208	Dunclug College	639	650	632	626	617
3210222	Dunluce School	481	493	488	489	476
3210233	Ballee Community High School	462	421	375	335	329
3230019	St Aloysius High School	146	126	114	94	67
3230075	Our Lady of Lourdes High School	257	238	227	202	202
3230084	St Patrick's College	412	406	411	421	415
3230227	Cross and Passion College	680	681	711	732	736
3260289	Slemish College	676	690	705	718	736
3410297	Cambridge House Grammar School	1,073	1,057	1,063	1,062	1,057
3420010	St Louis Gs	961	960	955	947	955
3420011	Ballymena Academy	1,191	1,204	1,204	1,193	1,187
3420012	Dalriada School	842	847	849	847	854
3230142	St Mary's College	275	0	0	0	0

Source: school census.

North Antrim Primary Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the (i) controlled; and (ii) maintained, primary schools in the North Antrim constituency; and to detail which of these schools teach any level of Irish. (AQW 155/09)

sainaitnítear roinnt cúiseanna struis do pháistí lena n-áirítear cúiseanna struis do chúramóirí óga mar aon le heolas a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí.

The Department is currently updating its pastoral care guidance for schools, in which a number of stressors on children including those of young carers are identified along with signposting information for teachers.

North Antrim Post-Primary School Numbers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the number of pupils that attended each post-primary school in North Antrim in each of the last five years.

(AQW 147/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

ENROLMENT FIGURES FOR POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2003/04 – 2007/08

The Minister of Education: Tá liosta de na

bunscoileanna rialaithe agus faoi chothabháil i dtoghcheantar Aontroim Thuaidh le feiceáil thíos. Cé go dtugann cuid mhór bunscoileanna in Aontroim Thuaidh agus ar fud an tuaiscirt deis dá ndaltaí Gaeilge a fhoghlaim chomh maith le roinnt teangacha eile, is iad na scoileanna féin a dhéanann an cinneadh

leis seo a dhéanamh agus ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas sin.

A list of controlled and maintained primary schools in the NA constituency is provided below. While many primary schools in North Antrim and across the north offer their pupils an opportunity to learn Irish, and indeed many other languages, the decision to do this is one for individual schools and information is not held by my Department. We do, however, collect details of those schools that are participating in my primary languages programme, which provides peripatetic support for primary schools that wish to deliver certain languages, including Irish. The schools that have signed up to teach and learn Irish to date through this programme in the North Antrim constituency are Barnish PS, St Mary's Gortaclea, and St Patrick's Loughguile.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY 2007/08.

Longstone Primary School	Controlled
Carrowreagh Primary School	Controlled
Garryduff Primary School	Controlled
Buick Memorial Primary School	Controlled
Dunseverick Primary School	Controlled
Kirkinriola Primary School	Controlled
Harryville Primary School	Controlled
Lislagan Primary School	Controlled
Gracehill Primary School	Controlled
Landhead Primary School	Controlled
Eden Primary School	Controlled
Straidbilly Primary School	Controlled
Moorfields Primary School	Controlled
Carnaghts Primary School	Controlled
The Diamond Primary School	Controlled
Clough Primary School	Controlled
Kells & Connor Primary School	Controlled
The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Primary School	Controlled
Ballymoney Primary School	Controlled
Bushmills Primary School	Controlled
Ballymena Primary School	Controlled
Kilmoyle Primary School	Controlled
Fourtowns Primary School	Controlled
Knockahollet Primary School	Controlled
Broughshane Primary School	Controlled
Ballykeel Primary School	Controlled

Camphill Primary School	Controlled
Leaney Primary School	Controlled
Armoy Primary School	Controlled
Dunclug Primary School	Controlled
Rasharkin Primary School	Controlled
Carniny Primary School	Controlled
Ballee Primary School	Controlled
Cloughmills Primary School	Controlled
Portglenone Primary School	Controlled
Hazelbank Primary School	Controlled
Balnamore Primary School	Controlled
Bushvalley Primary School	Controlled
Millquarter Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Rathlin	Catholic Maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone	Catholic Maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel	Catholic Maintained
Glenann Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Olcan's Primary School, Armoy	Catholic Maintained
Barnish Primary School	Catholic Maintained
Braid Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Patrick's Primary School, Aughtercloney	Catholic Maintained
St Brigid's Primary School, Clogh Mills	Catholic Maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Glenariff	Catholic Maintained
St Anne's Primary School	Catholic Maintained
Glenravel Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Patrick's Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Brigid's Primary School, Larne	Catholic Maintained
St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill	Catholic Maintained
St Patrick's Primary School, Glenariff	Catholic Maintained
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballymoney	Catholic Maintained
St Joseph's Primary School, Dunloy	Catholic Maintained
St Ciaran's Primary School, Glendun	Catholic Maintained
St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Colmcille's Primary School	Catholic Maintained
St Brigid's Primary School	Catholic Maintained
Bunscoil An Chastil	Other Maintained

Source: school census

Second Languages in Primary Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what percentage of primary schools in the (i) maintained sector; and (ii) controlled sector, teach a second language; and what plans she has to increase these figures. (AQW 157/09)

The Minister of Education: My department does not hold the statistical information sought, as modern foreign languages are not compulsory at primary level.

Cuireann foghlaim teanga ag aois luath le sult agus le scileanna teanga na bpáistí, agus beidh mé ag déanamh macnamh ar sholáthar teanga i mbunscoileanna i gcomhthéacs chur chuige straitéisigh i leith teangacha ag gach leibhéal. Tá réimse dea-chleachtas i mbunscoileanna agus thug mé isteach Clár Teangacha Bunscoile sa scoilbhliain 2007/08.

Learning a language from an early age benefits pupils' enjoyment and language skills, and I will be considering primary language provision in the context of a strategic approach to languages at all levels. There is a range of good practice in primary schools and I introduced the Primary Languages Programme in the 2007/08 school year. This provides peripatetic support for primary schools wishing to deliver Spanish and Irish, and is expanding, including looking at support for newcomer languages. To date 284 primary schools have been allocated tutors. Taken together, the strategic approach, existing good practice, and programme expansion will allow us to build provision and support more primary schools in teaching a second language.

Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many surplus year 9 places there are in Bangor Academy. (AQW 183/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2008/09 tá líon faofa iontrála de 242 agus líon faofa rollaithe de 1420 ag Bangor Academy. Cuireadh in iúl don Roinn ar 9 Meán Fómhair 2008 go bhfuil a líon iomlán údaraithe daltaí glactha isteach ag an scoil i mBliain 8, ach go bhfuil spás aici go fóill le 50 dalta a ghlacadh isteach i mbliainghrúpaí eile.

For 2008/09 Bangor Academy has an approved admissions number of 242 and an approved enrolment number of 1420. The position notified to the Department on 9 September 2008 is that the school has admitted its full authorised complement of Year 8 pupils, but still has room to admit up to 50 pupils within other year groups. It is not possible to specify a number of surplus places for Years 9-12 because there is no set upper limit in relation to individual year groups, other than Year 8 which is capped by the admissions

number. All post-primary schools have discretion to adjust numbers across year groups above Year 8 provided they remain within their overall approved enrolment number, and adhere to Departmental guidance on class sizes in practical subjects.

Teaching Unions

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education what contact, including correspondence and meetings, she has had with teaching unions, since taking office in May 2007. (AQW 190/09)

The Minister of Education: Since taking up office in May 2007 I have met the teacher unions on 9 occasions and have attended 7 teacher Union Conferences.

All correspondence received in my office is recorded under the individual's name rather than the organisation they are associated with and therefore it is not possible to identify the exact number of correspondence in such a short timescale.

Fuair mé 18 cás comhfhreagrais ó Cheardchumann na Múinteoirí ar tugadh aghaidh orthu i gcomhar a chéile.

I have received 18 correspondence cases which were addressed collectively from the Teacher Unions.

Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many surplus year 10 places there are in Bangor Academy. (AQW 191/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2008/09 tá líon faofa iontrála de 242 agus líon faofa rollaithe de 1420 ag Bangor Academy. Cuireadh in iúl don Roinn ar 9 Meán Fómhair 2008 go bhfuil a líon iomlán údaraithe daltaí glactha isteach ag an scoil i mBliain 8, ach go bhfuil spás aici go fóill le 50 dalta a ghlacadh isteach i mbliainghrúpaí eile.

For 2008/09 Bangor Academy has an approved admissions number of 242 and an approved enrolment number of 1420. The position notified to the Department on 9 September 2008 is that the school has admitted its full authorised complement of Year 8 pupils, but still has room to admit up to 50 pupils within other year groups. It is not possible to specify a number of surplus places for Years 9-12 because there is no set upper limit in relation to individual year groups, other than Year 8 which is capped by the admissions number. All post-primary schools have discretion to adjust numbers across year groups above Year 8 provided they remain within their overall approved

enrolment number, and adhere to Departmental guidance on class sizes in practical subjects.

Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many surplus year 11 places there are in Bangor Academy. (AQW 192/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2008/09 tá líon faofa iontrála de 242 agus líon faofa rollaithe de 1420 ag Bangor Academy. Cuireadh in iúl don Roinn ar 9 Meán Fómhair 2008 go bhfuil a líon iomlán údaraithe daltaí glactha isteach ag an scoil i mBliain 8, ach go bhfuil spás aici go fóill le 50 dalta a ghlacadh isteach i mbliainghrúpaí eile.

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Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many surplus year 12 places there are in Bangor Academy. (AQW 193/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2008/09 tá líon faofa iontrála de 242 agus líon faofa rollaithe de 1420 ag Bangor Academy. Cuireadh in iúl don Roinn ar 9 Meán Fómhair 2008 go bhfuil a líon iomlán údaraithe daltaí glactha isteach ag an scoil i mBliain 8, ach go bhfuil spás aici go fóill le 50 dalta a ghlacadh isteach i mbliainghrúpaí eile.

For 2008/09 Bangor Academy has an approved admissions number of 242 and an approved enrolment number of 1420. The position notified to the Department on 9 September 2008 is that the school has admitted its full authorised complement of Year 8 pupils, but still has room to admit up to 50 pupils within other year groups. It is not possible to specify a number of surplus places for Years 9-12 because there is no set upper limit in relation to individual year groups, other than Year 8 which is capped by the admissions number. All post-primary schools have discretion to

adjust numbers across year groups above Year 8 provided they remain within their overall approved enrolment number, and adhere to Departmental guidance on class sizes in practical subjects.

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many surplus places there are for each year in Bangor Grammar. (AQW 194/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2008/09 tá líon faofa iontrála de 125 agus líon faofa rollaithe de 910 ag Bangor Grammar School. Cuireadh in iúl don Roinn ar 10 Meán Fómhair 2008 go bhfuil a líon iomlán údaraithe daltaí glactha isteach ag an scoil i mBliain 8, ach go bhfuil spás aici go fóill le 41 dalta a ghlacadh isteach i mbliainghrúpaí eile.

For 2008/09 Bangor Grammar School has an approved admissions number of 125 and an approved enrolment number of 910. The position notified to the Department on 10 September 2008 is that the school has admitted its full authorised complement of Year 8 pupils, but still has room to admit up to 41 pupils within other year groups. It is not possible to specify a number of surplus places for Years 9-12 because there is no set upper limit in relation to individual year groups, other than Year 8 which is capped by the admissions number. All post-primary schools have discretion to adjust numbers across year groups above Year 8 provided they remain within their overall approved enrolment number, and adhere to Departmental guidance on class sizes in practical subjects.

Secondary Level Students

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education if secondary level students in Northern Ireland were the most successful in GCSE and 'A' level results in the United Kingdom. (AQW 263/09)

The Minister of Education: Baineann na sonraí is deireanaí do leibhéal na ndaltaí i dtuaisceart na hÉireann leis an bhliain acadúil 2006/07.

The latest pupil level data for the north of Ireland relates to the 2006/07 academic year.

	North of Ireland	England	Wales
Percentage of pupils in the final year of an A level course achieving 2 or more A levels (or equivalent) at grades A-E	98	96	94

	North of Ireland	England	Wales
Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A*-C	64	62	54

Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER)

Data for Scotland have not been included, due to differences in the education system between Scotland and the other regions.

The latest data at entries level for the north of Ireland relates to the 2007/08 academic year.

The table opposite shows overall performance in all GCSE entries in England, Wales and the north of Ireland.

	North of Ireland	England	Wales
%A*	9	7	6
%A*-A	26	21	19
%A*-C	75	66	65
%A*-G	98	98	98
Total entries	192,360	5,166,628	310,089

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

The table below shows overall performance in all A level entries in England, Wales and the north of Ireland.

	North of Ireland	England	Wales
%A	35	26	24
%A-B	64	50	51
%A-C	84	73	76
%A-E	98	97	98
Total entries	30,020	760,881	36,836

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Expansion of the University of Ulster Magee Campus

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in the expansion of the University of Ulster Magee Campus. (AQW 58/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am advised by the University that expansion of a broad range of activity at the Magee

Campus continues to be a key priority. Having secured £20m to establish the Intelligent Systems Research Centre, the University is in the process of securing premises to house the Centre and allow for the planned expansion in this area which concentrates on research and doctoral level education.

Additionally, following successful accreditation by the Law Society, the University is this year introducing postgraduate professional legal education for those wishing to qualify as solicitors. This is the first time ever that such training has been provided outside of Belfast and the University advises that it has recruited successfully to the initiative, both in terms of additional staff and the first student intake. This complements the work of the University's undergraduate teaching in law at the Magee Campus.

Within the current physical estate the University advises that there are limited opportunities for future development and it continues to be involved in discussions about the site currently occupied by the Foyle and Londonderry College. The University is also working in active partnership with the Northern Ireland Science Park to expand high technology company start-up and technology transfer activity, and is a central partner in the Academic Business and Clinical facility at Altnagelvin Hospital. Research, doctoral study, and technology transfer are important parts of a strong University's overall portfolio of activities and considerable progress is being made in expanding this aspect of the University's work at the Magee Campus.

Essential Skills Courses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to enhance the figure of 12,000 adults completing courses to improve reading, writing and maths skills. (AQW 83/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Since the launch of the Strategy in 2002, there have been 85,000 enrolments on Essential Skills courses with over 39,000 qualifications achieved. The Department has set a challenging PSA target to support 42,000 adult learners to achieve an Essential Skills qualification by March 2011, including 4,000 learners in the new Essential Skill of ICT.

The focus of the Strategy over the next three years will be to target the most disadvantaged people and to secure greater employer engagement. This will be achieved through working closely with Further Education colleges and their extensive network of outcentres, to reach those adults most in need in local communities. In the workplace, there will be increased collaboration with Sector Skills Councils and support

for Union Learning Fund projects to help raise the skills levels of the current workforce.

A new promotional campaign has just been launched which encourages adults to 'get the know how' and presents Essential Skills as the way to get more out of life, either at home or at work.

Training for Success Programme

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many 16-18 year olds from the Village area of South Belfast have completed the Training for Success programme delivered by A4E. (AQW 89/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The first recruitment for Training for Success began on 3rd September 2007, and is in general designed to be a 52 week provision. As such, the Department is only now beginning to receive details of the first cohort of participants who have completed. The provision is also operated on a continuous basis, meaning that participants can enrol at any stage during the year. Consequently, not all participants would have begun the provision in September 2007, and will therefore not have reached the completion stage.

At present, A4E has ten participants on the programme, four of whom are aged between 16 and 18 and still undertaking the Skills for Work (Level 1) provision with A4E. None has completed.

Stranmillis and St Mary's Student Numbers

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students were enrolled in (i) Stranmillis University College; and (ii) St Mary's University College, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 128/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of students enrolled in (i) Stranmillis University College; and (ii) St Mary's University College, in each of the last 3 years are shown in the table below:

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Stranmillis	1,460	1,350	1,325
St Mary's	1,135	1,120	1,130

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. The latest available data are for 2006/07.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy Heating Systems

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to introduce grants for renewable energy heating systems for new and existing homes. (AQW 30/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Any future support for a household renewable energy grant scheme will need to take into account changing market conditions, value for money and the effect on competitiveness. The Reconnect programme, which ended on 31 March 2008, is currently being evaluated and this is scheduled to be completed by November 2008.

Government continues to support renewable energy micro-generation through:

- the reduction in the standard VAT rate to 5%;
- grants from the UK wide Low Carbon Building Programme; and
- the availability of Renewable Obligation Certificates.

Current Building Regulations (November 2006) set standards that reduce energy usage in new buildings, subject to these regulations, by up to 40% on previous standards, with a corresponding 40% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

The Minister for Finance & Personnel, Nigel Dodds, has endorsed a further amendment of the building regulations to further reduce carbon emissions from buildings to which the regulations apply by an additional 25% by 2010, rising to 44% by 2013.

Chicken Waste Incinerator in Glenavy

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the substantial investment requested to develop a chicken waste incinerator in Glenavy, if the application proposed meets the requirements for an article 31 public inquiry into the proposal; and if she will support such an inquiry. (AQW 150/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: An application for planning permission in respect of this project was submitted on the 4th of June 2008. The determination as to whether this application meets the requirements for an article 31 public enquiry is the responsibility of the Planning Service of the Department of the Environment.

ENVIRONMENT

Breach of a Tree Preservation Order

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the breach of a Tree Preservation Order in the Shandon Park area of Belfast in July 2008; and what action his Department is taking in relation to this.

(AQW 33/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):

A possible breach of a TPO on protected trees on a site at 135 Shandon Park was reported to my Department on 10 July 2008. Following several visits to the site, my Planning officials have determined that the removal of four protected trees, as well as works to other trees protected by the Order does constitute a breach of the TPO. An enforcement investigation is therefore ongoing. While replacement planting proposals are currently under consideration, my Department is also seeking legal advice on the potential for a prosecution in this case.

Breach of a Tree Preservation Order

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the recent breaches of Tree Preservation Orders, what measures he proposes to strengthen the legislation.

(AQW 35/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning (Amendment) (NI) Order 2003 introduced new legislative changes which provide my Department with greater powers to protect trees including the power to make a provisional Tree Preservation Order (TPO) with immediate effect, enhanced enforcement powers to require replacement of trees removed without consent and higher fines for breaches of TPOs. In particular, trees within a Conservation Area are now afforded the same protection as if a TPO was in place. In this regard, I have no proposals to introduce any further legislative measures at present.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Emergency Incident Line

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel will the Executive take action to set-up a sufficiently manned single emergency telephone number to deal with localised emergencies such as flooding.

(AQW 52/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): The Programme for Government contains a December 2008 target for implementation of a single number to improve access to selected government services and this programme of work includes the provision of an incident line to deal with local emergencies. The initial focus for the incident line is to deal with calls in relation to flooding.

My department is working closely with the flooding agencies and our commercial partner to establish this facility. Subject to successful testing, the aim is to have the incident line service for flooding in place by the end of October 2008 which is in advance of the December target.

This communications facility will improve the way in which members of the public can make contact about flooding and will help the Government's flood agencies in organising their response.

Peace III Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if Peace III funding can be used to fund community workers' salaries.

(AQW 55/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Salaries are deemed eligible for posts where they contribute to the provision of services that relate to the implementation of an operation and where that operation contributes to the overall Programme's aims and objectives.

Therefore PEACE III funds can be used to fund community workers' salaries.

Tax Exemption for Residents of Rathlin Island

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is his assessment of the benefit to the economy of Rathlin Island if tax exemption for residents is introduced for residents.

(AQW 146/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not made an assessment of this specific issue since the Executive has no responsibility for taxation policy.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Portadown Golf Club Drainage Works

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what drainage works, including drain

cleaning, has taken place within the vicinity of Portadown Golf Club. (AQW 1/09)

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr C Murphy): With regard to AQW 1/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that all of the road gullies in the vicinity of the golf club on the Gilford Road, Portadown, were cleaned and flushed on 10 December 2007.

During the particularly severe weather conditions, on Saturday 16 August 2008, this location was inspected by Roads Service staff. There was no flooding on the road at that time. However, there was widespread flooding of lands within the Bann river basin adjacent to the road.

There had been road flooding at this location, on a previous occasion, which was caused by debris obstructing a grid cover on a culvert crossing the road. This resulted in the stream overflowing onto the road. The grid was cleared by the Rivers Agency at that time.

The road gullies on the Gilford Road in the vicinity of the golf club were inspected on Tuesday 2 September 2008 and are clear and functioning.

I have been advised by NI Water that it has a gravity sewer and foul pumping main in the vicinity of Portadown Golf Club. During last year NI Water has cleared seven blockages in the sewers at the Gilford Road, Portadown. NI Water has also undertaken regular scheduled maintenance to ensure that the infrastructure continues to operate effectively and to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding.

In relation to AQW 2/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that road gullies in the towns of Banbridge, Portadown and Lurgan and the villages of Waringstown and Donaghcloney are on Roads Service's schedule for twice yearly cleaning. This includes clearing any blockages.

Within the Craigavon Borough Council area, a contractor is employed continuously throughout the year for the sole purpose of cleaning road gullies.

I have been advised by NI Water that regular scheduled maintenance is undertaken on the sewerage infrastructure, to ensure that it operates effectively and to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding. When a sewer blockage does occur, NI Water aims to clear the public sewer within 24 hours of a report being received. As records of the number of sewer blockages cleared do not provide a breakdown specifically for the Banbridge, Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney areas, it is not possible to provide the information requested.

In regard to AQW 3/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that Maintenance works in the Banbridge area are undertaken from Corbet Depot, where there is a gully emptier which can also be used to pump out water. Maintenance work in Portadown,

Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney are undertaken by Roads Service's staff based at Carn Depot in Craigavon. Carn Depot currently has a three inch pump that is fully operational and a gully emptier which can be used to pump water.

Roads Service would not have any routine need for pumps, given the nature of works that it carries out day-to-day. However, it has contract arrangements for the hire of plant and would draw on these when necessary.

I have been advised by NI Water that it operates a number of wastewater pumping stations in the Banbridge, Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney areas and all of these facilities operated normally during the recent heavy rainfall. NI Water does not own large mobile pumping equipment suitable for dealing with flood water. Its sewerage maintenance contractors have access to pumping equipment and tankers, but these are considered more effective for removing wastewater from the sewerage system.

Drainage Works

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development when drains have been (i) checked; (ii) cleaned; and (iii) unblocked, in the (a) Banbridge; (b) Portadown; (c) Lurgan; (d) Waringstown; and (e) Donaghcloney areas, in the last 12 months. (AQW 2/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 1/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that all of the road gullies in the vicinity of the golf club on the Gilford Road, Portadown, were cleaned and flushed on 10 December 2007.

During the particularly severe weather conditions, on Saturday 16 August 2008, this location was inspected by Roads Service staff. There was no flooding on the road at that time. However, there was widespread flooding of lands within the Bann river basin adjacent to the road.

There had been road flooding at this location, on a previous occasion, which was caused by debris obstructing a grid cover on a culvert crossing the road. This resulted in the stream overflowing onto the road. The grid was cleared by the Rivers Agency at that time.

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infrastructure continues to operate effectively and to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding.

In relation to AQW 2/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that road gullies in the towns of Banbridge, Portadown and Lurgan and the villages of Waringstown and Donaghcloney are on Roads Service's schedule for twice yearly cleaning. This includes clearing any blockages.

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In regard to AQW 3/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that Maintenance works in the Banbridge area are undertaken from Corbet Depot, where there is a gully emptier which can also be used to pump out water. Maintenance work in Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney are undertaken by Roads Service's staff based at Carn Depot in Craigavon. Carn Depot currently has a three inch pump that is fully operational and a gully emptier which can be used to pump water.

Roads Service would not have any routine need for pumps, given the nature of works that it carries out day-to-day. However, it has contract arrangements for the hire of plant and would draw on these when necessary.

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Water Pumps

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development how many water pumps (i) are owned by Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water; and (ii) are currently in working order, in the (a) Banbridge;

(b) Portadown; (c) Lurgan; (d) Waringstown; and (e) Donaghcloney areas. (AQW 3/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 1/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that all of the road gullies in the vicinity of the golf club on the Gilford Road, Portadown, were cleaned and flushed on 10 December 2007.

During the particularly severe weather conditions, on Saturday 16 August 2008, this location was inspected by Roads Service staff. There was no flooding on the road at that time. However, there was widespread flooding of lands within the Bann river basin adjacent to the road.

There had been road flooding at this location, on a previous occasion, which was caused by debris obstructing a grid cover on a culvert crossing the road. This resulted in the stream overflowing onto the road. The grid was cleared by the Rivers Agency at that time.

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Within the Craigavon Borough Council area, a contractor is employed continuously throughout the year for the sole purpose of cleaning road gullies.

I have been advised by NI Water that regular scheduled maintenance is undertaken on the sewerage infrastructure, to ensure that it operates effectively and to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding. When a sewer blockage does occur, NI Water aims to clear the public sewer within 24 hours of a report being received. As records of the number of sewer blockages cleared do not provide a breakdown specifically for the Banbridge, Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney areas, it is not possible to provide the information requested.

In regard to AQW 3/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that Maintenance works in the Banbridge area are undertaken from Corbet Depot, where there is a gully emptier which can also be used to pump out water. Maintenance work in Portadown,

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I have been advised by NI Water that it operates a number of wastewater pumping stations in the Banbridge, Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney areas and all of these facilities operated normally during the recent heavy rainfall. NI Water does not own large mobile pumping equipment suitable for dealing with flood water. Its sewerage maintenance contractors have access to pumping equipment and tankers, but these are considered more effective for removing wastewater from the sewerage system.

North Down Flooding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development in what areas in the North Down constituency flooding was reported during the recent heavy rain. (AQW 5/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that during the heavy rainfall experienced on the 16 and 17 August 2008, flooding was reported in the North Down area at Woodlands in Holywood, Bridge Road in Helen's Bay, and in Bangor at Dixon Park, Brunswick Road/Osborne Drive, Rathmore Ave, Maxwell Road and Princetown Road/Glenbank.

I have also been advised by Northern Ireland Water that 32 incidents of flooding were reported to them in the North Down area, 22 in the Bangor area, 9 in Holywood and 1 in Donaghadee.

Public Transport in Glengormley

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what proportion of public transport in the Glengormley area can be accessed by people with disabilities; and what plans he has to increase the provision of this type of service. (AQW 28/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Both Metro and Ulsterbus services operate in the Glengormley area. Of these 98% of Metro buses are fully accessible and 50% of Ulsterbus vehicles are accessible. Translink plans to increase the number of

accessible vehicles in line with the targets contained in the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Door-to-Door transport services are also available in the Glengormley area and all the vehicles used to provide these services are fully accessible.

Water Treatment Facilities Project, Toomebridge

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the land acquisition for the water treatment facilities project on the Raughery Road, Toomebridge. (AQW 29/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the proposed acquisition of land at Roguery Road for a wastewater pumping station is part of a wider project to upgrade wastewater treatment facilities for Toomebridge.

Negotiations with the landowner for acquisition of the land are close to completion. However, acquisition of the land is dependant on the design requirements of the overall project which are yet to be finalised.

Westlink Underpass at Broadway Roundabout

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what surveys have been carried out on the Westlink underpass at Broadway roundabout following the flooding on Saturday 16th August 2008, and by whom; and to detail the results of those investigations and any recommended remedial actions. (AQW 50/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 50/09, a number of surveys and inspections were carried out on Broadway Underpass before it was re-opened to traffic on the morning of Tuesday 19 August.

Roads Service has advised that the M1/Westlink contractor, Highway Management Construction (HMC), installed a number of monitoring points to check for movement of the reinforced concrete floor slab of the underpass. HMC has been checking and continues to check the position of these monitoring points at regular intervals and no movement has been identified in the floor slab.

HMC has cleaned and undertaken visual inspections of the road drainage system. They have also undertaken visual inspections of all motorway communications and electrical ducts associated with Broadway Underpass. Specialist electrical sub contractors, GR White, have inspected the underpass lighting system.

HMC has also removed a number of facing blocks from the walls of the underpass which has allowed them to carry out a visual inspection for any trapped water behind the front face of the wall. No trapped water has been found.

Since the flooding, HMC has raised the bank of the Clowney Water on the approach to the culvert at Broadway and has increased its inspection regime of the inlet grill and river level of the Clowney Water.

You may be aware that Roads Service has already appointed an independent consultant, Amey, to carry out a detailed investigation into the circumstances surrounding the flooding of the subject underpass. This investigation will establish the reasons why the underpass flooded and will recommend longer term mitigation measures to prevent this from happening in the future.

With regard to AQW 51/09, in which you requested details of the costs for draining, surveys and repairs to the underpass, I should explain that the responsibility for the works at this stage rests with the Design, Build, Finance and Operate Company. Roads Service has advised that a detailed breakdown of costs is not presently available. At this stage I can advise that HMC has indicated that the clean up operation to remove water from the Broadway Underpass involved approximately 3000 man hours.

Westlink Underpass at Broadway Roundabout

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the costs of (i) draining, (ii) surveys and repairs required, following the flooding of the Westlink underpass at the Broadway roundabout on Saturday 16th August 2008. (AQW 51/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 50/09, a number of surveys and inspections were carried out on Broadway Underpass before it was re-opened to traffic on the morning of Tuesday 19 August.

Roads Service has advised that the M1/Westlink contractor, Highway Management Construction (HMC), installed a number of monitoring points to check for movement of the reinforced concrete floor slab of the underpass. HMC has been checking and continues to check the position of these monitoring points at regular intervals and no movement has been identified in the floor slab.

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Translink Buses

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the figures for hiring buses by Translink to private bodies or individuals, for each of the last three years. (AQW 54/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been informed by Translink that it does not hold separate figures for the hire of buses by private bodies or individuals. The number of occasions when Translink buses were privately hired, in each of the last three years, is as follows:-

Year ending June 2006	14,559
Year ending June 2007	12, 890
Year ending June 2008	11,611

Vandalism of Roads Infrastructure in Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps his Department is taking to

tackle vandalising of the road infrastructure in the Brownlow area of Craigavon. (AQW 80/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Following any act of vandalism on roads infrastructure, such as the recent burning of vehicles that occurred in the Brownlow area of Craigavon, my Department's Roads Service will carry out an inspection of the area to determine the extent of any structural damage caused to the road. Where the damage caused is considered to present a hazard to the travelling public, repairs are carried out as soon as possible.

However, the decision on timing for follow-up action is made at a local level, so that it can be best determined when it is safe for Roads Service personnel to carry out the necessary repairs. The reason is that vehicles and staff can often become the targets for vandalism and intimidation.

When the police have been successful in bringing those responsible for vandalism to roads infrastructure to the courts, Roads Service will provide details of any damage, including the cost of repairs, for the court to consider for the purpose of recouping the costs.

Traffic Calming in Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development for a timescale for the introduction of traffic calming on the Circular Road, Newtownards. (AQW 87/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

An assessment for the provision of traffic calming measures at Circular Road, Newtownards should be complete by the end of September 2008. The results of the assessment will determine whether Circular Road can be considered for inclusion in the 2009/10 traffic calming programme for the Ards Council area. My Department's Roads Service will write to you when the assessment has been completed.

However, I should advise that a further assessment will be required upon completion of the new A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor Road, currently being constructed in association with Castlebawn Development Ltd, as there may be a shift in traffic patterns towards the new road.

Annaghmore Winter Gritting Schedule

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to include the Moss Road, Annaghmore, in the gritting schedule this winter, given the recent housing developments along the road. (AQW 96/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Moss Road, Annaghmore had not previously met the criteria for inclusion on the Winter Gritting Schedule.

However, due to the possible increase in traffic on the road, as a result of additional housing development, Roads Service will assess the present traffic levels to ascertain if the road would now meet the necessary criteria.

I have asked that the Southern Division Roads Manager to write to you in due course to advise you of the outcome of this assessment.

Establishment of a Floods Authority

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department will give urgent consideration to the establishment of a Floods Authority to co-ordinate a cross-agency approach to flood emergencies. (AQW 139/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Responsibility for the drainage infrastructure is shared between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) through the 3 main drainage organisations, namely Roads Service, NI Water and Rivers Agency. DARD Rivers Agency has taken the lead in the formulation of procedures for the liaison and co-ordination of the emergency response of the 3 drainage organisations for localised flooding events. The result of this process has been the production of Best Practice Guidelines and the Flooding Hotspot list.

There are already inter-agency arrangements in place to deal with flooding emergencies, and following the widespread flooding in June 2007 it was recognised that in more severe conditions, where a multi-agency response is required (i.e. more than the 3 main drainage organisations), wider co-ordination is necessary. This co-ordination can best be achieved by councils through the local resilience fora to ensure integration with the regional structures and coordination of a local response. The Belfast Resilience Forum is already established, and others are currently being developed.

Roads Service Sandbags Numbers

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development how many sandbags Roads Service have in the (i) Banbridge; (ii) Portadown; (iii) Lurgan; (iv) Waringstown; and (v) Donaghadee areas. (AQW 141/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service maintains stock levels of sandbags within its maintenance depots for use during flooding incidents.

The Banbridge area is covered by Roads Service's Corbet depot, while Portadown, Lurgan, Waringstown and Donaghcloney are covered by the Craigavon depot at Carn. Each of these depot's retains a stock level of 3000 sandbags, with 1000 filled ready for immediate use. Resources are available to fill and replenish stocks as necessary.

Arrangements also exist with those Agencies that deal with flooding emergencies, to draw on additional stocks when necessary.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Proposed Land Sale at Churchill, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why there was no community consultation in relation to the proposed land sale at Churchill, Bangor, by the Housing Executive. (AQW 8/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The Housing Executive continually reviews its sites of undeveloped land to identify their potential future use for social housing. In considering this particular site, the Housing Executive took the view that it would be unsuitable for social housing and declared it surplus to requirements. Community consultation on this alone would be inappropriate.

However, any potential purchaser would need to ensure that all necessary planning approvals could be obtained for the future development of this site. This would involve consultation where local residents, at that stage, would have the opportunity to comment on any proposals.

Local Legislation

Ms Ni Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what local legislation the Minister intends to bring forward for consideration by the Assembly. (AQW 21/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The planning of the legislative programme is difficult given the uncertainty around the timing of Executive meetings. Nevertheless, I intend to bring forward legislation relating to Pensions and Housing to the Assembly for consideration in the 2008/09 session. I will also be bringing forward a programme of subordinate legislation. It is not possible to be definitive on the contents of that programme at this point.

Provision of Social and Affordable Housing

Ms Ni Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide details of new guidelines that will be used in the procurement process for the provision of social and affordable housing.

(AQW 23/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has just developed a new Procurement Strategy for the provision of social housing. It will be formally launched within the next few weeks.

Housing Executive Waiting List

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently on the Housing Executive waiting list with Saintfield as one of their areas of choice; and what the (i) highest number of points; (ii) lowest number of points; and (iii) the average number of points is, for these applicants. (AQW 25/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently 111 applicants on the waiting list for social housing who have expressed an interest in Saintfield as one of their areas of choice. The highest number of points gained by an applicant is 310 and the lowest number of points gained by an applicant is 0.

The average number of points gained, per application expressing a preference for housing within the Saintfield area, is 51.

Renovation Work at Millburn Estate in Coleraine

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development when renovation work on the retirement dwellings at Millburn Estate in Coleraine will begin. (AQW 47/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Work to renovate these homes in the Millburn Estate is planned to commence in March 2009. A tender for this scheme will be issued later this month.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people receive Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 53/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There were 174,367 people receiving Disability Living Allowance in Northern Ireland at the date of extract, 9 August 2008. The figure shown reflects the number

of customers where an amount of Disability Living Allowance is in payment.

Social Housing for the Central Craigavon Area

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans for social housing for the Craigavon Central area of Upper Bann, for each of the next five years. (AQW 77/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Draft Social Housing Development Programme for 2008/09 – 2012/13 for the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency (which includes the Central Craigavon area) includes 28 schemes with 402 units programmed for completion in the next five years, broken down as follows:-

2008/09	6 schemes	108 units
2009/10	6 schemes	75 units
2010/11	7 schemes	91 units
2011/12	5 schemes	66 units
2012/13	4 schemes	62 units

Vandalism and Graffiti in the Central Craigavon Area

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the work carried out by her Department to tackle (i) vandalism and (ii) graffiti in each of the estates in the central Craigavon area of Upper Bann. (AQW 79/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive continues to address all forms of blight where it exists within its estates, including vandalism and graffiti, through its maintenance and improvement programmes. In the Brownlow area during the last financial year (in addition to routine maintenance works) a total of £6,296 was spent on vandalism repairs and £884 was spent on graffiti removal.

Removal of Derelict Houses in Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps her Department has taken to complete the removal of derelict houses in the Craigavon Central area of Upper Bann. (AQW 81/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 1985, 1615 derelict properties have been demolished in the Brownlow area. In October 2004 a major review of the

Brownlow strategy was undertaken with a view to re-energising the housing market and removing the blight of vacant or derelict properties. Since then £3.5m has been invested in this area.

Community Heating Schemes

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if the Fuel Poverty Taskforce will consider the potential benefits of introducing community heating schemes. (AQW 124/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Fuel Poverty Task Force was set up primarily with the aim of producing short term recommendations which could be put in place to help those people in greatest need this winter. Community heating schemes are a longer-term measure and would not be a central consideration in this context.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 19 September 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Fair Employment Monitoring

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the implications for the current approach to Fair Employment monitoring, arising out of the judgement of the European Court on Human Rights in the *Alexandridis v. Greece* case (2008), regarding the right not to disclose a religious identity. (AQW 116/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The *Alexandridis* case dealt with a specific issue within the Greek legal system and the decision of the European Court of Human Rights was highly dependent on the individual facts of the case. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), like most Convention Articles, does not confer absolute rights. If there is any interference with such rights, the Court will look for a clear legal basis and procedures for the interference, including whether the interference seeks to achieve a legitimate aim such as a pressing social need and whether the interference is a proportionate response to achieving the legitimate aim.

Monitoring the community background of the workforce in Northern Ireland is exercised under a clear legal framework, the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and the Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations which are made under that Order. Fair employment monitoring was introduced to enable the composition of those who belong to the Protestant or the Roman Catholic community to be ascertained. Such monitoring is essential to enable the proper assessment of progress being made towards fair participation in the workforce by both communities. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has a statutory role in overseeing and safeguarding the fair employment monitoring procedures.

The European Court of Human Rights accepts that there are areas in which national authorities are in a better position to decide what is best for their people. It is for each state to balance the rights and to act proportionally and for good reason in interfering with such rights. We believe that the *Alexandridis* case does not have implications for the current system we have for recording and monitoring the community background of employees locally.

Community Heating Schemes

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the possibility of using community heating schemes will form part of the response to the Child Poverty Inquiry recommendations. (AQW 123/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently finalising our formal response to the OFMDFM Committee's final report on its Inquiry into Child Poverty here.

The response deals with all recommendations made and will be forwarded to the Committee as soon as possible.

Sustainable Development Commission

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the post of the Commissioner on the Sustainable Development Commission became vacant; and when it is anticipated that the post will be filled. (AQW 305/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The post of the Northern Ireland Commissioner of the UK wide Sustainable Development Commission became vacant on 1 April 2008.

We would refer you to our answer to your earlier question AQW 137/09.

Sustainable Development Commission

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Executive relates to the work of the Sustainable Development Commission in the absence of a Northern Ireland Commissioner. (AQW 306/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Notwithstanding the vacancy in the post of the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Commissioner, there continues to be good communication between Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) officials and the Sustainable Development Unit within OFMDFM. The SDC has an established Secretariat

here, which is currently working with OFMDFM officials on the delivery of the Sustainable Development training programme, and in consultation with OFMDFM officials, it contributed to the review of the Sustainable Development Strategy. The SDC Secretariat has also corresponded with, and given evidence before, the OFMDFM Committee.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress the Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 430/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First and deputy First Minister is making good progress in delivering its Programme for Government (PfG) and Public Service Agreement (PSA) commitments.

To date in Year 1 of the PfG, achievements include:

- Extension of the Northern Ireland Bureau's representation to New York to promote Northern Ireland's interests and develop further key contacts in the US.
- Appointment of 2 new honorary consuls for Malta, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.
- Provision of additional budget provision to fund both the appointment from 1 September of 14 additional Panel Commissioners, and a number of appointments to senior levels within the Planning Appeals and Water Appeals Commission. These additional resources are targeted on addressing the backlog of appeals cases.
- All Departments have nominated a 'Champion for Children and Young People' to liaise on children's issues and to encourage departments to ensure children's and young people's interests are fostered and their views sought on policy and strategy issues. The Children's Champions hold regular meetings chaired by OFMDFM and report to the Children and Young People's Strategy Planning and Review Group which is chaired by the Junior Ministers.
- The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children was established on 31 January 2008 and there has been 3 meetings held to date. The Sub-Committee has established 6 key priorities and has set up cross departmental sub-groups to take these forward.
- The Ilex Urban Regeneration Company has taken forward the Ebrington masterplan and is developing capital infrastructure projects for site transport, open space, car parking and event infrastructure.

- We have commissioned a new sustainable development strategy – the first draft of which we are currently considering – and sustained our funding for the sustainable development commission.
- Through the co-ordination and drafting of the Executive's legislative programme, we helped secure the Introduction of 17 Bills during the 2008/2009 Assembly Session compared to the 15 which we announced in October last year; and
- We have made significant progress in delivering the 10-year Investment Strategy to renew our vital infrastructure.

We have also taken forward a range of cross-cutting issues in conjunction with DSD and DHSSPS in the delivery of our commitments under PSA 7, Making People's Lives Better.

Progress against 3 of the targets allocated to OFMDFM in the PfG has taken a little longer than planned:

- PSA 7 includes a target date of March 2008 for the establishment of a Victims and Survivors Forum – this has not been achieved. Legal responsibility for establishing the Victims and Survivors Forum rests with the Commission for Victims and Survivors, which was not established until the beginning of June 2008. The Commission is currently considering plans for establishing a Forum as part of its overall work programme.
- The target date of July 2008 for the agreement of expected outcomes from the Older People's Strategy, again in PSA 7, has been deferred to Autumn 2008, pending the appointment of the Older Person's Advocate. The appointment of an Older Person's Advocate is progressing and is expected to be complete by October 2008. The newly appointed Advocate will co-chair a reactivated Older People's Panel with OFMDFM officials; and
- The consolidation of 70% of NICS Departmental and agency websites by March 2009, as set out in PSA 20, will not be achieved due to recent problems with the security of some departmental websites.

Transfer of Former Military Sites

Mr Bresland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of the transfer of former military sites from the United Kingdom Government. (AQO 21/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We can reassure the Member that we are taking every opportunity to press the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on this important issue.

In addition to regular official meetings on the subject, the First Minister personally pressed the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on this point in Parliament during Northern Ireland Question Time on 25 June this year.

To date we have not received a decision but remain hopeful of a positive outcome and will continue to press for the gifting of sites.

Credit Crunch

Mr McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action the Executive is taking in relation to the credit crunch. (AQO 75/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The “credit crunch” is, of course, a global phenomenon. As a small open economy we cannot remain immune from global economic events such as the difficulties in the world banking sector and the rise in commodity prices. We are keenly aware that the combination of restricted access to credit, falling property prices, increasing inflation, rising food and energy prices, may in the short term, undermine business and consumer confidence and seriously impact on the well-being of all our people.

We have been keen to hear direct from local stakeholders and have their view on the particular impacts that the economic slowdown is having locally. We have planned a series of meetings with local interest groups to canvas their views, not just on the scale and types of problems we face, but also to discuss what mitigating steps we might take. In this regard we have already met with the banking sector, the Institute of Directors, and representatives of the local construction industry. Further meetings are planned.

We intend to report on our meetings to other Ministers and it is our intention to have this issue as a regular feature on Executive business to ensure that we are collectively addressing the problem across the full width of government.

There have been some encouraging local developments on the housing front. Since our meeting with local banks, one has announced a new scheme in alliance with local property developers that protects first time buyers from some of the volatility of the property market. Also, the Minister for Social Development recently launched the “own a home” pilot in Portadown. We also welcome the stamp duty “holiday” announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The worldwide economic outlook is challenging, but we are determined that we do not talk ourselves into economic despondency. We need to be mindful

that, despite the pressures and challenges we face locally as a result of current global conditions, it is very important that as well as trying to do what we can to address these issues, we must not get caught in the trap of focusing on the short term issues to the exclusion of our longer term goals. We must continue to plan and build for the future. We have a secure budget and programme for government, and a sizeable investment strategy to take forward our key aim of growing a dynamic innovative economy.

Review of the Civic Forum

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the review of the Civic Forum. (AQO 32/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The review of the Civic Forum has sought to canvass as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the structure, operation, composition and membership of the Civic Forum and to determine the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with, and obtaining the views of, civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

The consultation phase of the review was launched on 29 May and, by the closing date for responses on 29 August, over 50 written submissions had been received.

During the period May to August, meetings were held with a wide range of stakeholders, including the former Chair and members of the Forum, civic society organisations and academics.

Members of the review team have conducted visits to examine mechanisms for engagement with civic society in other jurisdictions.

Details of existing arrangements for engagement with civic society by Northern Ireland Departments have been collated.

The review team is currently analysing the information assembled, including consultation responses, with a view to presenting recommendations and options to us in the near future.

Departmental Staff Numbers

Mr Craig asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many staff are employed in the Department; and the projected number of staff by the end of the Comprehensive Spending Review period. (AQO 30/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On the 1st of September 2008, there were 393 full and

part-time staff directly employed by the Department and 8 staff loaned from other Northern Ireland Civil Service departments working in areas such as statistics and research.

It is important to recognise that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister covers a wide range of functions, many of them conferred on it by statute and that much of our work facilitates the business of other Ministers and their departments. For example, through the Office of the Legislative Counsel, the Executive Information Service, our offices in Brussels and Washington, and through our support of the work of the Executive including the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council.

As we move further into the Comprehensive Spending Review period, we are continuing to seek to improve efficiency and maximise effectiveness and we will, of course, keep our staffing levels under review.

Cancelled Executive Meeting

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the meeting of the Executive, due to take place on 24 July 2008, was cancelled. (AQO 15/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive meeting scheduled for 24 July 2008 was cancelled because there was no agreement that this meeting should take place.

Executive Meetings

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to state the dates the Executive will meet in the next 2 months. (AQO 88/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As co-chairs of the Northern Ireland Executive we have agreed a schedule of dates for Executive meetings as follows:

18 September 2008
2 October 2008
16 October 2008
30 October 2008
13 November 2008
27 November 2008

This schedule of meetings may be altered in response to changing circumstances.

Peace and Reconciliation Activities

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has for the promotion of peace and reconciliation activities in the run up to Christmas and the new year. (AQO 7/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We remain fully committed to addressing the divisions within our society and to achieving measurable reductions in sectarian, racism and intolerance.

Our Department funds on an ongoing basis throughout the year a range of initiatives and programmes aimed at the promotion of peace and reconciliation and the development of good relations through the Community Relations Council, the District Councils Community Relations Programme and our Minority Ethnic Communities Fund.

Our Department's sponsorship of the Community Relations Council in the region of £3.3m enables it to fund a broad range of regional and local activities and initiatives including the core-funding of interface workers; conflict resolution workers and programmes; small grants for cross-community events and research on good relations issues.

Funding of £2.5m is made available annually to the 26 District Councils to operate community relations based programmes such as small grant schemes for community groups engaged in cross-community activities. Other projects include bonfire initiatives which are aimed at challenging sectarian behaviours, youth-based activities targeting issues around sectarianism and racism and integration of minority ethnic people into host communities. In addition, funding of almost £1m has been made available this financial year to promote good race relations.

The past 3 years have seen significant progress in improved relationships, with historically low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that improved relationships within the whole community continue and we want to address the challenges that face new and host communities. Therefore, we have committed an additional £7.5m direct expenditure over the next three year – 2008/2011, making a total of £29m on good relations and good race relations.

Devolution of Policing and Justice Powers

Mr B McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the current state of proposals for the devolution of policing and justice powers. (AQO 28/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is for the Assembly to request the devolution of policing and justice powers and its report, submitted to the

Secretary of State in March 2008 in accordance with Section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, recorded consensus that there should be a single policing and justice department and on the range of matters which might be devolved. The report recommended that the political parties commit to further discussions on the Ministerial arrangements for a new department and on when a request might be made.

We have reached a view that justice and policing powers should reside with a single Minister elected from the Assembly in a way which would ensure cross-community support, and we wrote to the Chair of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on 28 July 2008 inviting that Committee to consider producing a further report within this framework. Our officials have conducted prudent preparatory work to plan for the administrative and resource implications of devolution, in the event of political agreement to proceed.

Programme for Government

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures have been put in place to ensure delivery of targets for the Programme for Government. (AQO 122/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government is framed under five priority areas which set out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are in turn supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities.

The Executive recognise that many of the outcomes and targets set out in the PSA framework will only be achieved where departments work closely together and co-ordinate their approach. In light of this, departments have worked together over recent months to develop detailed Delivery Agreements for each PSA. These Delivery Agreements, to be published on departmental websites, set out in more detail how departments intend to ensure delivery of the targets and actions set out in the PSA framework and will provide the basis upon which the Executive will monitor and report on progress at departmental level.

Emergency Flooding Relief

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures it has co-ordinated within the Executive in relation to

emergency flooding relief, since the last meeting of the Assembly in July 2008. (AQO 26/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following extremely heavy rain on Saturday 16 August, flooding occurred in locations across Northern Ireland. To ensure a co-ordinated and effective strategic response, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment convened a meeting of the Crisis Management Group on Sunday 17 August with senior officials from the relevant organisations and agreed a range of response measures. In parallel, the Minister of the Environment agreed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that a scheme of emergency financial assistance should be made available to district councils, including payments to affected householders. This was agreed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Details of this scheme were released by the Department of the Environment on Monday 18 August and councils immediately implemented the emergency financial assistance grants, with all householders who qualified within the terms of the scheme being entitled to a payment of £1,000. This payment was provided by the Executive as practical assistance to those who had suffered severe inconvenience, to ensure that homes were made habitable as quickly as possible. It was not a compensation payment.

In addition to the payments to individual households, district councils will be able to apply to the DOE for financial assistance with the direct and indirect costs of the flooding, including collection, retention and disposal of damaged household goods; assistance to private householders to clean up their homes and gardens; and provision of dehumidifiers to dry out homes.

As agreed at the Crisis Management Group meeting, other agencies, including the Chief Medical Officer, the Social Security Agency and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency also offered practical advice and assistance to those affected.

Up to Friday 12 September, district councils had paid an emergency financial assistance grant to 1,431 households.

Northern Ireland Bureau

Mr McQuillan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington. (AQO 5/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, D.C. is playing an important role in supporting the work of the Executive and the Assembly in all matters

which have a United States dimension. The Bureau works closely with the US administration, the British and Irish Embassies and key business and political interests in advancing the Executive's international priorities and economic and cultural objectives.

The Bureau's work focuses on presenting Northern Ireland as a confident, outwardly looking region and as part of this strategy the Bureau pursues high level political contacts within key Federal and State institutions across the US. At the beginning of this year the Bureau strengthened its profile in the US by establishing an office in New York. This has helped in raising Northern Ireland's profile and in providing a focus for the work of the Executive in the New York Consular District, which extends to Pennsylvania and parts of New England.

The Bureau played an important role in the very successful investment conference in May and the visit by President Bush to NI in June. Both these events help project a very positive image of Northern Ireland by raising our profile as an investment location. The Bureau will continue to work closely with NI Departments and key agencies, including InvestNI and Tourism Ireland in attracting investment, encouraging people to visit and in creating new business and cultural opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Over the next two months the Bureau will facilitate separate visits to the US by the Ministers for Social Development and Employment and Learning and for both Junior Ministers.

Executive and Departmental Business

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list all Executive and departmental business that has been due for Executive decision since June 2008; and to detail delays caused by the failure of the Executive to meet. (AQO 14/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers, including draft papers, is confidential.

Transfer of Policing and Justice Powers

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with (i) the United Kingdom Government; and (ii) the Government of the Irish Republic, in the last 3 months, in relation to the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Assembly. (AQO 58/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is for the Assembly to request the devolution of policing and justice powers and the achievement of

agreement on this issue is essentially a matter for the Northern Ireland political parties, rather than the United Kingdom and Irish Governments.

On 6 June 2008, we attended talks in Downing Street, hosted by the Prime Minister, on a range of matters including the devolution of policing and justice powers. The deputy First Minister also had a meeting with the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs on this occasion.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the publication of the Regional Development Strategy, as agreed by the Executive. (AQO 29/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Regional Development Strategy was published by the Department of Regional Development in September 2001.

A fundamental review of the Regional Development Strategy is ongoing, and publication of a revised Regional Development Strategy will follow when this review is completed.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to extend the deadline for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. (AQW 36/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): The decision to extend the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) scheme is not within my gift. It is an issue of EU State Aid approval and the relevant EC legislation is restrictive because of the link to compliance with the Nitrates Directive.

I have been in discussions with the EU Commissioner about the FNMS deadline since March 2008. I have explained how inadequate construction capacity and wet weather have hampered progress with the scheme.

However, the Commission have insisted that the deadline for the FNMS cannot be changed. There is no legal scope under the relevant European Community legislation to extend the 60% FNMS grant beyond 31 December 2008. The Commission have stated that

it is impossible to change the EC legislation or the approval for the FNMS.

I have worked with the Construction Employers Federation and farming organisations to encourage more construction companies to build slurry tanks. I have written to farmers in the Scheme and have continually highlighted the need to complete works by the December 2008 deadline.

Farming Community in Ards

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will ensure that the farming community in the Ards area will not be discriminated against by relocating DARD Direct offices over the 16 mile radius to Newry and Downpatrick. (AQW 88/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) is currently being carried out on the proposed roll-out of the DARD Direct one-stop shop model across the North of Ireland. The purpose of the EQIA is to examine the impacts of the roll-out and how the new approach to delivery of services can promote equality of opportunity for identified Section 75 groups within DARD's customers and staff.

Following agreement with the Assembly Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the public consultation period commenced on Monday, 7th July for a 9 week period and ended on Friday, 5th September 2008.

A majority of the responses have been supportive of the concept of DARD Direct and quality of service has been identified as being generally more important to customers than the location of offices.

Concern has been expressed, however, about the need to consider a location that will provide equitable access to services for Ards, North Down and Lagan Valley.

Members may be assured that no decision on the roll-out, including the number and location of DARD Direct offices, will be taken until feedback from the recently completed public consultation has been fully considered

Commercial Fishing Boats

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what regulations are in place to prevent commercial fishing boats draining all the shell fish from Belfast Lough. (AQW 103/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Belfast Lough hosts a number of

licenced aquaculture sites for farming mussels. Operators of these sites are licenced through a fish culture licence issued under Section 11 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966. Seed mussels from outside the Lough are laid on these sites and harvested after one to two years once they have reached marketable size. Laying and harvesting is by mussel dredgers and harvesting and vessel movements are strictly monitored and controlled by the Department through the licence conditions, inspections and satellite monitoring technology.

This year an amendment was made to the Inshore Fishing (Prohibition of Fishing and Fishing Methods) Regulations (NI) 1993 to prohibit the use of any mobile fishing gear including shellfish dredges westward of an imaginary straight line drawn from Carrickfergus Castle to Grey Point. Exemptions are allowed for those acting under the authority of a licence or permit issued under sections 11 or 14 respectively of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966.

Fishermen fishing for crabs and lobsters must have a Restrictive Shellfish Licence. The number of licences is capped and no new licences have been issued since 2004. Licence holders must submit monthly returns of their catches of crabs and lobsters so that the Department can evaluate stock trends and ensure that fishing effort is sustainable.

Wind Energy for Rural Business Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications there have been for wind turbines under the Wind Energy for Rural Business scheme, broken down by Parliamentary constituency. (AQW 110/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: 64 applications were made to the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses (WERB) Scheme for funding towards the erection of wind turbines. The applications can be broken down into parliamentary constituency as follows:

Belfast East	Nil
Belfast North	Nil
Belfast South	Nil
Belfast West	Nil
East Antrim	1
East Londonderry	1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	13
Foyle	Nil
Lagan Valley	3

Mid Ulster	11
Newry & Armagh	6
North Antrim	Nil
North Down	7
South Antrim	2
South Down	2
Strangford	1
Upper Bann	1
West Tyrone	16

Glenarm Salmon Farm

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what support and funding was made available to Glenarm Salmon Farm when they lost £1m worth of stock in November last year due to the attack by mauve jellyfish. (AQW 174/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Northern Salmon Company Limited did not receive any financial assistance from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as a result of the fish kill at Glenarm Bay in November last year. The Company's request for financial assistance was fully considered, in conjunction with other relevant Departments, but it was concluded that the request did not offer value for money in economic terms to justify support from the Executive.

Future Land Erosion and Damage to Fencing in County Tyrone

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to prevent future land erosion and damage to fencing at Fallagh Middle and Fallagh Lower, Gortin, Co. Tyrone. (AQW 255/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The townlands of Fallagh Middle and Fallagh Lower bound the Owenreagh Gortin watercourse which is designated under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 from its confluence with the Owenkillew River to the upstream limits at Cashel Bridge. As such this watercourse is subject to inspection and maintenance by Rivers Agency as necessary to provide a free flow of water. Maintenance works were carried out along this stretch of watercourse during the 2006/07 and 2007/08 years. These works included shoal removal to low water level and tree and bush cutting.

Rivers Agency has received several complaints about erosion along the Owenreagh Gortin catchment and staff have visited several riparian landowners offering advice. Works to repair erosion can only be considered where it creates an impediment to flow or where there is a danger to roads, flood defences or property. Repairs to fencing remain the responsibility of the adjacent landowners.

Slurry Tanks

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what the proposed timetable is for the payment of grant aid in relation to slurry tanks that have been constructed, inspected and passed for payment. (AQW 269/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department's target for full payment of claims under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) has been 12 weeks after receipt of a valid claim. However the Department recognised that as the number of claims will accelerate as the scheme nears closure at the end of December 2008, this target cannot be maintained. Consequently, and recognising that farmers want and need to reduce any borrowing, a part payment option has been introduced. Subject to the work being completed and satisfactory supporting invoices and receipts being provided, the Department will pay 50% of the grant on approved costs or acceptable receipts if less. The average processing time is two weeks and thus an applicant can expect to receive the part payment within 4 weeks of the date the Department receives his claim. The balance of grant will be paid once an on-farm inspection has confirmed that the work has been completed to the required specification.

Flooding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the total cost to the farming industry of the recent flooding. (AQW 271/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It has proven difficult to estimate the scale of the total flooding damage. Accordingly, I have asked my officials to carry out assessments of damage to the crops sector only. Damage to outbuildings, yards, fences walls and gates is outside of the scope of this exercise.

A provisional estimate of the total costs to the crops sector due to the flooding of 16 August has been calculated at just over £450,000. This calculation is based on the inputs used to establish and maintain the crop up until the 16 August, excluding any conacre rents paid.

Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what extra resources she will provide to restore walking routes and bridges on Forest Service property that have been damaged by the recent flooding. (AQW 328/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The recent flooding caused most damage in the South/East of the Province where 3 recreational bridges were damaged (2 in Tollymore Forest Park and 1 in Rostrevor Forest). Within these same areas, short sections of walking trails were also damaged. Forest Service has the capability to repair most of this damage. The cost, including additional materials, is estimated at £12,000.

A minor walking route was also damaged in one of the Clogher Valley forests at an estimated repair cost of £4,200. A decision has yet to be taken on the public benefits of this repair.

Forest Service considers that, as these costs are relatively minor, they can be met by reprioritising existing work programmes. This position will, of course, be monitored carefully.

Forest Service Land

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will authorise a review of the number of staff employed to maintain Forest Service land, with a view to increasing the number. (AQW 329/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The deployment of staff to maintain forests is an operational matter to be managed by the Chief Executive and Management Board of the Forest Service, within budgetary constraints. The Board regularly reviews the number of staff required to deliver the Agency's business objectives, which include managing forests to the rigorous standards set out in the UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the additional costs incurred by (i) the Rivers Agency; and (ii) Forest Service, following the recent flooding. (AQW 330/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date Rivers Agency has incurred an estimated total of £140,000 of additional costs as a result of the flooding of 16 and 17 August 2008. This cost is composed of £20,000 on materials and

£120,000 on staff time for attendance at flooding incidents and investigations.

Forest Service estimates that it will incur an additional cost of approximately £52,200. This figure includes the cost of road stone, bridge repair materials and contract plant to carry out the necessary repairs, and the cost of Forest Service staff time and machinery, redeployed to deal with the flooding incident.

Rivers Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will review the effectiveness of the Rivers Agency, given that its remit does not permit it to clean and maintain rivers beyond clearing blockages. (AQW 332/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Firstly I would clarify that Rivers Agency has a wide remit under the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 which enables it to carry out such river maintenance works as are necessary to ensure free flow in the channel. The Agency has a comprehensive programme that extends beyond clearing blockages.

Recently a Review of Flood Management Policy and the role of Rivers Agency has been completed and, a Government Response based on this review has been prepared for publication shortly, endorsed by the First and Deputy First Minister. That Review examined the Rivers Agency's river maintenance function in the interests of flood management, and environmental sustainability.

The Agency currently maintains some 6,800 kilometres of designated watercourses in a rolling programme based on watercourse type and risk. However, acting as the drainage authority, DARD Rivers Agency has no role in the amenity, environmental health or water quality aspects of rivers (including fallen animals, litter, visual appearance of river banks or overhanging tree branches) which do not impede the flow of water.

While I have no plans at this stage to review the Rivers Agency, obviously I will seriously consider a review of maintenance as part of future land use planning under EU obligations, and the views of ARD Committee Members would be welcomed at that time.

Rivers Agency

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the Rivers Agency's policy on clearing rivers to allow the maximum flow and alleviate flooding. (AQO 110/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Firstly I would pay tribute to the staff who worked tirelessly on 16/17 August to provide emergency assistance to those affected by flooding.

I can assure you that proactive flood risk management is a central aim of my Department's Rivers Agency. Essential to this is an effective watercourse maintenance policy and programme. Rivers Agency currently maintains over 6,800 kms of designated watercourses. A rolling programme of inspection and maintenance is in place for these watercourses. In addition targeted inspections, particularly at times of high flows, are carried out in conjunction with early pre-emptive clearance of debris from inlet grilles at high risk locations. These measures have reduced the risk of flood and damage.

The Agency is required to employ environmentally sensitive maintenance techniques to satisfy European Directive obligations on environmental protection and is committed to undertaking watercourse maintenance in a sustainable manner. I believe we can carry out maintenance to deliver appropriate flood risk management while meeting European and National obligations in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Record-Keeping Facilities

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department's record keeping facilities at departmental offices, particularly Orchard House, are fit for purpose. (AQO 112/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I can advise my colleague that record keeping facilities are standard across all offices in my Department, including Orchard House, and are fit for purpose. Through the use of information technology, the Department seeks to enhance its facilities, to help speed up the ability to access and review records, and to respond to enquiries from customers.

Man Hours Worked on Farms

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will review the criteria used by her department to calculate the number of man hours worked on farms, which is accepted by the Planning Service to justify planning approvals under agricultural need. (AQO 6/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The criteria that you refer to is the use of the farm viability test when assessing applications for new dwellings on farms under Planning Policy Statement 14 – Sustainable development in the Countryside. PPS 14 is the responsibility of the Minister for the Environment.

DARD currently undertakes farm viability assessments as part of the planning process for dwellings on farms. This information is provided to DOE Planning Service for their use as part of the overall assessment of the application.

The assessment of farm viability is one of a number of issues considered by the Executive Sub Committee reviewing PPS 14, of which I am a member. I have consistently made the case that the farm viability test is not appropriate for assessing applications for new dwellings on farms. The test does not account for the changing nature of farming and the fact that an increasing proportion of farms are operated on a part time basis.

I have therefore no intention of reviewing the farm viability test as a means of assessing agricultural need, but instead will continue to press for its replacement.

National Trails Day

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to link up with National Trails Day in the Republic of Ireland, and to operate it on an all-Ireland basis. (AQO 109/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: This is the first National Trails Day to be organised in the south, taking place on 28 September. I have asked my officials in Forest Service to consider organising a similar event in the north and I am pleased to be able to report that a Forest Parks Open Day will be held on the same date. Entrance charges to Forest Parks will be waived and guided tours of forest trails will be available in a number of forests.

I believe that our forests are a very important asset and I want to see all sections of our community enjoying the many recreational, social and health benefits that they provide.

A National Trails Day is an excellent way to promote rural recreation and I would like to see this being expanded in future years to include not only our forests, but also the many other trails that are available, for example the Ulster Way. My officials will liaise with their counterparts in the south to ensure that we can make the best opportunity of this very worthwhile initiative.

Climate Change Adaption Strategy

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consultation she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the creation of a Climate Change Adaption strategy. (AQO 80/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: While I take the issues around climate change very seriously, I have not specifically been in consultation with the Minister for the Environment on the issue of adaptation to climate change.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the recent weather conditions, what action she is taking to convince the European Union Commission to relax its deadline to allow farmers to complete their work under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. (AQO 107/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have been in discussions with the EU Commission about the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) deadline since March 2008. During these negotiations I explained how one of the wettest summers on record in 2007 meant progress in the busiest building tank building period was severely hampered.

However, the Commission have insisted that the deadline for the FNMS cannot be changed. There is no legal scope under the relevant European Community legislation to extend the 60% FNMS grant beyond 31 December 2008. The Commission have stated that it is impossible to change the EC legislation or the approval for the FNMS.

I will be informing the Commissioner of the difficulties that the recent wet weather creates for FNMS works. The exceptional weather conditions are valid and practical reasons for slippage as the 31 December 2008 deadline approaches.

Flood Mapping Strategy

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Flood Mapping Strategy. (AQO 83/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Flood Mapping Strategy published by DARD Rivers Agency indicated timescales for the delivery of various mapping products and outlined their means of delivery. The first in a series of flood risk maps, the Strategic Flood Map for Northern Ireland is nearing completion and I propose to publish the mapping product on the internet later this year. In light of developments in relation to implementation of the EU Floods Directive the Strategy will be reviewed and updated.

Rural Development Programmes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if efforts are underway to join-up the Rural Development Programmes in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, particularly in border areas, to increase their benefits to farmers and the wider rural community.

(AQO 108/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Under Axis 3 of the Rural Development programme there are opportunities to develop transnational co-operation projects. These can be north south and or with partners from elsewhere in the European Union. Funding equivalent to five percent of the programme have been ring fenced for these co-operation projects. My officials have had discussions with their colleagues in the Department of Community Rural and Gaelic Affairs (DCRGA) and will shortly meet to examine cross border co-operation project procedures. My Department is also close to awarding a contract to implement the Rural Development Programme network. One of the networks responsibilities through networking events is to encourage co-operation projects and ensure that opportunities are created on the ground for interested local action groups to meet and link up at a north south and European level.

Renewable Energy Sector

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department will use the development of the renewable energy sector to create job opportunities. (AQO 89/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Whilst I recognise there is potential to create jobs from renewable energy this sector is in its early stages of development at farm level. Specifically, my Department is promoting the opportunities of renewable energy within the agri-food and forestry sector and wider rural economy through technology transfer and demonstration programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and the Agriculture, Food and Bioscience Institute.

In addition to this, employment creation is central to a measure within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan. Under the Business Creation and Development Measure there is potential to include renewable energy activities.

My Department is currently working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Bioenergy Inter Departmental Working Group to assess the potential market opportunities for energy from biomass, which includes addressing cross cutting issues, such as job creation, some of which will be relevant to the agricultural sector.

Flooding

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to ensure that farmers help to reduce the risk of flooding by managing water run from their land. (AQO 77/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Farmers have an important role to play, with other landowners in managing land and watercourses to reduce flooding risk.

As the statutory drainage authority Rivers Agency administers advisory and enforcement procedures to protect the drainage function of all watercourses. Where a watercourse is not designated for maintenance by the Rivers Agency, responsibility falls to riparian landowners. In these cases, the Agency provides advice and where necessary, may require a landowner to carry out watercourse maintenance to ensure the free flow of water and thus reduce the risk of flooding. This is enforced under Schedule 5 of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973.

Where field drains discharge to watercourses, Rivers Agency also has a consenting role in relation to additional discharges. This applies to both designated and undesignated watercourses.

In cases of non-compliance, and the drainage disability is threatening to increase the flood risk, or causing detriment to drainage of surrounding land the Rivers Agency may take enforcement action, which could include court proceedings.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

National Stadium

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to utilise the £70 million set aside for a national stadium. (AQW 16/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): The issue of the multi-sports stadium together with the overall regeneration of the Maze site has still to be considered by the Executive. Accordingly nothing has been ruled out at this point. It is however my intention to announce progress in the Autumn.

In regard to alternatives, should the proposal for the Maze site project not proceed, I am conscious that under such circumstances there would clearly remain a critical need to invest in stadia in Northern Ireland. All possible options would need to be considered, ranging from refurbishment of existing stadia through to permutations on new build stadia.

I have held a series of preliminary meetings with the Governing Bodies for football, rugby and Gaelic games to determine their current positions on these matters.

In terms of funding, 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 allocation in the current financial year has already been surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel. In the event of any decision not to proceed with the Maze stadium proposal my Department will bid to DFP to reallocate all or part of this funding to alternative stadium options.

National Stadium

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what viable options are under consideration to fund a national stadium elsewhere than the Maze site. (AQW 17/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The issue of the multi-sports stadium together with the overall regeneration of the Maze site has still to be considered by the Executive. Accordingly nothing has been ruled out at this point. It is however my intention to announce progress in the Autumn.

In regard to alternatives, should the proposal for the Maze site project not proceed, I am conscious that under such circumstances there would clearly remain a critical need to invest in stadia in Northern Ireland. All possible options would need to be considered, ranging from refurbishment of existing stadia through to permutations on new build stadia. I have held a series of preliminary meetings with the Governing Bodies for football, rugby and Gaelic games to determine their current positions on these matters.

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National Stadium

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has decided against a national stadium at the Maze site. (AQW 18/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The issue of the multi-sports stadium together with the

overall regeneration of the Maze site has still to be considered by the Executive. Accordingly nothing has been ruled out at this point. It is however my intention to announce progress in the Autumn.

In regard to alternatives, should the proposal for the Maze site project not proceed, I am conscious that under such circumstances there would clearly remain a critical need to invest in stadia in Northern Ireland. All possible options would need to be considered, ranging from refurbishment of existing stadia through to permutations on new build stadia. I have held a series of preliminary meetings with the Governing Bodies for football, rugby and Gaelic games to determine their current positions on these matters.

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Public Libraries

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to integrate local library facilities with educational provision. (AQW 45/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Public libraries provide services across the entire age spectrum in Northern Ireland which extends beyond those in formal education. Each proposal for a new library facility is considered on a case by case basis and deliberations include issues such as local need, potential partners, location, accessibility and a safe and neutral environment.

While there are no current plans to site new library facilities alongside educational provision, Finaghy and Cookstown are examples of new libraries with close links to educational establishments. Equally, successful libraries may be sited with health and leisure facilities, such as the Grove Wellbeing Centre.

Expenditure on Irish-Language Translation

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure on Irish language translation broken down by each Department in each of the last three years. (AQW 61/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The expenditure on Irish Language Translation is broken down by Department in each of the last three years in the table below:

BREAKDOWN OF DEPARTMENTAL IRISH TRANSLATIONS COSTS

2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08			
Department	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
NIO	£480.76	£1,963.00	£1,342.00
DE	£19,349.27	£19,371.88	£50,983.49
DARD	£3,192.16	£2,087.49	£4,303.75
DEL	£0.00	£2,375.06	£494.10
DETI	£390.89	£223.75	£114.00
DFP	£899.73	£9,971.29	£1,183.72
DHSSPS	£8,974.00	£14,046.45	£3,678.88
DOE	£7,290.06	£20,145.87	£1,313.32
DRD	£436.04	£410.67	£892.78
DSD	£0.00	£1,932.88	£30.00
OFMDFM	£2,740.77	£3,891.97	£2,122.07
DCAL	£20,801.17	£40,667.70	£22,869.13
Total	£64,554.85	£117,088.01	£89,327.24

Action Against Wildlife Crime Group

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he is aware of the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Group and can he outline the involvement of his staff in the work of this body given its relevance to his Department's duties with regards to fisheries protection. (AQW 63/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am indeed aware of the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime group in Northern Ireland.

Salmon and inland fisheries protection functions are discharged by the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) and by the Loughs Agency in NI. However, given that DCAL will assume the functions of the FCB through the Public Authorities Reform Bill, a DCAL Fisheries Officer attended an initial meeting of the group in 2007.

A Senior Fisheries Officer has now been seconded to FCB to assist them manage operational fisheries protection. This officer will attend the next meeting of PAWNI on Thursday 18th September 2008. The PAWNI secretariate has indicated that fishing related crime, whether pollution of rivers or illegal poaching, is an issue that is commonly mentioned at meetings. DCAL are invited to update the group on how the Department tackles issues like this, and to discuss how the group may be able to help.

Full Rates Relief to Sporting Clubs

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to give full rates relief to sporting clubs, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 115/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As rating matters are the responsibility of my colleague Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I have sought advice from him on this issue. The Minister has no immediate plans to review the way in which sporting and recreation clubs receive rate relief. There are distinct differences in the way in which such relief is provided here and in the rest of the UK.

First of all, I should clarify that professional clubs, either here or in the rest of the UK, usually pay full rates. I assume, therefore, that your enquiry relates to amateur sport.

In Northern Ireland the rating legislation provides for 80% reduction in rates liability for rateable properties used for prescribed active recreations. This level of relief aligns with the mandatory relief available in GB.

The alternative is for premises to be registered as a charity, but in Northern Ireland few have chosen to apply given the restrictions such registration places on clubs.

In GB eligibility is more complex and there are three ways to qualify for rate relief. Either the club needs to be registered as a charity or a community amateur sports club, or be considered to be of particular benefit to the local community. For all three there are conditions attached to receiving relief. For example, membership fees cannot be set at levels which would exclude the local community and there must be open access. Such designations place obligations on the running of the clubs.

No such stipulations exist in Northern Ireland, and as a result “better off” clubs (for example private members golf clubs) qualify for 80% relief, regardless of their membership policies and fees. Many comparable clubs do not get any relief in the rest of the UK and those that do, usually do so at the discretion of individual local authorities, who administer rate relief there.

There is also a power available to GB local authorities to provide top up discretionary relief (thereby increasing relief to 100%) to particularly worthy clubs, in circumstances where such a measure would align with a particular local authority’s policies and programmes. It is not applied universally and therefore it is not correct to say that amateur sport in the rest of the UK gets full exemption from rates.

This 20% discretionary relief is not available in Northern Ireland. Officials are however currently

considering the feasibility of providing Councils, post RPA, with the power to waive district rates for particular ratepayers (which could include clubs) in certain circumstances, providing safeguards are in place to ensure this discretion would be applied appropriately and fairly, protecting the interests of other ratepayers and without affecting the regional rate.

Aside from this and given the complications outlined above, the Finance Minister has no immediate plans to fundamentally change the way in which sport and recreation relief is awarded in Northern Ireland, particularly as it may not be in the interests of many of our clubs to move to the same system that exists in GB. However, I am aware that clubs here are reviewing their position on this.

Sport and Physical Recreation Strategy

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the Sport and Physical Recreation Strategy will be launched. (AQW 142/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The new Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation is currently being considered by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Strategy will be launched when this consideration is completed.

Sports Events for People with Disabilities

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to attract more sports events for people with disabilities. (AQW 143/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Over the past two years, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), has been developing a new strategy entitled “Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2008-2018”. The Strategy proposes to establish Northern Ireland as a world class venue for sporting events including events for people with disabilities, for example, the World Blind Golf Championships which were held at Belvoir Park Golf Club in August 2008.

Young at Art Event at Stormont

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made on an event to be staged at Stormont by ‘Young at Art’. (AQW 144/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee agreed, at its meeting of 26 June, to invite Young at Art to stage an

event at Stormont after the summer recess. As my Department has not received any correspondence relating to the staging of an event at Stormont by 'Young at Art' I am unable to provide an update on progress.

Sporting Facilities

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what improvements will be completed on sporting facilities by the 2012 Olympic games.
(AQW 145/09)

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.

The Elite Facilities Capital Programme Stage Two competition was launched on 25th June 2008. Fourteen projects were shortlisted and applicant organisations have until 28th November 2008 to submit their Outline Business Cases. The range of facilities under consideration includes Cycling, Fencing, Table Tennis, Volleyball, Basketball, Sailing, Athletics, Rowing, Tennis and Equestrian.

North Down Borough Council has been selected as the preferred developer for the 50m swimming pool and work is progressing with this project.

Whilst many projects aim to be completed by 2012, confirmation cannot be given until the applicant organisations' Outline Business Cases have been submitted on the 28th November 2008 containing their anticipated delivery date.

Angling

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department is taking to promote angling.
(AQW 180/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure promotes angling through the development of a DCAL angling website which provides a background to angling in N. Ireland and a guide to the Public Angling Estate. It is aimed at the tourist angler and provides the facility for on line permit sales and booking facilities. Ongoing development of the Public Angling Estate provides improved facilities and access for disabled anglers. The Department attends annually a number of angling fairs across Europe and the rest of the U.K. to attract tourist anglers to the province.

The Department is also aware of the need to conserve wild fish stocks such as salmon, which are reducing at an alarming rate and is looking at possible solutions.

Design of Classrooms

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consultation he has had with the Minister of Education to ensure that the design of classrooms helps pupils to concentrate, reduces disruption and improves academic performance, as detailed in the document 'Architecture and the Built Environment for Northern Ireland'.
(AQW 198/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: While I have not had any direct consultation with the Minister of Education, I am aware that the Department of Education takes account of the policy on 'Architecture and the Built Environment for Northern Ireland' and provides guidance on classroom design for school authorities, and also receives advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate on design matters.

Single Game Rod Licences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many single game rod licences were issued by the Fisheries Conservancy Board for the 2008 season; and how this compares with the 2005, 2006 and 2007 seasons.
(AQW 277/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As the 2008 season is still open the Department is unable at this time to confirm how many single game rod licences were issued by the Fisheries Conservancy Board for the 2008 season. The figures are normally available by late November.

I can provide the numbers for the seasons 2005, 2006 and 2007.

2005	18,570
2006	18,236
2007	19,850

Financial Aid for Sporting Clubs and Associations

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration is given to the geographical location of the league in which sporting teams compete, when assessing applications for financial aid from sporting clubs and associations.
(AQO 66/09)

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. When assessing applications for financial aid from sporting clubs and associations, SNI gives no consideration to the geographical location of the league in which the sporting teams compete.

Fire and Rescue Games 2013

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the Fire and Rescue games in 2013 will be able to go ahead if he rejects the development of a multi-sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 93/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am delighted that Belfast has been successful in securing the bid for these games which will bring participants from 100 Countries to take part in 60 sports at approximately 45 venues throughout Northern Ireland in 2013.

When the World Police and Fire Games were awarded to Northern Ireland by the Federation it was not a condition of the contract that the opening or closing ceremonies would have to be held at the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium or indeed any other specific location.

It will be a matter for those with responsibility for the delivery of the Games to finalise the arrangements for the opening and closing ceremonies.

Physical Inactivity

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to target groups experiencing unhealthy lifestyles through physical inactivity and obesity; and how success will be monitored by council area. (AQO 23/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Over the past two years, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), has been developing a new strategy entitled "Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2008-2018". The strategy proposes a number of targets and actions to increase participation in sports by people in groups experiencing unhealthy lifestyles through physical inactivity. Progress against these targets will be monitored by a Monitoring Group, which I intend to Chair, and which will bring together senior representatives of departments, relevant agencies and stakeholders with responsibility for areas including sport, health, education and the environment. Subject to the approval of the executive, the Strategy will be launched later this year.

Quality of Architectural Design

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide examples of the impact of his Department's suggestions for the improvement of the quality of architectural design. (AQO 36/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

In 2004 an inter-departmental group chaired by DCAL was established to draft Government policy on architecture and the built environment. DCAL published the formal policy in 2006 and last September appointed a Ministerial Advisory Group to advise the Minister responsible for DCAL on the development and implementation of that policy.

The Group has prioritised the following key issues for consideration: preservation of the built heritage; public sector construction procurement; planning policies and sustainable development.

National Stadium

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the proposed national stadium at the Maze. (AQO 11/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Outline Business Case on the proposed multi-sports stadium, which is publicly available through my Department's website, sets out the financial, economic and other factors associated with the stadium and it is this which will form the basis of the decision-making process around the project.

As part of this decision-making process the Outline Business Case, together with the corresponding Business Case for the Maze project - for which OFMDFM are responsible - have been closely examined by the respective Accounting Officers. The Department of Finance and Personnel has had the opportunity to examine both Business Cases and the First Minister, in his former role of Finance Minister, has provided advice to Ministerial colleagues on his assessment of both the Stadium and the overall Maze project.

In addition, I have met with the football, rugby and Gaelic games governing bodies and have taken their views on the issues and options on the way forward.

It is anticipated that all the documentation relating to the Maze project, including the Outline Business Case on the stadium, will be discussed by the Executive in the near future. Following this I intend to make an announcement, which will be in the best interests of all sports, on how we progress stadium provision in Northern Ireland.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what (i) social; (ii) financial; and (iii) economic, decision making criteria will be used to make a determination on the proposed multi-sports stadium. (AQO 65/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Outline Business Case on the proposed multi-sports stadium, which is publicly available through my Department's website, sets out the financial, economic and other factors associated with the stadium and it is this which will form the basis of the decision-making process around the project.

As part of this decision-making process the Outline Business Case, together with the corresponding Business Case for the Maze project - for which OFMDFM are responsible - have been closely examined by the respective Accounting Officers. The Department of Finance and Personnel has had the opportunity to examine both Business Cases and the First Minister, in his former role of Finance Minister, has provided advice to Ministerial colleagues on his assessment of both the Stadium and the overall Maze project.

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It is anticipated that all the documentation relating to the Maze project, including the Outline Business Case on the stadium, will be discussed by the Executive in the near future. Following this I intend to make an announcement, which will be in the best interests of all sports, on how we progress stadium provision in Northern Ireland.

Community and Cultural Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to increase community and cultural funding in the (i) Banbridge; (ii) central Craigavon; (iii) Lurgan; and (iv) Portadown areas. (AQO 57/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department, through Sport NI, currently invests in the Banbridge, Craigavon, Lurgan and Portadown areas under the 'Sport In Our Community' investment programme, a £4m lottery funded programme that began in 2006 and will conclude in 2010 and the Building Sport Programme which began in 2004.

As a result of the additional £9.75m arts and culture revenue funding secured during the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), the Arts Council has been allocated an additional £7.55m over the 3 year period of the Budget. My Department, through its Arms Length Bodies will endeavour to provide advice and support to those involved in accessing funding.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the investigation into the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQO 4/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Investigations carried out on behalf of the Department into the financial deficit at the Northern Ireland Events Company have raised serious questions in relation to how the affairs of the Company were conducted. The reports into these investigations contain matters of a sensitive legal and financial nature which will be subject to further investigation.

These matters have been referred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which is considering if further action is warranted under companies' legislation.

I am unable to comment further as such publicity may be prejudicial to further investigations.

The Department is also reviewing its role in the oversight of the NIEC with a view to identifying what lessons can be learnt from the experience and what appropriate action may be required in light of this.

I also understand that the Public Accounts Committee intends to examine these matters in some detail once the investigatory process is complete

An independent verification process has been undertaken into all creditors and debtors in respect of the NIEC. I am not prepared to comment publicly on specific transactions. However, 144 creditors out of a total of 158 have been verified as bona fide and paid a total of £673,511. The remainder have still to be verified and a number of contingent liabilities have also been identified.

Arts Council

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why the Arts Council has not appointed a full-time traditional arts officer. (AQO 63/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The appointment of Arts Officers is a matter for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The Arts Council is currently reviewing its staffing structure and intends to make an announcement regarding support for the traditional arts sector in due course. The needs of the traditional arts sector will be considered as part of this review.

Dundrod & District Racing Club

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department has had any contact with the Dundrod & District Racing Club in relation to the financial losses incurred as a result of races cancelled due to the recent bad weather. (AQO 31/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As a result of the severe weather conditions experienced across Northern Ireland during the week beginning

11th August racing at the Ulster Grand Prix at Dundrod was seriously disrupted, resulting in the cancellation of racing on the main race day that has impacted financially on the event.

I was in attendance on race day and spoke with organisers who, it should be noted are all unpaid volunteers, about the financial implications of the cancellation of the event. On Monday 18th August officials from my Department's Events Unit contacted the organisers, and requested a report detailing the disruption during race week and the cancellation of racing on the main race day. When this report has been received I will want to give the matter further consideration given the significance of the Ulster Grand Prix locally and internationally.

The event secured £40,000 revenue funding under the DCAL Major Events Fund towards production and marketing costs for the 2008/9 event and this is unaffected by the cancellation. Requests for support for the Ulster Grand Prix in 2009 should be advanced by application to the relevant funding body.

As a result of the Review of Public Administration DCAL's events function is anticipated to transfer from my Department to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in 2009.

Dog Racing

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his Department's assessment of the economic benefits of dog racing; and what plans he has to include dog racing on the list of activities officially recognised as sports. (AQO 67/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As dog racing is not a recognised sport my Department has not assessed the economic benefits of dog racing. I have no plans to include dog racing on the list of activities officially recognised as sports. It would be for the British Greyhound Racing Board to apply for recognition.

Sports Facilities

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to increase the investment in community sports facilities, given the link between sporting investment and Olympic medal success rates. (AQO 38/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The new 10-year strategy for sport which my Department has been developing, in association with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), has identified the need for new, improved and shared sports facilities to a standard comparable with other similar regions of the UK. SNI is currently developing a number of

new programmes which will help address this need, including new investment in places for sport in communities and training of coaches and leaders in communities and clubs across Northern Ireland.

Development of Cultural Facilities

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider the establishment of a capital programme to support the development of cultural facilities. (AQO 124/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As the Member will be aware the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has an agreed ten year capital programme under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) of over £650 million.

Within the ISNI there is an approved three year capital programme over the CSR period 2008 - 2011 of £232m. The DCAL programme supports the development of a wide range of cultural, arts and leisure facilities.

Ulster Grand Prix

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the cancellation of this year's Ulster Grand Prix, what plans his Department has to support the event in 2009. (AQO 81/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As a result of the severe weather conditions experienced across Northern Ireland during the week beginning 11th August racing at the Ulster Grand Prix at Dundrod was seriously disrupted, resulting in the cancellation of racing on the main race day that has impacted financially on the event.

I was in attendance on race day and spoke with organisers who, it should be noted are all unpaid volunteers, about the financial implications of the cancellation of the event. On Monday 18th August officials from my Department's Events Unit contacted the organisers, and requested a report detailing the disruption during race week and the cancellation of racing on the main race day. When this report has been received I will want to give the matter further consideration given the significance of the Ulster Grand Prix locally and internationally.

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As a result of the Review of Public Administration DCAL's events function is anticipated to transfer from my Department to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in 2009.

EDUCATION

Donaghadee High School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education when she intends to announce the future of Donaghadee High School. (AQW 56/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): D'fhoilsigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Oirdheisceirt togra forbartha i mí Aibreán 2008, gur chóir go ndruidfí Donaghadee High School le héifeacht ó 31 Lúnasa 2009. D'fhógair mé mo chinneadh chun an togra forbartha a fhaomhadh ar 17 Meán Fómhair 2008.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board published a development proposal in April 2008, that Donaghadee High School should close with effect from 31 August 2009. I announced my decision to approve the development proposal on 17 September 2008.

Teaching of Irish in Primary Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools in the (i) maintained; and (ii) controlled sectors, teach any level of Irish. (AQW 156/09)

The Minister of Education: Cé go dtugann cuid mhór bunscoileanna in Aontroim Thuaidh agus ar fud an tuaiscirt deis dá ndaltaí Gaeilge a fhoghlaim chomh maith le roinnt teangacha eile, is iad na scoileanna féin a dhéanann an cinneadh leis seo a dhéanamh agus ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas sin.

While many primary schools in North Antrim and across the north offer their pupils an opportunity to learn Irish and indeed many other languages, the decision to do this is one for individual schools and information is not held by my Department. We do, however, collect details of those schools that are participating in my primary languages programme, which provides peripatetic support for primary schools that wish to deliver certain languages, including Irish. The schools that have signed up to teach and learn Irish through this programme to date are listed below.

Christ the King Primary School, Ballynahinch	Catholic maintained
St Colman's Primary School, Lisburn	Catholic maintained
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	Catholic maintained
Ballyhackett Primary School, Castlerock	Catholic maintained
Broadbridge Primary School, Eglinton	Catholic maintained
Faughanvale Primary School, Greysteel	Catholic maintained

Rosemount Primary School, Derry	Catholic maintained
St Brigid's Primary School, Knockloughrim	Catholic maintained
St Columba's Primary School, Garvagh	Catholic maintained
St Finlough's Primary School, Sistrakeel	Catholic maintained
St John's Primary School, Maghera	Catholic maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Draperstown	Catholic maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Claudy	Catholic maintained
St Patrick's & St Joseph's Primary School, Garvagh	Catholic maintained
St Patrick's Primary School (Glen)	Catholic maintained
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School, Dungiven	Catholic maintained
Ballyholland Primary School	Catholic maintained
St Brigid's Primary School, Crossmaglen	Catholic maintained
St Bronagh's Primary School, Rostrevor	Catholic maintained
St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Keady	Catholic maintained
St Malachy's Primary School, Camlough	Catholic maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Mullaghbawn	Catholic maintained
St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland	Catholic maintained
St Patrick's Primary School, Mayobridge	Catholic maintained
St Patrick's Primary School, Hilltown	Catholic maintained
Belvoir Park Primary School, Belfast	Controlled
Mercy Primary School, Belfast	Catholic maintained
Sacred Heart Primary School, Belfast	Catholic maintained
St John the Baptist Boys' Primary School, Belfast	Catholic maintained
St Kevin's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic maintained
St Macnisius' Primary School, Tannaghmore	Catholic maintained
St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic maintained
Holy Family Primary School, Downpatrick	Catholic maintained
Millennium Integrated Primary School, Saintfield	GMI
Sacred Heart Primary School, Newcastle	Catholic maintained
St Caolan's Primary School, Ballynahinch	Catholic maintained
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan	Catholic maintained

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education when the South Eastern Education and Library Board will be re-instated. (AQW 165/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá athbhunú bhord SEELB, a bhí ar fionraí, faoi bhreithniú go fóill agus déanfaidh mé mo chinneadh a fhógairt in am is i dtráth.

The reinstatement of the suspended board of SEELB remains under consideration and I shall announce my decision in due course.

Ballywalter Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education when the capital funding, which was granted in 2006, will be released to enable work to be done to Ballywalter Primary School. (AQW 166/09)

The Minister of Education: Níor deonaíodh aon chistiú caipitil sa bhliain 2006 le haghaidh oibreacha móra tógála ag Ballywalter Primary School.

No capital funding was granted in 2006 for major building works at Ballywalter Primary School.

Teachers' Pay

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education why teachers are not receiving a pay rise in September 2008 in line with their colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 188/09)

The Minister of Education: Teachers in England and Wales have their salaries determined by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, following recommendations made by the independent School Teachers' Review Body (STRB). The STRB's remit extends only to England and Wales: teachers in Scotland have their pay awards agreed by the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers.

The pay of teachers in grant-aided schools here is negotiated by the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools). While the local bargaining process has historically concluded by broadly mirroring the settlement reached for teachers in England and Wales, a pay remit approval process must nevertheless be completed in accordance with guidance on the application of public sector pay policy endorsed by the Executive.

Faoi réir chomhaontú an choiste idirbheartaíochta, déanfaidh mo Roinn cinneadh ar phá a eisiúint, a bheas in éifeacht ó 1 Meán Fómhair 2008, nuair a bheas an próiseas faofa shainchúram pá críochnaithe.

Subject to agreement by the negotiating committee, my Department will issue a pay determination, effective from 1 September 2008, on completion of the pay remit approval process.

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The Minister of Education: Teachers in England and Wales have their salaries determined by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, following recommendations made by the independent School Teachers' Review Body (STRB). The STRB's remit extends only to England and Wales: teachers in Scotland have their pay awards agreed by the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers.

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Subject to agreement by the negotiating committee, my Department will issue a pay determination, effective from 1 September 2008, on completion of the pay remit approval process.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education on what date she intends to re-constitute the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 195/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá athbhunú bhord SEELB, a bhí ar fionraí, faoi bhreithniú go fóill agus déanfaidh mé mo chinneadh a fhógairt in am is i dtráth.

The reinstatement of the suspended board of SEELB remains under consideration and I shall announce my decision in due course.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education why she has not re-constituted the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 196/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá athbhunú bhord SEELB, a bhí ar fionraí, faoi bhreithniú go fóill agus déanfaidh mé mo chinneadh a fhógairt in am is i dtráth.

The reinstatement of the suspended board of SEELB remains under consideration and I shall announce my decision in due course.

Kindle Integrated Primary School

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether the well-being of children attending Kindle Integrated Primary School was the prime consideration prior to her decision to close the school. (AQW 201/09)

The Minister of Education: The well-being of the children concerned is of primary concern in the consideration of every proposal for the closure of a school. In 2007/08 only 31 children were enrolled in Kindle Integrated Primary School (IPS), of whom 4 were Year 1 children. I therefore agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal that the school was no longer sustainable. I had also visited the school at the beginning of this year.

The majority of children attending Kindle IPS were from families located at the nearby Ballykinler army base. Before reaching a decision on this proposal, the department received confirmation from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that all primary age children from the Ballykinler base had been able to obtain places at other local schools which would meet their children's needs.

A full statutory consultation exercise was undertaken by the South Eastern Education and Library Board which provided the opportunity for all views and concerns to be raised before a decision was taken, including any issues in regard to equality.

Níor sáraíodh cearta na bpáistí mar atá leagtha amach i gCoinbhinsiún na hEorpa um Chearta an Duine mar gheall ar an chinneadh chun Kindle IPS a dhruim.

The rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights have not been infringed by the decision to close Kindle IPS.

Kindle Integrated Primary School

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether the special circumstances affecting a majority of children attending Kindle Integrated Primary School was given due consideration prior to her decision to close the school. (AQW 202/09)

The Minister of Education: The well-being of the children concerned is of primary concern in the consideration of every proposal for the closure of a school. In 2007/08 only 31 children were enrolled in Kindle Integrated Primary School (IPS), of whom 4 were Year 1 children. I therefore agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal that the school was no longer sustainable. I had also visited the school at the beginning of this year.

The majority of children attending Kindle IPS were from families located at the nearby Ballykinler army base. Before reaching a decision on this proposal, the department received confirmation from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that all primary age children from the Ballykinler base had been able to obtain places at other local schools which would meet their children's needs.

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The rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights have not been infringed by the decision to close Kindle IPS.

Kindle Integrated Primary School

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether the proposal to close Kindle Integrated Primary School was equality proofed. (AQW 203/09)

The Minister of Education: The well-being of the children concerned is of primary concern in the consideration of every proposal for the closure of a school. In 2007/08 only 31 children were enrolled in Kindle Integrated Primary School (IPS), of whom 4 were Year 1 children. I therefore agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal that the school was no longer sustainable. I had also visited the school at the beginning of this year.

The majority of children attending Kindle IPS were from families located at the nearby Ballykinler army base. Before reaching a decision on this proposal, the

department received confirmation from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that all primary age children from the Ballykinler base had been able to obtain places at other local schools which would meet their children's needs.

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The rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights have not been infringed by the decision to close Kindle IPS.

Kindle Integrated Primary School

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether her decision to close Kindle Integrated Primary School infringed upon the rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. (AQW 204/09)

The Minister of Education: The well-being of the children concerned is of primary concern in the consideration of every proposal for the closure of a school. In 2007/08 only 31 children were enrolled in Kindle Integrated Primary School (IPS), of whom 4 were Year 1 children. I therefore agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal that the school was no longer sustainable. I had also visited the school at the beginning of this year.

The majority of children attending Kindle IPS were from families located at the nearby Ballykinler army base. Before reaching a decision on this proposal, the department received confirmation from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that all primary age children from the Ballykinler base had been able to obtain places at other local schools which would meet their children's needs.

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The rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights have not been infringed by the decision to close Kindle IPS.

Kindle Integrated Primary School

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education if the alternative schools being offered to children transferring from Kindle Integrated Primary School will provide a similar setting to that experienced by the children at their previous school. (AQW 210/09)

The Minister of Education: The well-being of the children concerned is of primary concern in the consideration of every proposal for the closure of a school. In 2007/08 only 31 children were enrolled in Kindle Integrated Primary School (IPS), of whom 4 were Year 1 children. I therefore agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal that the school was no longer sustainable. I had also visited the school at the beginning of this year.

The majority of children attending Kindle IPS were from families located at the nearby Ballykinler army base. Before reaching a decision on this proposal, the department received confirmation from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that all primary age children from the Ballykinler base had been able to obtain places at other local schools which would meet their children's needs.

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The rights of children as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights have not been infringed by the decision to close Kindle IPS.

Education and Library Boards

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education how many out-of-court settlements there have been involving each Education and Library Board since devolution; and the costs incurred in relation to legal fees and compensation for each case. (AQW 219/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an t-eolas atá mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos:

The information detailed in the table below has been provided by each Education and Library Board:

SUMMARY**CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT SINCE DEVOLUTION**

	Damages	Plaintiffs Costs	Board Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims	Reference
BELB	£228,941.15	£85,770.07	£94,935.01	£409,646.23	30	Annex A
NEELB	£212,876.00	£103,853.66	£65,493.13	£382,222.79	16	Annex B
SEELB	£255,693.07	£117,218.09	£69,746.36	£442,657.52	27	Annex C
SELB	£276,128.38	£151,866.20	£89,603.61	£517,598.19	28	Annex D
WELB	£58,130.91	£30,030.36	£27,282.46	£115,443.73	17	Annex E

EMPLOYMENT, JUDICIAL REVIEWS, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY TRIBUNALS SINCE DEVOLUTION*

	Total Amount of Compensation	Plaintiffs Costs	Board Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Cases
BELB	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	4
NEELB	£68,000.00	Nil	£34,583.00	£102,583.00	8
SEELB	£16,500.00	£375.00	£6,700.00	£23,575.00	6
SELB	£52,000.00	Nil	£14,250.00	£66,250.00	4
WELB	£43,000.00	Nil	£10,230.00	£53,230.00	4

* These cases are not provided on an individual basis as this may compromise the confidentiality clause agreed as part of such settlements.

ANNEX A**BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD****CLAIMS SETTLED OUT-OF-COURT SINCE DEVOLUTION**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	No of claims
£8,800.00	£1,104.05	£5,225.00	£15,129.05	1
£2,500.00	£1,058.40	£2,495.00	£6,053.40	1
£3,500.00	£3,737.30	£1,629.20	£8,866.50	1
£500.00	£1,696.87	£1,694.00	£3,890.87	1
£1,000.00	£1,974.42	£652.20	£3,626.62	1
£41,982.10	£12,476.00	£7,612.25	£62,070.35	1
£6,500.00	£3,068.00	£1,747.20	£11,315.20	1
£7,500.00	£2,801.50	£1,553.10	£11,854.60	1
£2,500.00	£1,897.55	£354.00	£4,751.55	1
£2,000.00	£2,991.89	£1,786.10	£6,777.99	1
£3,000.00	£2,666.00	£1,164.00	£6,830.00	1
£16,174.49	£4,834.70	£3,575.00	£24,584.19	1
£3,000.00	£2,310.00	£519.00	£5,829.00	1
£4,000.00	£2,876.00	£1,321.15	£8,197.15	1
£1,000.00	£1,012.20	£323.05	£2,335.25	1
£1,250.00	£2,236.00	£1,472.32	£4,958.32	1
£12,500.00	£3,925.00	£1,579.50	£18,004.50	1
£308.96			£308.96	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	No of claims
£180.00			£180.00	1
£345.00		£60.50	£405.50	1
£10,000.00	£9,130.15	£16,163.28	£35,293.43	1
£2,500.00	£4,735.81	£8,952.47	£16,188.28	1
£5,000.00	£1,949.00	£2,488.88	£9,437.88	1
£3,000.00	£1,086.00	£1,993.00	£6,079.00	1
£7,500.00	£1,437.20	£3,097.90	£12,035.10	1
£6,250.00	£3,195.34	£1,207.20	£10,652.54	1
£65,464.85	£3,358.33	£19,404.00	£88,227.18	1
£3,685.75	£4,832.67	£1,818.53	£10,336.95	1
£6,500.00	£1,408.40	£3,094.63	£11,003.03	1
£500.00	£1,971.29	£1,952.55	£4,423.84	1
£228,941.15	£85,770.07	£94,935.01	£409,646.23	30

ANNEX B**NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD****CLAIMS SETTLED OUT-OF-COURT SINCE DEVOLUTION**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
£30,000	£9,416.36	£5,250.00	£44,666	1
£12,500	£7,752.47	£4,799.29	£25,052	1
£40,000	£11,737.25	£7,808.96	£59,546	1
£7,500	£12,413.82	£7,412.17	£27,326	1
£17,500	£17,555.30	£10,052.18	£45,107	1
£5,000	£4,500	£6,406.25	£15,906	1
-	-	£2,002.20	£2,002	1
£8,901	£3,761.15	£2,546.99	£15,209	1
£2,000	£2,113.51	£1,753.62	£5,867	1
£25,000	£5,130.94	£2,304.61	£32,436	1
£7,000	£3,305.70	-	£10,306	1
	-	£2,298.26	£2,298	1
£475	-	-	£475	1
£4,500	£1,327.95	-	£5,828	1
£17,500	£11,733.67	£6,022.17	£35,256	1
£35,000	£13,105.54	£6,836.43	£54,942	1
£212,876.00	£103,853.66	£65,493.13	£382,222.79	15

ANNEX C
SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

CLAIMS SETTLED OUT-OF-COURT DURING SINCE DEVOLUTION

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
3,500.00	2,676.86	1,632.15	7,809.01	1
35,000.00	13,275.93	6,926.36	55,202.29	1
2,000.00	2,096.93	1,262.40	5,359.33	1
50,000.00	9,807.20	10,420.90	70,228.10	1
3,250.00	1,393.20		4,643.20	1
45,000.00	19,255.80	22,095.66	86,351.46	1
750.00	1,434.59	737.07	2,921.66	1
4,500.00	2,248.00	1,043.70	7,791.70	1
7,500.00	2,773.50	2,220.62	12,494.12	1
20,000.00	7,529.00	4,944.90	32,473.90	1
2,500.00	6,638.71	938.10	10,076.81	1
2,500.00	1,682.50	442.00	4,624.50	1
4,500.00	2,216.50	1,118.25	7,834.75	1
80.00			80.00	1
295.00			295.00	1
91.24			91.24	1
178.83			178.83	1
40.00			40.00	1
180.00			180.00	1
17,500.00	10,405.95	5,079.25	32,985.20	1
5,505.00	3,743.08	2,135.50	11,383.58	1
6,000.00	3,567.30	800.00	10,367.30	1
7,500.00	1,509.00		9,009.00	1
2,000.00	1,856.00	690.00	4,546.00	1
5,000.00	11,427.11	1,397.50	17,824.61	1
323.00			323.00	1
30,000.00	11,680.93	5,862.00	47,542.93	1
£255,693.07	£117,218.09	£69,746.36	£442,657.52	27

ANNEX D
SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT SINCE DEVOLUTION

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
5,000.00	7,650.30	9,083.83	£21,734.13	1
62,500.00	29,285.68	15,861.61	£107,647.29	1
4,000.00	4,167.40	1,724.14	£9,891.54	1
8,750.00	3,801.73	2,285.28	£14,837.01	1
25,000.00	20,201.61	9,698.90	£54,900.51	1
10,000.00	14,175.78	7,472.50	£31,648.28	1
7,500.00	8,743.94	5,124.25	£21,368.19	1
4,728.84	2,958.93	1,544.00	£9,231.77	1
10,000.00	9,734.95	5,774.59	£25,509.54	1
4,000.00	2,920.63	1,494.20	£8,414.83	1
17,833.05	8,063.21	4,864.30	£30,760.56	1
10,000.00	8,087.33	4,788.00	£22,875.33	1
1,000.00	0	347.9	£1,347.90	1
6,000.00	4,457.32	6,711.85	£17,169.17	1
46,582.08	14,548.38	5,078.66	£66,209.12	1
2,785.96	0	0	£2,785.96	1
16,000.00	6,073.50	3,241.00	£25,314.50	1
0	0	1,159.80	£1,159.80	1
210	0	0	£210.00	1
27000	4,873.13	2,340.00	£34,213.13	1
223.84	0	0	£223.84	1
130	0	0	£130.00	1
89.95			£89.95	1
4,502.50	2,122.38	1,008.80	£7,633.68	1
164.68			£164.68	1
60			£60.00	1
2,002.85			£2,002.85	1
64.63			£64.63	1
£276,128.38	£151,866.20	£89,603.61	£517,598.19	28

ANNEX E
WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

CLAIMS SETTLED OUT-OF-COURT SINCE DEVOLUTION

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
£7,500.00	£3,921.28	£779.03	£12,200.31	1
£3,000.00	£2,594.39	£1,906.96	£7,501.35	1
£500.00	£3,589.42	£3,594.00	£7,683.42	1
£140.00	£0.00	£0.00	£140.00	1
£240.87	£0.00	£0.00	£240.87	1
£88.13	£0.00	£0.00	£88.13	1
£175.00	£0.00	£0.00	£175.00	1
£193.71	£0.00	£0.00	£193.71	1
£6,059.49	£2,448.27	£5,894.38	£14,402.14	1
£1,000.00	£2,074.72	£1,094.74	£4,169.46	1
£7,500.00	£4,226.91	£4,252.90	£15,979.81	1
£21,540.72	£6,337.52	£7,239.88	£35,118.12	1
£120.00	£0.00	£0.00	£120.00	1
£114.20	£0.00	£0.00	£114.20	1
£266.00	£0.00	£0.00	£266.00	1
£7,192.79	£3,156.08	£1,299.75	£11,648.62	1
£2,500.00	£1,681.77	£1,220.82	£5,402.59	1
£58,130.91	£30,030.36	£27,282.46	£115,443.73	17

Grammar Schools in North Antrim

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of 11-plus grades accepted by grammar schools in the North Antrim constituency, in each of the last 3 academic years. (AQW 251/09)

The Minister of Education: The numbers requested are as follows:

School Name	Breakdown of 11 plus grades accepted by grammar schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2007/08 school year						
	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Others
Cambridge House Grammar	29	16	24	37	32	21	4
St Louis Grammar	73	18	13	15	10	4	0
Ballymena Academy	139	18	19	1	0	0	0
Dalriada Grammar	104	19	1	0	0	0	2

School Name	Breakdown of 11 plus grades accepted by grammar schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2006/07 school year						
	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Others
Cambridge House Grammar	24	14	42	30	38	20	2
St Louis Grammar	90	20	26	3	0	2	1
Ballymena Academy	138	29	6	0	0	0	3
Dalriada Grammar	85	16	8	11	2	0	4

School Name	Breakdown of 11 plus grades accepted by grammar schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2005/06 school year						
	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Others
Cambridge House Grammar	32	35	38	41	12	8	4
St Louis Grammar	80	17	23	16	3	2	1
Ballymena Academy	156	17	2	0	0	0	2
Dalriada Grammar	93	28	2	0	0	0	4

Fuarthas na figiúirí atá léirithe sa tábla ó eolas a thug Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt don Roinn i mí Dheireadh Fómhair do gach bliain. Tagraíonn na figiúirí faoin cheannnteideal “Others” do dháltaí a glacadh isteach, nach raibh gráid sa scrúdu aistrithe acu.

The numbers shown in each table are taken from returns made to the Department by the North Eastern and Education and Library Board in October each year. The numbers shown under the heading of “Others” refer to pupils admitted without transfer test grades.

Teachers’ Pay

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking (i) to ensure the resolution of teachers pay negotiations to bring equality of pay with teachers in the rest of the United Kingdom; and (ii) to reduce the risk of industrial action by teachers. (AQW 262/09)

The Minister of Education: The pay of teachers in grant-aided schools here is negotiated by the Teachers’ Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools). The local bargaining process has traditionally concluded by broadly mirroring the settlement reached for teachers in England and Wales, with some contextualisation to reflect local circumstances. Equality of pay with teachers in England and Wales already holds good for the pay spines and rates of pay of teachers here, and historically teachers here have received the same pay awards as their counterparts in England and Wales. Where arrangements differ from those obtaining in England and Wales, this is the result of local

negotiation and agreement by the Teacher Negotiating Committee.

Tá oifigigh i mo Roinn ina gcomhaltaí de Choiste Idirbheartaíochta na Múinteoirí agus buaileann siad go rialta le hionadaithe d’fhostóirí na múinteoirí agus leis an chúig cheardchumann aitheanta múinteoirí. Taobh amuigh den chóras foirmiúil idirbheartaíochta, bíonn mé féin agus oifigigh i mo Roinn i dteagmháil le múinteoirí agus lena n-ionadaithe go rialta i dtaca le réimse leathan ceisteanna oideachais.

Officials of my Department are members of the Teacher Negotiating Committee and meet regularly with representatives of teachers’ employers and the five recognised teacher unions. Outside the formal negotiating machinery, both I and my officials engage regularly with teachers and their representatives on a wide range of education issues.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many new post-primary schools are likely to be built in anticipation of the new Ards and Down Area Plan, and over what initial period. (AQW 272/09)

The Minister of Education: There are no plans for the provision of new post-primary schools in the Ards and Down Districts linked to the outcome of the Ards and North Down Area Plan 2015. Several previously announced major capital projects are currently at various stages of the planning process which will provide replacement provision either through new-build or extension and refurbishment. The details of these projects are listed below.

School	Details Of Project
Assumption Grammar, Ballynahinch	Extension and Refurbishment.
The High School, Ballynahinch	Replacement school on existing site.
Glastry College, Ballyhalbert	Replacement school on extended site.
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	Replacement school on existing site.

The SEELB is also planning to take forward a major capital project for a replacement school for Down High School, Downpatrick.

Táthar ag súil go mbeidh obair an ghrúpa pleanála ar bhonn ceantar áitiúil mar bhonn eolais ag forbairt sholáthar iarbhunscoileanna sa cheantar amach anseo.

The work of the local area-based planning group is also expected to inform the future development of post-primary provision in the area.

Pupils in the Strangford Constituency

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many children living in the Strangford constituency are currently enrolled in post-primary schools outside the constituency. (AQW 274/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2007/08 bhí 4,084 dalta ina gcónaí i dtoghcheantar Loch Cuan a bhí rollaithe in iarbhunscoileanna taobh amuigh den toghcheantar.

In the 2007/08 year there were 4,084 pupils living in the Strangford constituency enrolled in post primary schools outside of the constituency.

Pupils in the Strangford Constituency

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many P7 children, living in the Strangford constituency, transferred to post-primary schools outside the constituency last year; and what percentage of the total number of post-primary transfers this represents. (AQW 275/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn an t-eolas seo, ach is féidir a rá go raibh 1,249 dalta i mbliain 8 ina gcónaí i dtoghcheantar Loch Cuan sa scoilbhliain 2007/08, agus bhí 613 (49.08%) acu rollaithe in iarbhunscoileanna taobh amuigh den toghcheantar.

The Department does not hold this information, however, it can be agreed that in the 2007/08 year there were 1,249 year 8 pupils resident in the Strangford constituency, of which, 613 (49.08%) were enrolled in post primary schools outside of the constituency.

After-School Clubs

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education to confirm if a child must be registered and in attendance at a specific primary or post-primary school to be eligible for registration at that school's after-schools' clubs; and to outline the legislation that govern this criterion. (AQW 282/09)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir le scoileanna soláthar iarscoile a chur ar fáil do dhaltai atá rollaithe i scoileanna eile agus tá neart samplaí ann de seo i ngach ceantar. Níl reachtaíocht ar leith ann a rialaíonn cásanna mar seo, ach bheifí ag dúil leis go gcomhlíonfadh scoileanna aon socruithe dlíthiúla, árachais nó cosanta leanai.

Schools may make after-school provision available to pupils enrolled in other schools and there are many examples of this across all areas. There is no specific legislation governing this situation, though schools would be expected to comply with any legal, insurance or child protection arrangements.

Schools should take advice from their ELB and/or managing authority regarding these issues.

Council for Education in World Citizenship's Model UN Programme

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education if she has any plans to continue funding the Council for Education in World Citizenship's Model UN programme. (AQW 338/09)

The Minister of Education: Is é an t-aon fhoinsé maoinithe sa Roinn atá oiriúnach do sheachadadh na hoibre a dhéanann an Chomhairle um Oideachas i Saoránacht Dhomhanda ná trí Scéim Bunmhaoinithe Chaidreamh Pobail na Roinne Oideachais (CRCFS) atá go hiomlán leithdháilte go dtí 31 Márta 2009.

The only funding source in the Department appropriate to the delivery of the work carried out by the Council for Education in World Citizenship is through the Department of Education's Community Relations Core Funding Scheme (CRCFS) which is fully committed until 31 March 2009. The Department is currently reviewing its Community Relations policy including funding mechanisms. Therefore, the Department is not considering any further requests for community relations funding until the policy is in place, which will be in 2009.

Children Living in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children living in the North Down constituency

are currently enrolled in post-primary schools outside the constituency. (AQW 347/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa scoilbhliain 2007/08 bhí 6,222 dalta ag iarbhunscoileanna deontaschúnta ina gcónaí i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh, agus as sin, bhí 1,690 acu rollaithe in iarbhunscoileanna taobh amuigh den toghcheantar.

In the 2007/08 year there were 6,222 pupils at grant-aided post-primary schools resident in the North Down constituency, of which, 1,690 were enrolled in post-primary schools outside of the constituency.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

New Deal Programme in Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the impact of his Department's decision to award the tender to operate the New Deal programme in Derry/Londonderry to England-based company A4E. (AQW 126/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate, has selected ten 'Preferred Bidders' one of which is A4E to deliver the Steps to Work provision, which has replaced the New Deal Programme, in the Londonderry area.

No final decision has been made on the award of contract for the Foyle area.

New Deal Programme in Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the tendering criteria which informed the decision to award the tender to operate the New Deal programme in Derry/Londonderry to A4E. (AQW 127/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate, has selected ten 'Preferred Bidders' one of which is A4E to deliver the Steps to Work provision, which has replaced the New Deal Programme, in the Londonderry area. However, as stated in Part 1, "Instructions to Tenderers", point 15 of the tender document, before the Department can proceed to award contracts we require confirmation from the named sub-contractors that they have a formal agreement with the Preferred Bidder to provide Services as identified in their tender.

All tenderers for the Steps to Work Programme were assessed against the following criteria broken down into sub-criteria which were included in the original tender documentation available to those who wished to tender for the Programme:

- Methodology
- Relevant Experience
- Capacity to Deliver

Homeworking

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the extent of 'home working'; and to set out the employment protections that are offered to those engaged in such activities.

(AQW 172/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A home worker is anyone who mainly works from home. Home workers are employed in a range of activities including manufacturing, distribution and teleworking, the latter of which largely involves office type work.

Latest figures, from the April to June 2008 Labour Force Survey, estimate that 80,000 persons or 10.3% of all those in employment in Northern Ireland work at home or use their home as a base for work. The equivalent figure for employees only (i.e. excluding the self-employed) is lower at 18,000 (2.7% of all employees).

An individual's employment rights depend on their employment status i.e. whether under the law they are self-employed, an employee, or a worker. Home based employees have access to the same employment rights as other employees, whereas workers only have access to the core rights, in areas such as working time, national minimum wage and health and safety. In addition, in relation to home based employees, an employer must carry out a health and safety risk assessment and address any identified risks.

With regards to teleworking, it is worth noting there is a European wide agreement between employer and employee organisations. Guidance based on this agreement has been produced and is available from my Department's website.

Employment protections generally do not apply to those who are self-employed.

Further information on home working is also available from www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk, and www.direct.gov.uk.

Employees for Technology Companies

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to address the shrinking pool of employees for technology companies. (AQW 246/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

This issue is being addressed in two key ways:

- through implementation of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) for IT in Northern Ireland, published by e-skills UK (the Sector Skills Council for IT and Telecoms) in February 2007. This SSA covers all aspects and levels of IT skills, from user skills to IT professional.
- through implementation of the ICT Future Skills Action Plan, published by my Department in association with Invest Northern Ireland, e-skills UK and Momentum (the ICT Trade Federation in NI) in June 2008. This plan focuses on the particular needs of the software industry, which make up the majority of ICT companies in Northern Ireland.

Initiatives taking place under the SSA for IT include:

- Computer Clubs for Girls (CC4G) aimed at schools who have not had a strong back ground in ICT related subjects.
- An upskilling programme for the ICT sector designed to meet the needs of the existing workforce. This is called “Pathways,” and is being developed by e-skills UK. This is the first structured approach to skills provision that focuses on actual workplace upskilling.

Actions contained within the ICT Future Skills Action Plan include:

- Software Professional Course which converts non-IT graduates into software professionals over a 35 week period. Significant improvements have been made to the basis on which the course is offered – an increased training allowance, removing the requirement to be unemployed to participate in the course, and a high profile advertising campaign to promote the course.
- A major career attractiveness campaign for the ICT sector. This has commenced with a series of outreach events aimed at young people currently considering subject choices for university applications and will be complemented in early 2009 with a media advertising campaign.
- A workshop taking place in October 2008 involving representatives of the ICT industry and higher education providers to identify additional actions which can be taken to improve course enrolments and retention, and to ensure the curricula on offer best meet the needs of local companies.

My Department has also offered local companies the opportunity to source talent from outside Northern Ireland on an individual basis through the European Employment Service (EURES) and collectively through a skills mission for this sector.

In addition, a number of technology companies are participating in the Department’s C’m on Over campaign (to encourage those currently studying at a number of mainland universities to consider employment opportunities in Northern Ireland).

Departmental Responsibilities: Employment and Learning

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all areas that are the responsibility of his Department. (AQW 257/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The three pillars of the work of the Department for Employment and Learning are innovation, skills and employment. The Department is responsible for policy, legislation, finance, corporate governance, and service delivery across a wide range of areas within this remit, including:

- Higher Education, including research and innovation
- Further Education, including qualifications and curriculum, and quality improvement
- Careers Information and Guidance
- Training Programmes through Training for Success and Apprenticeships NI, including Adult Apprenticeships
- Adult upskilling
- The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland including skills forecasting and development, the Essential Skills strategy and Sector Skills Councils
- Employment Services and Programmes, including Welfare to Work
- Employment Rights and Relations, including the Office of the Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunals, the Labour Relations Agency, the Industrial Court, and the Redundancy Payments Service
- Responsibility as Managing Authority for the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2007-2013
- Student Finance
- The Construction Industry Training Board

I have placed a copy of the Department’s Corporate Plan in the Library, which gives more detail on the Department’s responsibilities.

Number of Colleges

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for a list of all colleges under the control of his Department. (AQW 258/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland are incorporated bodies. Thus, whilst the Department core funds Colleges, each of them enjoys a high degree of autonomy. The six Further Education Colleges are as follows:

Southern Regional College

Belfast Metropolitan College

Northern Regional College

South West College

South Eastern Regional College

North West Regional College

There are also two University Colleges; Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. Both are Colleges of Queen's University, Belfast and are responsible primarily for the delivery of teacher education. In common with other Higher Education Institutions, they are autonomous bodies responsible for their own policies and practices.

Departmental Budget: Employment and Learning

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his Department's budget for the next 3 years. (AQW 260/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning's total current and capital expenditure budgets for the next three years, as detailed in the Budget 2008 – 2011 document, are set out below:

2008/09	£788.6m
2009/10	£825.7m
2010/11	£879.7m

Community Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the community groups that his Department funds in the North Down constituency. (AQW 261/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning currently funds Conservation Volunteers NI. This

organisation was offered funding for their Training for Employment Project over a three year period, April 2008-March 2010, under the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2007-2013. A total of £216,628 was offered, comprising £133,310 EU funding and £83,318 DEL funding.

Conservation Volunteers NI is also currently contracted, under ApprenticeshipsNI, for the provision of Level 2 and Level 3 Apprenticeship training in Environmental Conservation and Amenity Horticulture, as well as for the provision of training under Training for Success. Contracts were on the basis of a competitive tendering process undertaken with Central Procurement Directorate, DFP.

Training for Success

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many Training for Success contracts were awarded in 2007; (ii) how many training organisations and providers, awarded level 2 and level 3 Training for Success contracts, have sub-contracted all or part of the contracts; (iii) to detail the contracts sub-contracted out by each organisation; and (iv) if more level 2 contracts have been sub-contracted out compared to level 3 contracts. (AQW 266/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) In May 2007, contracts for the Training for Success provision were awarded to 53 Training Organisations (providers).
- (ii) None of the Training Organisations have sub-contracted fully the provision but 16 Training Organisations have subcontracted components of the provision.
- (iii) The following components of the provision have been sub-contracted;

Training Organisation	Level	Elements Of Provision Sub-Contracted		
		Essential Skills	Underpinning Knowledge	Technical Certificate
A4E	2 & 3	Workers Education Association	-	-
Conservation Volunteers	2 & 3	North Down Training	-	-
Plumbing & Mechanical Services Training (NI) Ltd	2 & 3	All 6 regional FE colleges	All 6 regional FE colleges	All 6 regional FE colleges
Bombardier	2 & 3	Belfast Metropolitan College	Belfast Metropolitan College	Belfast Metropolitan College
Rutledge Joblink, Londonderry	2	-	HairAffair	HairAffair
Food & Drink Training Council	2 & 3	A4e	Southern Regional College (some aspects)	Southern Regional College (some aspects)
Seven Towers Training	2 & 3	-	Wrightbus Ballymena, Flamingo Beauty	Wrightbus Ballymena, Flamingo Beauty
Electrical Training Trust	3	All 6 regional FE colleges	All 6 regional FE colleges	All 6 regional FE colleges
Transport Training Services	2	-	Skill net Bristol (DAF Trucks) and Valleyforge Newhaven (AVOCO Trucks)	Skill net Bristol (DAF Trucks) and Valleyforge Newhaven (AVOCO Trucks)
People 1st	2 & 3	-	The Link Works, Newco	The Link Works, Newco
CAFRE	2 & 3	Northern Regional College	-	-
Rutledge Joblink, Limavady	2	-	HairAffair	HairAffair
Coalisland Training Services	2 & 3	-	Rutledge Joblink Cookstown	Rutledge Joblink Cookstown
Engineering Training Council	2	Amicus		
Wade Training	2	-	-	Craft Recruitment
North City Training	2		Paragon Training Services, Jennymount Training Services	Paragon Training Services, Jennymount Training Services

- (iv) 16 components of Level 2 and 10 components of Level 3 provision have been sub- contracted since the award of contracts.

Students with Disabilities

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for a breakdown of each Further and Higher Education College's 'discretionary fund' to provide adjustments for students with disabilities; and to detail the criteria by which students with disabilities are eligible to apply for these funds. (AQW 304/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Discretionary Support Funds are intended to provide financial help to students including those with a disability, who are inhibited by financial considerations from accessing and participating in further education. My Department issues

guidance annually to Further Education Colleges on the application of the fund; individual colleges can determine specific eligibility criteria and administrative procedures, provided these are applied on a consistent basis. Funding in 2008/09 totals £2.5m. The allocations to each college are:

South ern Regional College	£454,888
North West Regional College	£412,486
South West Regional College	£151,852
Northern Regional College	£337,670
Belfast Metropolitan College	£749,489
South Eastern Regional College	£393,615

Additional Support Funds provide support for disabled students undertaking both mainstream and discrete provision; support may be in the form

of additional technical and/or personal support. Funding for 2008/09 has increased by £0.5m in respect of discrete provision to ensure priority continues to be applied to students who require this specialist provision. Funding in 2008/09 totals £1.5m for mainstream provision and a further £2.0m for discrete provision. The allocations to each college for the mainstream element are as detailed below. The allocations for discrete provision are made in year and are based on actual student numbers.

Southern Regional College	£308,020
North West Regional College	£177,444
South West College	£335,589
Northern Regional College	£214,035
Belfast Metropolitan College	£206,516
South Eastern Regional College	£258,396

The eligibility criteria for both Discretionary Support Funds and Additional Support Funds are extensive, and are set out in Departmental policy circulars FE 05/08 and FE 06/08 which are both

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the courses at Belfast Metropolitan College that are undersubscribed for the 2008-09 academic year; and what plans he has to address this. (AQW 310/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Enrolment for courses at Belfast Metropolitan College for the new academic year is still in process. It is not yet possible, therefore, to provide details of courses which might be under-subscribed in 2008/09.

The College has informed me that it will strive to maximise its enrolments in line with the targets, and the associated budgets, it has agreed with the Department for the 2008/09 academic year.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his strategy to make efficiency savings for his Department. (AQW 324/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has produced a detailed account of how it intends to make efficiency savings through its Efficiency Delivery Plan 2008 – 2011. The DEL Efficiency Delivery Plan is available on the DEL Website

Pathways Scheme

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what training is given to personal advisors under the Pathways scheme (Employment and Support Allowance/Incapacity Benefit), who interview and advise people suffering from depression and other mental health illnesses; (ii) what qualifications have been obtained by these advisors to give advice on forms of counselling and treatment suitable to each individual; (iii) what assessment is carried out to determine the effect of interviews on the health of interviewees suffering from depression and other mental illnesses; and (iv) under what circumstances is a decision made to stop calling people to these interviews. (AQW 361/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

(i) Pathways Personal Advisers receive an intensive [8/9 week] training programme to prepare them to conduct work-focused interviews with benefit claimants with health conditions and/or disabilities, including depression and mental health illnesses.

(ii) Pathways Personal Advisers are not trained in counselling, do not give medical advice and do not study for formal qualifications as part of their training: their role is to explore with clients their prospects of returning to work. If in the course of an interview either the client or Personal Adviser thinks that more specialist or professional medical intervention is necessary, the Personal Adviser can sign-post the client to appropriate support.

(iii) We have recently conducted an interim evaluation of Pathways to Work. This indicates that the Pathways approach has been well received by clients with many, including those with depression and mental health illnesses, reporting progress into or closer to work.

(iv) Personal Advisers can defer participation in interviews at any time if they feel the client is not able to benefit from the service.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments.

(AQW 434/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning is responsible for delivering PSA 2: Skills for Prosperity and PSA 3: Increasing Employment. Delivery Agreements for each, which relate to the three year period for the Programme for Government, are

published on the Departmental website. Since April the Department has made good initial progress, including:

- increasing the number of PhD research students at local universities;
- developing a Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance strategy; and
- enabling over 9,000 adult learners to achieve a recognised qualification in Essential Skills.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what courses are not being delivered in this academic year at Belfast Metropolitan College due to a lack of interest from prospective students.
(AQW 523/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Enrolment for courses at Belfast Metropolitan College for the new academic year is still in process. It is not yet possible, therefore, to provide details of courses which might not be delivered in this academic year due to lack of interest from prospective students.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Pump Storage Electricity Generation Project

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give details of the investigation into the possibility of a pump storage electricity generation project at Camlough.
(AQW 130/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): I understand that an energy company recently made some enquiries about the extent to which the land and equipment at Camlough remained in Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) ownership. The company was interested in the Camlough project as a concept which they see as complementary to wind and suitable for the Single Energy Market. However, the high capital costs and land issues involved mean that the company is not actively progressing the project at present.

Invest NI

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what land holdings are held by Invest NI, broken down by district council area.
(AQW 222/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI holds 2,779 acres of land across Northern Ireland. 2,015 acres of its estate is occupied by its client companies leaving 764 acres currently available for industrial use.

A table has been attached showing the breakdown of the land holding by Council area. Figures are correct as at 30th June 2008.

Invest NI land is held exclusively for its client companies with an approved business case and an immediate demonstrable business need.

TABLE 1
BREAKDOWN OF INVEST NI'S LAND HOLDING BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA.

District Council	Landholding (Acres)	Land Availability (Acres)
Antrim	110.44	26.50
Ards	31.50	4.10
Armagh	33.15	0
Ballymena	81.17	31.60
Ballymoney	12.75	1.70
Banbridge	27.43	0
Belfast	137.14	20.90
Carrickfergus	108.06	19.30
Castlereagh	13.25	0
Coleraine	74.36	49.90
Cookstown	38.31	5.80
Craigavon	360.25	181.10
Londonderry	419.21	107.10
Down	114.11	50.90
Dungannon	90.10	43.40
Fermanagh	126.50	37.70
Larne	35.70	4.70
Limavady	51.34	16.50
Lisburn	313.31	22.65
Magherafelt	72.17	16.10
Moyle	6.03	2
Newry & Mourne	100.28	0
Newtownabbey	283.20	99.90
North Down	62.81	20.10
Omagh	46.79	0
Strabane	29.17	2.10
Total	2778.53	764.05

Figures are correct as at 30th June 2008.

Gas Storage

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in pursuing the potential for gas storage in the salt deposit strata which lie under parts of East Antrim to ensure that Northern Ireland has a strategic gas storage capacity similar to other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 395/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department has granted Mineral Prospecting Licences to three companies to investigate the salt beds in different parts of the Larne and Islandmagee area. These companies are Antrim Resource Limited (“Antrim Resources”), Portland Gas NI Limited (“Portland Gas”) and Bord Gais Eireann (Bord Gais). “Portland Gas” has also obtained a licence from the Crown Estate to explore an area beneath part of Larne Lough.

The exploration programmes of these three companies are at different stages, in accordance with when the licences were issued. The furthest advanced is that of “Portland Gas” who have run a seismic survey over part of Larne Lough and Islandmagee. “Portland Gas” is now planning to drill a borehole to confirm their interpretation of the seismic data. In parallel, they are carrying out detailed technical, economic and environmental assessments, of the proposed gas storage facility.

The Department has also commissioned the British Geological Survey to collect new seismic data and integrate this with existing geological and geophysical data from sedimentary basins beneath Northern Ireland and adjoining offshore areas. This study will provide the Department with an assessment of all areas containing salt beds that might be used to provide strategic gas storage for Northern Ireland.

NACCO Materials Company

Mr O’Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support her Department is offering the NACCO materials company in Portadown following the announcement of a possible loss of 90 jobs. (AQW 401/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NACCO management contacted Invest NI on Friday, 12 September 2008, to confirm that no decisions have been taken with regard to future job levels and that they will be undertaking a thorough review of forward production for the first and second quarters of their new financial year; January - June 2009.

On completion of this detailed assessment, staff at NACCO will be fully informed of the outcome

and resulting decisions to be taken. This will be in advance of any public announcement.

Invest NI has offered the company significant financial assistance and remains in regular contact with the company. It will continue to work closely with the company to ensure its long term profitable future in Craigavon.

Utility Regulator

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she would initiate an immediate review of the decision of the Utility Regulator to approve the recent price increases of electricity and gas. (AQW 436/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The recent gas and electricity price increases were the subject of detailed scrutiny by the Utility Regulator, who concluded that the increases were justified as a result of significant increases in wholesale fuel costs.

In light of the concerns about the scale of the electricity price rise in particular, I sought proposals from the Regulator about how best to ensure full public confidence in the tariff setting process. I am pleased that he has responded by confirming that he has commissioned an independent review by the former Regulator, Douglas McIlDoon.

Credit Unions

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she will make a decision on whether she will remove the barriers that prevent Credit Unions offering the same financial services as their counterparts in England and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 437/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Assembly’s Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is engaged in an ongoing inquiry into “the Role and Potential of Credit Unions, and Opportunities and Barriers in Northern Ireland”. Briefing papers on the regulation of Credit Unions in Northern Ireland have been provided to the Committee by my Department. The Financial Services Authority has likewise provided a paper, including briefing on the legal and regulatory frameworks in GB and Northern Ireland. I look forward to the outcome of this inquiry and will give full and careful consideration to the Committee’s views.

Utility Regulator

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Utility Regulator to ensure that the proposed rises in energy costs by privately owned utility companies are justified. (AQW 438/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I met with the Utility Regulator to discuss the proposed price rises by NIE Energy and Phoenix Supply Ltd and received assurances on the level of detailed scrutiny which his office conducted. Moreover, my Department was consulted as part of the Regulator's tariff setting process and accepted that while disappointing, the price increases were justified on the basis of significant increases in wholesale fuel costs.

ENVIRONMENT

Emergency Funding for Flooding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many people in the North Down constituency have applied for emergency funding because of the recent heavy rainfall. (AQW 4/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Nine applications have been received from North Down constituents under the current "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils" which was established by the Department of the Environment to deal with the recent widespread flooding across Northern Ireland.

Nuisance High Hedges

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what the current schedule is for the introduction of legislation in relation to nuisance high hedges; and what progress has been made since April 2008, when the previous Minister indicated her intention to bring forward legislation. (AQW 12/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In April 2008 my predecessor indicated that she intended to bring forward legislation to address nuisance high hedges, starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation. The Minister added that the timing will be subject to consideration of the other competing priorities facing the Department. I am currently considering this matter and intend to make a final decision on the way forward in the next few weeks.

Breach of a Tree Preservation Order

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the action being taken by his Department to enforce the Tree Preservation Order at Myrtle Lodge, Newcastle. (AQW 34/09)

The Minister of the Environment: It would be inappropriate to make detailed comment on the case as until such times as the matter has either been before the court or the Department has determined that no case can be taken. I can advise, however, that the matter continues to be investigated.

A breach of a Tree Preservation Order is a summary offence and the penalty, which may include the necessity to replace any trees felled, is a matter for the courts.

I will, however, let you know the outcome.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Areas of Special Scientific Interest which have been declared since 1st January 2007. (AQW 67/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Twenty-nine Areas of Special Scientific Interest have been declared since 1 January 2007.

Test Centres

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment how many vehicles were tested at Test Centres under his Department's control during the year 2007, including repeat tests. (AQW 70/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007, 649,213 full tests and 146,673 retests were carried out by DVA.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside have been received and subsequently approved since 16 March 2006, that were (i) replacement dwellings; (ii) in-fill site; (iii) farm workers' dwellings; (iv) farm retirement dwellings; (v) substitution of previous planning permission; (vi) alternative proposals for a previously approved site; and (vii) other. (AQW 93/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department can provide data for single dwellings in the countryside during the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2008. However, the current system of electronic data retrieval

does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the full level of information you have requested. The number of new and replacement dwellings approved and planning renewals issued for single dwellings (outline and full applications) from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2008 is shown in the table below.

Category of Development	1 April 2006 – 31 March 2007	1 April 2007 – 31 March 2008
New Single Dwellings	86	259
Replacement Dwellings	308	370
Planning Renewals	3	1

Emissions

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the legislation that regulates the monitoring of airborne emissions from chimneys at Ulster Farm By-Products in Glenavy; (ii) the levels of emissions of all potentially hazardous or offensive gases permitted under this legislation; (iii) how often levels of such emissions are required to be evaluated under this legislation; and (iv) the number of emission tests that have taken place at Ulster Farm By-Products in each of the last 5 years, summarising the results of these tests and highlighting any violations of the criteria that have occurred. (AQW 122/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Emissions from Ulster Farm By-Products are regulated by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency through a permit issued under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003.
- (ii) Emissions from the boiler plant chimneys and the stacks from the two thermal oxidisers that treat the odorous air arising from the process are covered by the permit. The following limits are set in the permit for the discharge points from the thermal oxidisers (the main odour sources on the site):

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs - a surrogate for odour)	20 mg/m ³
Hydrogen Sulphide (only when treating chicken feathers)	1 ppm
Temperature of thermal oxidisers	850°C

- (iii) The permit specifies that these pollutants should be measured twice a year, but due to the history of odour complaints NIEA has decided that periodic direct odour measurements (using olfactometry techniques) would provide more valuable information. The temperature of the

thermal oxidisers is continually monitored to ensure optimum odour destruction efficiency and this is reviewed at site visits.

- (iv) The test results held by NIEA are set out below. This does not include any earlier records that may be held by Lisburn City Council who regulated the site until November 2005.

Substance	Date	Result – exit thermal oxidiser chimneys
Volatile Organic Compounds	March 2006 4 tests undertaken	13 mg/m ³
		19 mg/m ³
		2 mg/m ³
		9 mg/m ³
Odour	October 2005 2 tests undertaken	8,239 ou/m ³
		6,850 ou/m ³
	March 06 1 test undertaken	10,706 ou/m ³
	June 2006 2 tests undertaken	13,052 ou/m ³ 11,728 ou/m ³
	March 2008 1 test undertaken	5,000 ou/m ³

Further VOC and olfactometry testing is planned for October 2008.

Chicken Waste Incinerator in Glenavy

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment if the proposed application for a chicken waste incinerator in Glenavy meets the requirements for an article 31 public inquiry into the proposal; and if he will support such an inquiry. (AQW 149/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The planning application for a biomass fuelled power plant at Glenavy was submitted to Planning Service on 4 June 2008. A decision on whether Article 31 of the Planning Order 1991 will be applied to this application will be taken on or before 24 September 2008.

Careful consideration of the planning application, and all representations made in relation to it, is necessary before I would be in a position to decide whether to proceed by way of public inquiry as the most appropriate course of action. It would not be appropriate therefore at this stage to indicate whether I would be supportive of a public inquiry.

Divisional Planning Office

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many current vacancies there are at each divisional planning office. (AQW 151/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service currently has the following vacancies in each of the Divisional Planning Offices.

Divisional Office	Number of vacancies.		Number of vacancies following Casual appointments.	
	Professional & Technical Staff	Admin Staff	Professional & Technical Staff	Admin Staff
Downpatrick	4	0	2	0
Belfast	1	1	1	1
Craigavon	5	2	3	0
Omagh	7	2	4	0
Londonderry	4	0	2	0
Ballymena	4	0	1	0

Every effort is being made to recruit staff as quickly as possible with a new competition to appoint Professional and Technical Officers (PTO) due to take place over the next few months. Planning Service also has appointed casual PTOs and Casual AAs to fill vacancies as an interim measure until permanent staff become available.

Enforcement Cases

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5696/08, to detail the number of enforcement cases by (i) divisional planning office; and (ii) district council area.

(AQW 152/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of enforcement cases by (i) divisional planning office and (ii) Council area is highlighted in table 1 overleaf. The numbers refer to cases outstanding on the Department's live enforcement case list.

TABLE 1

Divisional Office	Council Area	Number of outstanding Enforcement Cases	Headquarters Strategic Projects Division (Minerals and Waste)	Overall Total
Omagh		524	112	636
	Cookstown	90	22	112
	Dungannon	117	20	137
	Fermanagh	123	20	143
	Omagh	119	28	147
	Strabane	75	22	97

Divisional Office	Council Area	Number of outstanding Enforcement Cases	Headquarters Strategic Projects Division (Minerals and Waste)	Overall Total
Northern		587	51	638
	Coleraine	151	11	162
	Ballymoney	51	3	54
	Derry	237	20	257
	Moyle	71	8	79
	Limavady	77	9	86
Craigavon		1458	113	1571
	Armagh	299	25	324
	Banbridge	228	8	236
	Newry and Mourne	634	61	695
	Craigavon	297	19	316
Ballymena		466	53	519
	Antrim	139	18	157
	Ballymena	102	9	111
	Magherafelt	131	12	143
	Larne	57	11	68
	Carrickfergus	37	3	40
Belfast		686	23	709
	Newtownabbey	122	12	134
	Castlereagh	119	6	125
	Belfast	445	5	450
Downpatrick		1622	75	1697
	Lisburn	474	37	511
	North Down	236	1	237
	Ards	388	13	401
	Down	524	24	548
Overall Total		5343	427	5770

Strategic Planning Unit

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been considered by the Strategic Planning Unit since its formation; and the average time taken to process an application.

(AQW 153/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Programme for Government refers to a six month target being applied for the processing of large scale development proposals. These are proposals which are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland. In response to this the Planning Service formally created 2 teams at headquarters in October 2007 to specifically handle these types of applications. This also includes facilitating pre-application discussions (PADs). The six month target is now being applied provided there have been PADs with an agreed outcome.

At the time the teams were formally established they were required to complete the processing of a number of applications already in the system. Some were longstanding and therefore had lengthy processing times. However, since the creation of the teams two new applications have recently been processed to a decision, PRONI HQ and Grahams (Dromore) within 6 months and 7 months respectively.

PADs were formally introduced in December 2007 and at present there are 18 proposals in the pre-application discussion stage. One has completed the PAD process which took approximately 3 months and an application was submitted in June 2008. The Strategic Projects Division is confident that it will be processed within 6 months, in accordance with the Programme for Government target.

Construction Employers' Federation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to list all the inputs made by the Construction Employers' Federation and its agents into areas within the Department's remit, excluding inputs from public consultations, since 2000. (AQW 154/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Construction Employers' Federation (CEF) and its agents have provided the following inputs to my Department's Environment Agency (NIEA) and Planning and Environmental Policy Group (PEPG) since 2000:

- John Armstrong, Chief Executive of CEF wrote to Minister Cairns in August 2006, in respect of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) responses to planning applications and the development of a protocol on construction and demolition waste;
- CEF contacted the Chief Executive of EHS in March 2007 on the re-use of soil generated from construction; and
- CEF have a Board Member on the NIEA Better Regulation Group which convenes bi-annually.
- The CEF's position paper on developer contributions was enclosed with a letter from John Armstrong on 26 June 2008 in which he sought a meeting to discuss

social and affordable housing. However the position paper was withdrawn in a letter dated 16 July 2008.

- CEF is a significant stakeholder in the work carried out by the Planning Service. Due to the frequency and diverse nature of input received, information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Archaeological Digs

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment the archaeological digs on which the Environment Agency is currently working. (AQW 160/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) undertakes excavations using a contracted unit, the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork (CAF), Queen's University Belfast. The CAF is currently undertaking one excavation on behalf of the NIEA at Dunseverick Cave, County Antrim.

The purpose of this excavation is to inform the work being undertaken as part of An Archaeological Survey of the Maritime Cultural Landscape of the North Antrim Coast. This survey project is being undertaken by another contracted unit, the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Ulster. In due course, it will be published as a NIEA monograph.

Chain Memorial Tower

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of Chain Memorial Tower, Larne, in terms of its heritage value. (AQW 161/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Chain Memorial Tower is an unusual example of a 'lighthouse', designed as a round tower in a Celtic or Irish Romanesque Revival style, which forms a very picturesquely sited landmark on the Lough shore near Larne. It was built in 1887 by public subscription to commemorate James Chainé who was responsible for developing the modern harbour at Larne. It was the second lighthouse in the island of Ireland to be powered by electricity. It is therefore important for its architectural design, as a landmark, and for the history associated with its erection. It is listed at grade B1.

Quality of Beaches

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to improve the quality of beaches. (AQW 162/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the UK has an

obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment, including the shoreline. My Department's Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has accepted the non-statutory responsibility for dealing with coastal pollution incidents.

The Agency will coordinate and manage the shoreline response, including clean up, in the event of a marine pollution incident impacting, or threatening to impact the Northern Ireland coastal waters or its shoreline.

NIEA currently monitors the twenty four identified bathing waters in Northern Ireland in accordance with the requirements of the EU Bathing Water Directive. The Agency also works with Northern Ireland Water to ensure that adequate sewerage infrastructure and sewage treatment are in place around our coastline in order to meet the UK's obligations under other European legislation – for example, the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

NIEA does not have responsibility for maintaining the general tidiness of the coastline. Under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, District Councils have responsibility for litter control, including enforcement in the event of an offence being committed under the Order.

Olderfleet Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the Olderfleet Castle, Larne, in terms of its heritage value. (AQW 163/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Although Olderfleet Castle has no distinctly datable features, it was almost certainly constructed sometime between AD 1550-1600. It was probably erected as a watch tower and possibly also used as a place to store merchandise. It belongs to a category of buildings known as tower houses, which were built in Ireland and Scotland from the 15th to the 17th centuries. Although only partially extant, this is one of the best surviving examples of this type of building in County Antrim and is an important survival of the 16th and 17th century in this area. It was taken into State Care during the 1930s.

Dobbins Inn, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what support is available to the owners of Dobbins Inn, High Street, Carrickfergus, to enable them to complete repairs and renovations to this listed building. (AQW 164/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Grant aid is available from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) of my Department at 35% for repairs

to the historic fabric of the listed part of this building. Assistance is also available at 75% for any associated professional fees. This grant aid is available subject to the conditions of the Historic Buildings Grant Scheme which can be downloaded from the NIEA website at www.ni-environment.gov.uk.

Professional and scientific staff within the NIEA can also provide advice and guidance. This service is free of charge.

Planning Application Waiting Times

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what the average waiting time is between a planning application decision being issued and a decision notice being sent to the applicant/appointed agent, broken down by district council area. (AQW 178/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has provided the following statistics detailing the average waiting time between a planning application decision being generated and a decision notice being sent to the applicant/agent, broken down by district council area. These statistics show the average time in working days between the date a decision notice is printed and the date a decision notice is issued.

AVERAGE TIME IN WORKING DAYS BETWEEN DATE DECISION NOTICE IS PRINTED AND DATE DECISION NOTICE IS ISSUED

District	Volume of Decisions	Average number of days
Londonderry	1238	1
Limavady	499	2
Coleraine	953	0
Ballymoney	559	0
Moyle	298	0
Larne	377	2
Ballymena	1056	2
Magherafelt	900	2
Cookstown	898	3
Strabane	651	2
Omagh	1259	2
Fermanagh	2027	2
Dungannon	1480	3
Craigavon	1049	2
Armagh	1474	2
Newry and Mourne	2210	1

District	Volume of Decisions	Average number of days
Banbridge	1067	2
Down	1000	2
Lisburn	1116	1
Antrim	884	1
Newtownabbey	591	2
Carrickfergus	326	2
North Down	756	2
Ards	1004	2
Castlereagh	543	2
Belfast	2572	3

Note: Based on applications issued during 07/08 These figures have been extracted from a live database 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.

Any time lapse between the decision notice being printed and the notice being issued to the applicant/agent is due to the checking of the decision notice by the authorised officer who signs and will be dependant on the volume of decisions being issued at any one time.

Climate Change

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment for his Department's assessment of the link between human activity and climate change. (AQW 181/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have made clear my own view that the scientific consensus claimed by the International Panel for Climate Change on the degree to which climate change is caused by anthropologic activity does not exist and the views of the many scientists who had doubt on the role of man were deliberately removed from the final report on more than one occasion. I believe we would all benefit from a public debate on the issue not least because of the significant economic implications for the citizens of the UK of the costs of mitigation.

Climate Change

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment how he intends to carry out his official duties under the forthcoming Climate Change legislation. (AQW 182/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As Minister of the Environment, I will carry out any statutory duties required of me.

Glenfarm Holdings/Ulster Farm

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the recent enforcement action that was taken against Glenfarm Holdings/Ulster Farm By-Products; (ii) against what offences the action was taken; and (iii) the sanctions these companies will be facing in relation to violations of their permit and/or pollution laws. (AQW 186/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) My Department has taken 7 prosecutions against Ulster Farm By-Products, for offences involving water pollution, the most recent on 7 April 2008 when the Company was fined £5,000 + costs. Additionally, on 3 September 2008 NIEA issued an enforcement notice requiring the company to cease its discharge to the river by 15 October 2008 unless the effluent quality is in compliance with its permit.
- (ii) This enforcement action was in respect of the company's continued failure to comply with its permit's limits for its discharge of effluent into the Glenavy River.
- (iii) Sanctions for prosecutions taken against the company are for the Courts to decide. Failure to comply with an enforcement order is an offence for which the company can be prosecuted. There is also the option of instigating proceedings in the High Court for the purpose of securing compliance with the Notice.

Flooding in the Antrim Borough Council Area

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment how many claims for assistance (i) were made; and (ii) were successful, during the recent flooding in the Antrim Borough Council area. (AQW 187/09)

The Minister of the Environment: 199 applications have been received and £170,000 paid to ratepayers in the Antrim Borough Council area under the current "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils" which was established by the Department of the Environment to deal with the recent widespread flooding across Northern Ireland.

Nuisance High Trees and Hedges

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to introduce legislation on nuisance high trees and hedges. (AQW 197/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am currently considering this matter and intend to make a final decision on the way forward in the next few weeks.

Planning Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that Planning Service is more facilitative of small scale anaerobic digestion. (AQW 208/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service welcomes and indeed encourages the development of appropriate anaerobic digestion facilities, including those that would be small in scale. Planning Service has established specialist teams within its Headquarters Division to handle waste and renewable energy planning applications. Planning staff have the necessary expertise and are able to process the applications in a timely and efficient manner.

Planning Service has also recently produced draft Planning Policy Statement 18 Renewable Energy (PPS 18). The PPS aims to facilitate and encourage the greater use of small scale renewable energy technologies including anaerobic digestion.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment when the original programme of designating Areas of Special Scientific Interest was due to be complete; and when his Department will complete the programme. (AQW 214/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The original programme of designating Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) was intended to be completed by 2001. Sufficient resources to meet this target were not achieved and NIEA intends to complete, substantially, the declaration of ASSIs by 2016.

High Hedges

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to introduce legislation to deal with problems associated with high hedges. (AQW 220/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am currently considering this matter and intend to make a final decision on the way forward in the next few weeks.

Motorists

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to introduce legislation to comply

with the EU legislative requirement that motorists carry a high visibility vest in motor vehicles.

(AQW 221/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has no plans to introduce a requirement that motorists carry a high visibility vest in motor vehicles and there is no EU directive requiring such legislation.

Rose Energy Incinerator, Glenavy

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment if the proposed site for the Rose Energy incinerator, Glenavy, is in (i) the Lough Neagh Area of Special Scientific Interest; or (ii) the Ramsar area; and if not, . (AQW 225/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The proposed site for the Rose Energy incinerator at Glenavy is not in either the Lough Neagh Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) or the Lough Neagh and Lough Beg Ramsar Site.

The proposed site is approx 870m from both the Lough Neagh ASSI and the Ramsar Site at their nearest points.

Emergency Relief Payments

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment how many households in Grangers Mill, Antrim, applied for emergency relief payments as a result of the recent floods; and how many of these applications were successful. (AQW 228/09)

The Minister of the Environment: 24 applications have been received, 22 of which were successful, from residents in Grangers Mill, Antrim under the current "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils".

Road Safety

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment how many meetings his officials have had with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to discuss cross border co-operation on road safety issues, since devolution. (AQW 230/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been 42 meetings between my officials and counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to discuss road safety issues.

Golden Eagle Chicks

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with his Scottish counterpart in relation to the impact of the re-introduction of Golden Eagle chicks on small song birds and game birds. (AQW 240/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have had no discussions with my Scottish counterpart in relation to Golden Eagles. There have been no records of Golden Eagles breeding in Northern Ireland since 1959. However, there are occasional sightings of immature birds along the North Antrim coast and a bird released in Donegal by the Republic's National Park and Wildlife Service spent some time in the Sperrin Mountains.

Golden Eagles are generally thought to have little effect on small song birds and there is debate on their level of impact on various game species. Scotland has a significant population of Eagles and continues to have many fine grouse moors.

European Union (1992) Habitats Directive

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the penalties that may be imposed for failure to comply with the European Union (1992) Habitats Directive. (AQW 247/09)

The Minister of the Environment: If a Member State is found to have failed to comply with the terms of the Habitats Directive, the European Court of Justice can impose fines. Fines can take the form of penalty payments either on a daily basis or lump sum, either separately or together. There is no standard level of fine. The fine is decided by the European Court of Justice taking into account the merits of each case, i.e. the seriousness and duration of the breach of European law.

River Faughan

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if the River Faughan will be designated as a Special Area of Conservation by September 2008; and if not, would infraction proceedings resume due to a failure to comply with the European Union Habitats Directive. (AQW 248/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The River Faughan and Tributaries candidate Special Area of Conservation was submitted, in a combined UK response, to the European Commission on 29 August 2008.

Departmental Advisory Bodies

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all equality and race legislation applicable in the appointment of members to departmental advisory bodies, and assessments completed in relation to this; and how the legislation is applied in the current application process. (AQW 323/09)

The Minister of the Environment: All public appointments to my Department's statutory advisory bodies, including those to the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, are made in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland's Code of Practice. One of the seven principles underpinning the Code of Practice is equal opportunities. My Department complies with the statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity during any appointment process.

Pollution

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to (i) detect the source of pollution; and (ii) prevent further pollution incidents, at Ballybay River, Corcrain. (AQW 346/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Reports of water pollution are thoroughly investigated by inspectors from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

In relation to the specific pollution incident in the Ballybay River on 10 September 2008 both NIEA and Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) Officers have confirmed that a plug of pollution travelled down the river causing the fish kill, however the pollution has not impacted the main Bann River. Unfortunately, following extensive investigation by NIEA and FCB, no source has been identified for this incident.

NIEA also undertakes Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments at any site that has the potential to cause pollution e.g. government premises, construction sites, various industrial and commercial sites. This includes an investigation of the catchments and water bodies which are at risk, or potentially at risk, from pollution or have a history of poor water quality. A Risk Assessment was carried out at a business premises in the local area in April 2008 and NIEA officials have since been liaising with the company to ensure that the risk of water pollution is minimised.

The ultimate aim of the Pollution Prevention Risk Assessment is to identify sites which have the potential to adversely affect water quality in our catchments, so we can, through education or enforcement, reduce the risk of these sites causing pollution or downgrading the water quality in the catchment.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Collection of Rates

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total cost charged by the Land and Property Services to each local government authority for the collection of rates; and what benchmarking has taken place to compare costs with those in other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 11/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): Land and Property Services is required by statute to recover the cost of levying rates on behalf of all 26 district councils. The cost is apportioned by legislative formula on the basis of the percentage share of the total rateable values for Northern Ireland and notified annually to district councils.

Details of the total costs charged by Land and Property Services to each local government authority for the collection of rates in the 2007-2008 financial year are set out in Table 1.

Unit cost targets, which were published annually by the former Rate Collection Agency, were discontinued with effect from 2005-2006 due to the programme of rating reforms.

Land and Property Services plans to re-introduce unit costs for revenues and benefits from 1 April 2009 and will benchmark these costs with similar appropriate revenue and benefits bodies in the United Kingdom.

TABLE 1 - COLLECTION COSTS APPLIED TO DISTRICT COUNCILS FOR LEVYING RATES IN THE 2007-2008 FINANCIAL YEAR

Council	Collection Costs £
Antrim	186,396.90
Ards	189,196.06
Armagh	154,135.76
Ballymena	203,618.95
Ballymoney	68,638.26
Banbridge	127,754.52
Belfast	1,307,789.92
Carrickfergus	115,243.17
Castlereagh	173,606.57
Coleraine	204,828.83
Cookstown	83,825.92
Craigavon	297,317.28

Council	Collection Costs £
Downpatrick	178,153.74
Dungannon	124,964.24
Fermanagh	140,030.87
Larne	105,148.75
Limavady	91,624.42
Lisburn	327,337.77
Derry	374,387.28
Magherafelt	89,426.16
Moyle	49,385.64
Newry	247,026.59
Newtownabbey	281,449.18
North Down	237,326.33
Omagh	149,902.80
Strabane	91,214.34

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the budget for the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) budgets set for the future. (AQW 26/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Budget for NIAUR for the years 2003-04 to 2007-08 was as follows:-

				£000's
2003 - 04	2004 - 05	2005 - 06	2006 - 07	2007 - 08
485	836	1610	2810	1637

The table above shows the final plan budget position for each year after all in-year movements have been taken into account.

The NIAUR Budget for 2008-09 to 2010-11 is as follows:

		£000's
2008 - 09	2009 - 10	2010 - 11
501	501	501

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people were employed by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation in each of the last 5 years; and to detail any future employment projections. (AQW 27/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The average number of staff (expressed as full time equivalents) working in the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation in each of the last five years was as follows.

2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
23	24	27	36	59.2

The growth in staff numbers (a mix of on loan civil servants and direct recruits) over the period reflects the fact that NIAUR assumed additional responsibilities across the energy sectors and in particular assuming responsibility for regulation of the water industry.

Future projections are for 65 staff in 2008/09.

Asbestosis and Plural Plaque Sufferers

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department has any proposals to offer compensation to asbestosis and plural plaque sufferers. (AQW 92/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In October 2007 the House of Lords ruled that claims for compensation regarding asymptomatic pleural plaques could no longer be made under the law of negligence. We are currently preparing a consultation paper which will explore the implications of that judgment and invite views on how people in Northern Ireland with pleural plaques can be supported and assisted. The House of Lords ruling does not relate to claims for compensation regarding asbestosis and, as the law stands, people with asbestosis may still submit a claim on the basis of negligent exposure to asbestos.

Peace III Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in implementing the Peace III Programme. (AQW 105/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Implementation of the PEACE III Programme began immediately following European Commission approval of the Operational Programme in November 2007. All Themes of PEACE III have now opened to applications.

It is expected that the first Letters of Offer will issue to successful applicants in the early autumn.

Eradication of Child Poverty

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that his Department has made the eradication of child poverty a priority, and that measures to address child poverty are already in place. (AQW 109/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP is not responsible for taking forward actions to address child poverty directly. However, the Executive has identified the goal of “eliminating child poverty by 2020 and reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010” in the Programme for Government (PfG). The allocations to departments in the Budget process are conditional on the achievement of the outcomes and objectives set out in the PfG.

The Department, in conjunction with OFMDFM, has also taken forward a comparative analysis of expenditure on children and young people. This study focused primarily on comparing public expenditure on children in Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK and the report was circulated widely to NI departments to inform policy and spending proposals.

The new 2007-2013 PEACE III Programme (worth almost €333 million in Northern Ireland and the Border Region) will maintain and strengthen the PEACE II Programme’s focus on reconciliation activities. Children and young people are again named as one of the programme’s target beneficiary groups. Impact on poverty is one of the programme’s cross-cutting themes, and the programme will align with the principles of the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy. This will ensure that resources are targeted towards people, groups and areas objectively shown to be the most socially disadvantaged.

Religious Questions

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for its assessment of the implications for the current approach to religious questions in the Northern Ireland Census, arising out of the judgement of the European Court on Human Rights in the *Alexandridis v. Greece* case (2008), regarding the right not to disclose a religious identity. (AQW 117/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Proposals for the 2011 Census are currently being finalised. These proposals will be subject to subsequent legislative scrutiny by way of a Census Order and Census Regulations, both of which are planned for the 2009-2010 session. The collection of

Census information on a range of socio-economic variables provides public bodies, businesses, academia, the voluntary sector and the wider public with important information for the determination, monitoring and evaluation of policy. Whilst completion of a Census form is compulsory, it is specifically provided in the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 that no penalty may be imposed on anyone who refuses to reply to a direct question which asks for a statement of religious profession.

The Alexandridis case dealt with a specific issue within the Greek legal system and the decision of the European Court of Human Rights was highly dependent on the individual facts of the case. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), like most Convention Articles, does not confer absolute rights. If there is any interference with such rights, the Court will look for a clear legal basis and procedures for the interference, including whether the interference seeks to achieve a legitimate aim such as a pressing social need and whether the interference is a proportionate response to achieving the legitimate aim. The European Court of Human Rights accepts that there are areas in which national authorities are in a better position to decide what is best for their people. It is for each state to balance the rights and to act proportionally and for good reason in interfering with such rights. I believe that the balance that has been struck in respect of religious questions in the Northern Ireland census of population is compatible with article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights as it has been interpreted in the Alexandridis case.

Lone Pensioners Allowance Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many applications to the Lone Pensioners Allowance Scheme have been (i) received; and (ii) successful, in each month since the scheme commenced. (AQW 200/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of Lone Pensioner Allowance applications received each month and the number assessed as successful are shown in the table below.

Month	Number of applications at 18/9/08	Number successful at 18/9/08
April	7,796	5,124
May	5,590	3,614
June	1,539	934
July	924	227
August	454	Not yet assessed

Month	Number of applications at 18/9/08	Number successful at 18/9/08
September	220	Not yet assessed
Total to date	16,523	9,904

Of the 16,523 applications received, 10,152 have been assessed and 98% (9,904) have been successful. The remaining applications will be assessed when full IT functionality for applications involving Housing Benefit, transitional relief and Disabled Persons Allowance is in place.

St Mary's Gaelic Athletic Club

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain the delay in granting St Mary's Gaelic Athletic Club, Rasharkin, a refund of rates from January 2006; and when this refund will be paid. (AQW 212/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The delay in granting St Mary's Gaelic Athletic Club a refund in rates was caused by a number of factors including priorities at the time of application being redirected to the domestic revaluation exercise, technical problems, and an error in entering the effective start date of the exemption.

Land and Property Services apologises for the delay. The refund, including payment of interest, was issued to St Mary's Gaelic Athletic Club on 12 September 2008.

Review Panel

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of the Review Panel on the Location of Public Sector Jobs and whether he will accept the recommendations of the panel in full; and for a timescale for the implementation of panel's recommendations. (AQW 253/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Professor Bain is due to publish his report on the Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs on 30 September 2008. Copies of the report will be distributed to Executive Ministers and Members of the Legislative Assembly on 30 September. This is an independent review and, when I formally receive it, I will be considering the recommendations very carefully.

Decentralisation of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he can provide assurances that he will pro-actively work to ensure the decentralisation of public sector jobs to areas like the Strabane district. (AQW 254/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive approved an independent Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs in November 2007 and Professor Sir George Bain was subsequently invited to carry out the Review. He is due to publish his report soon. Until then it would be speculative to pre-empt the outcome of his work. It would also be inappropriate to give assurances or commitments to any particular areas of Northern Ireland until such times as there has been the opportunity to carefully consider the findings and recommendations of the Review.

North/South Confederation of Councillors

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to comment on the situation regarding funding of the North/South Confederation of Councillors. (AQW 317/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Confederation of European Councillors was awarded two grants, of £149,005.04 and £125,383.83, under Measure 5.2 (Improving Cross-Border Public Sector Co-operation) of the EU PEACE II Programme. This funding concluded on 31 July 2008.

The Confederation could seek further assistance under the new round of EU Programmes. Any application would be assessed on a competitive basis against the relevant programme selection criteria. No commitment to provision of funding under these Programmes can therefore be made.

Number of Births

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of births in 2008; and how this compares to the figures for the previous 2 years. (AQW 319/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information for births registered in 2008 is only available up to the end of July 2008. The table below gives the number of births registered between 1 January and 31 July for the years 2006 to 2008 and the annual percentage change in the number of births.

Time Period	Number of Births Registered	Annual Percentage Change
1 January 2006 - 31 July 2006	13,568	..
1 January 2007 - 31 July 2007 ^p	14,279	+ 5.2%
1 January 2008 - 31 July 2008 ^p	15,095	+ 5.7%

^p Provisional data

Fuel Poverty

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to redirect any departmental underspend or surplus to alleviate the growing problems associated with fuel poverty. (AQW 398/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Policy responsibility for Fuel Poverty resides with the Department for Social Development. However, to the extent that the Social Development Minister feels she has insufficient funding to deliver the associated services, there is scope to request additional resources as part of the In Year Monitoring process.

The Executive is scheduled to consider the September Monitoring position at its meeting on 2 October 2008.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Minor Ailments Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in resolving the impasse in relation to the minor ailments scheme. (AQW 9/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The enhanced minor ailments service has not been withdrawn. On the contrary, the scheme remains open and pharmacy contractors are free to join at any time. The enhanced service is being delivered by a small number of pharmacy contractors and I welcome this. I hope that those who are currently not providing the service will reconsider and decide to join.

At the end of June 2008 I invited the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC) to meet with me to discuss their concerns over the enhanced Minor Ailments Scheme. This offer was declined.

I wrote again to PCC in mid-August 2008 confirming that the Department's negotiating team remained available to meet with them to discuss their concerns over the scheme.

I am happy to say that PCC have since agreed to a meeting and I look forward to meeting with them in the near future.

Epilepsy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the strategy for

Epilepsy and how this is being developed across all the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 20/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has not issued a strategy specific to epilepsy. People suffering from this very debilitating condition have access to care and treatment from an appropriate part of the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector depending on their individual needs, ranging from primary and community care to specialist regional neurology services.

In January 2008, the Department issued a circular to the HSC endorsing a National Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline on the diagnosis, investigation and management of epilepsy in children and adults. NICE clinical guidelines are endorsed as developmental standards and the Department expects HSC organisations to review local practice against the guideline and take its recommendations into account in their future planning and delivery of services to patients presenting with a suspected seizure and those diagnosed with epilepsy.

Autism Spectrum Disorders Training Report

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the research report ‘The Development of a Strategic Response to Autism Spectrum Disorders Training in Northern Ireland’, funded by his Department, will be published. (AQW 32/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has taken a series of documents, including “The Development of a Strategic Response to Autism Spectrum Disorders Training in Northern Ireland” into account as part of the development of the ASD Action Plan which is soon to be published for consultation. The Action Plan recognises the importance of education and training for HSC staff and those affected by ASD, their families and carers.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will re-commence the minor ailments service provided by pharmacists. (AQW 37/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The enhanced minor ailments service has not been withdrawn. On the contrary, the scheme remains open and pharmacy contractors are free to join at any time. The enhanced service is being delivered by a small number of pharmacy contractors and I

welcome this. I hope that those who are currently not providing the service will reconsider and decide to join.

Prescribing the Drug Lucentis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the delay in prescribing the drug Lucentis for people with eye-sight problems. (AQW 41/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 27 August 2008 the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) issued guidance on the drugs Lucentis and Macugen for the treatment of wet age related macular degeneration (wet AMD). This recommends the use of Lucentis as a treatment option for wet AMD where a patient meets specified clinical criteria and where the manufacturer of the product meets the cost of treatment beyond 14 injections in the treated eye. The guidance does not recommend the use of Macugen.

My Department has established a link with NICE whereby all guidance published by the Institute from 1 July 2006 is reviewed locally for its applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, is endorsed by the Department for implementation in Northern Ireland. NICE’s guidance on Lucentis and Macugen is currently being considered under these arrangements and guidance on its implementation will be issued to the Health and Social Care sector in due course.

I understand Boards are currently funding treatment with wet AMD drugs for patients with the greatest clinical priority.

Providing these new drugs will require a significant expansion of the existing service, including recruitment of additional staff to deliver this new service safely and effectively.

Fire Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many fires the Fire Service was called out to attend, for each year the Department holds information; and to detail the number of deaths that occurred as a result of these fires. (AQW 42/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not routinely collect such information. Incidence of fires and associated deaths is published in Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Annual Reports and those of its predecessor, the Fire Authority Northern Ireland.

Ulster Hospital Staff

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Agenda for Change process, when arrears owed to staff at the Ulster Hospital will be paid. (AQW 43/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern HSC Trust wrote to all staff in the Ulster Hospital on 29 August 2008 giving a commitment to have the majority of arrears paid during the next three months. Currently 70 per cent of staff have been paid arrears and the Trust has engaged temporary staff to assist with the completion of this exercise.

Operating Practitioners

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Agenda for Change process, why there is not parity of treatment between operating department practitioners and senior operating practitioners in Northern Ireland in comparison to other regions of the United Kingdom. (AQW 44/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A job title is not the basis on which jobs in the health service are graded; it is the content and the responsibility of the job that determines the rate of pay. It is therefore not always appropriate to compare similar job titles across other parts of the health service and expect to see exactly the same grading for those jobs. Health and Social Care non-medical staff, including operating department practitioners and senior operating practitioners, in Northern Ireland have had the Agenda for Change arrangements implemented in partnership process between HSC organisations and staff representative groups. I am satisfied that this process has been applied appropriately for Health and Social Care staff. I am not in a position to comment on how the process has been applied in other regions of the United Kingdom.

Prescribed Medication

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the specific ailment for which medication is prescribed is not indicated on its containers label. (AQW 46/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Reflecting the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship, prescriptions properly do not indicate the ailment for which a medication has been prescribed.

Under statutory labelling rules there is no requirement for the label on a medication to indicate the ailment for which it is being prescribed.

Prescription Charges in Relation to Students

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update in the cost benefit review of prescription charges in relation to students. (AQW 64/09)

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 2007. The review group have completed their analysis of the current system of prescription charging and have sent their report to me. In recognition of the fact that I am still considering the options, I decided to freeze prescription charges at the 2007/2008 level for 2008/2009 in Northern Ireland. The review is extensive and examines the exemptions relating to age, income and medical conditions which also include those students who currently pay for medication. I hope to make an announcement in the near future when I have concluded my deliberations.

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurances he can give that the Southern Trust area will receive priority consideration in the process to determine capital priorities for health and social care from the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQW 74/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Trust's priorities, along with those of the other Trusts across Northern Ireland, will be given due consideration in the context of funding constraints.

I made a bid for £5.7bn as part of the Investment Strategy 2008, £1.1bn of which was within the CSR. I only received a total of £3.3bn over the 10 years with just over £700m in the CSR. A major element of this investment is already contractually committed reducing further the availability of capital resources needed to modernise our healthcare infrastructure after too many years of investment neglect.

This is still not enough in order to meet all the demands within the Health and Social Care estate and for that reason I commissioned a review of capital investment priorities over the next ten years, specifically looking at the years beyond the CSR. This review will report to me at the end of September.

Prescribed Medication

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why certain prescribed medications indicate the days on which the medication is to be taken in a format other than Monday, Tuesday etc. (AQW 75/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Some medications are dispensed in blister packs known as calendar packs which will indicate on the back of the blister the time or day the medication is to be taken. For medications where the dosage regime is irregular eg every other day or every third day, it may be more appropriate for the calendar pack to use a format other than the naming of sequential days.

Prescribed Medication

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what delays are caused as a result of patients not having their prescribed medication with them when attending hospitals. (AQW 76/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is unlikely that any delay in treatment would be caused by patients not having their medicines with them on admission to hospital. Having the patient's medicines available on admission allows a faster preparation of their medication history but where patients do not bring their medicines with them, their medication history can usually be obtained from the patient, carer or their GP. Potentially if a patient is unable to give an account of their medication history and the GP or other record is not accessible, there may be some delay, but this would be an exceptional case.

Hospital Cleaning Services

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the £2 million allocated in this financial year towards hospital acquired infections has been spent on front line cleaning services, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 91/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It will not be possible to reply to your Priority Written Assembly Question AQW 91/08, by the 16 September 2008. I will reply as soon as possible.

Training Facilities for Young Carers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional training facilities are available to young carers. (AQW 101/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: Children who are carers should be treated as children first and carers second. Children under 16 should have their needs assessed, and services provided, under the provisions of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. 16 or 17 year olds may be assessed either under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 or the Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. My Department has allocated funding to put in place support services for young carers which includes services to improve young carers' access to and support in education, and also awareness raising for young carers about the specific conditions of the 'cared for' person in their family.

Carers Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Carers Review initiated in May 2008. (AQW 102/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Preliminary work has been ongoing with the Department for Social Development over the summer months. The review will examine the Northern Ireland position in relation to health and social care support for carers against the recommendations contained in the new carer's strategy published by the Department of Health in June 2008. It will also examine issues around Carer's Allowance. It is anticipated that the review will be completed by early next year.

Strabane Health Centre

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that Strabane Health Centre will continue to offer a full range of health care provision for the people of Strabane and the surrounding district. (AQW 106/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Strabane Health Centre provides a wide range of health care services on both a weekly and a sessional basis. All services are kept under continuous review to ensure that they remain effective and are provided efficiently. There are no plans to change the profile of existing services.

Strabane Health Centre is one of five bases used by Western Urgent Care to provide GP Out of Hours (OOH) Services to patients in the Western area.

Currently all OOH services in Northern Ireland are subject to a review looking at their effectiveness and efficiency. No decision has yet been made regarding the future of Out of Hours services, although no commitment can be given at this time that there will

be no change to how the OOH service is provided in the Strabane area in the future.

Should proposals be made to change the situation in relation to the provision of general services or the Out of Hours service in Strabane Health Centre, there will be full engagement with all relevant stakeholders.

Needs of Carers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what improvements are needed by (i) GPs; and (ii) hospitals, to achieve a greater understanding of the needs of carers.

(AQW 113/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The carers' strategy, Caring for Carers, and associated guidance stressed the need for all Health and Social Care professionals, including GPs, to identify carers at the earliest possible time to ensure they have access to the right information and support at the right time. Furthermore, where a carer is identified, health and social care professionals must offer a carer's assessment in order to take a holistic view of the health, well-being and associated needs of the carer. The strategy also identified the need for Trusts to have a clear policy for hospital discharge to ensure that carers are fully involved in the discharge planning process of the person they care for. My Department has recently developed new guidance about how carers should be involved in this process and we will be sending this to Board and Trust Chief Executives for formal consultation in the coming weeks.

My officials monitor and review these policies to ensure effective implementation.

Arthritis Related Anti-TNF Therapies

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many patients are on the waiting list for arthritis related anti-TNF therapies; (ii) what the average waiting time is for these therapies; (iii) how these figures compare with (a) England; (b) Scotland; and (c) Wales; and (iv) what action he is taking to reduce these waiting lists.

(AQW 121/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 30 June 2008 there were 561 people waiting to start treatment with anti-TNF therapies for severe inflammatory arthritis. It is not possible to calculate the average waiting time for these patients. The Department does not hold information on waiting lists or waiting times for these therapies in England, Scotland and Wales.

The health service in Northern Ireland now spends around £9 million on anti TNF drugs each year. At 30 June there were 888 patients receiving treatment. I am fully committed to further improving access to anti-TNF drugs for severe arthritis. In the budget, I secured additional funding amounting to £39 million for specialist drugs and the infrastructure for their delivery. A significant part of that allocation will ensure that the waiting time for biological treatments for arthritis is reduced to 21 weeks by March 2011.

Treating a significantly increased number of patients will require a sizeable step-up in infrastructure to deliver the treatment safely. Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts have therefore agreed a stepped reduction in waiting times over the next three years, with interim targets of an 18 month waiting time by March 2009 and a maximum 9 month wait by March 2010.

Car Parking Charges

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will follow the example of his Scottish counterpart and abolish car parking charges at all Health Service hospitals.

(AQW 129/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following a review of hospital car parking, I announced on 21 May 2008 that it would be up to the individual Trusts to decide whether to charge for car parking for patients and visitors to reflect local circumstances. However those patients who have to make lengthy or frequent visits to hospital such as those requiring chemotherapy or radiotherapy and those receiving renal dialysis will not pay parking fees. Similarly, the next of kin or partner of a critically ill or high dependency patient will also receive free car parking. I have no plans to change this policy position however I will be keeping the matter under review.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people currently work for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 132/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As at 30th June 2008, there were 19,523 (16,778 Whole-Time Equivalent) staff employed by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. Information on the number of staff working for the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust was obtained from the Human Resource Management System which is maintained by the individual Health & Social Care Trusts.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is on course to meet its efficiency targets for this year. (AQW 133/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been set challenging efficiency targets for the three years 2008/09 to 2010/11. For 2008/09, trusts are expected to deliver total efficiencies of £67.0m through the Reform of Public Administration, improved productivity, re-design of services and regional procurement efficiencies. As this funding has already been removed from individual trusts' baselines, every trust must achieve the required level of savings if it is to fulfil its statutory duty to break even within the financial year. The Department will monitor the achievement of these targets closely.

For the South Eastern Trust this translates into a target, excluding procurement and pharmaceutical efficiencies which are to be delivered through regional action, of £10.0m. The trust is currently forecasting that this target will be met.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is on course to meet its efficiency targets for this year. (AQW 134/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been set challenging efficiency targets for the three years 2008/09 to 2010/11. For 2008/09, trusts are expected to deliver total efficiencies of £67.0m through the Reform of Public Administration, improved productivity, re-design of services and regional procurement efficiencies. As this funding has already been removed from individual trusts' baselines, every trust must achieve the required level of savings if it is to fulfil its statutory duty to break even within the financial year. The Department will monitor the achievement of these targets closely.

For the Belfast Trust this translates into a target, excluding procurement and pharmaceutical efficiencies which are to be delivered through regional action, of £21.8m. The trust is currently forecasting that this target will be met.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Western Health and

Social Care Trust is on course to meet its efficiency targets for this year. (AQW 135/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set challenging efficiency targets for trusts for the three years 2008/09 to 2010/11. For 2008/09, trusts are expected to deliver total efficiencies of £67.0m through the Reform of Public Administration, improved productivity, re-design of services and regional procurement efficiencies. As this funding has already been removed from individual trusts' baselines, every trust must achieve the required level of savings if it is to fulfil its statutory duty to break even within the financial year. The Department will monitor the achievement of these targets closely.

For the Western Trust this translates into a target, excluding procurement and pharmaceutical efficiencies which are to be delivered through regional action, of £8.9m. The trust is working with the Department to ensure that the target is delivered in full, to be submitted for approval shortly.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Northern Health and Social Care Trust is on course to meet its efficiency targets for this year. (AQW 136/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been set challenging efficiency targets for the three years 2008/09 to 2010/11. For 2008/09, trusts are expected to deliver total efficiencies of £67.0m through the Reform of Public Administration, improved productivity, re-design of services and regional procurement efficiencies. As this funding has already been removed from individual trusts' baselines, every trust must achieve the required level of savings if it is to fulfil its statutory duty to break even within the financial year. The Department will monitor the achievement of these targets closely.

For the Northern Trust this translates into a target, excluding procurement and pharmaceutical efficiencies which are to be delivered through regional action, of £10.2m. The trust is currently forecasting that this target will be met.

Prescribed Medication

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken by the Department to address the possible duplication of effort and resources where a GP issues a prescription which is then rescinded and replaced by the pharmacist selling the prescribed drug as an over the counter medicine. (AQW 167/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I do not regard the situation described as duplication of effort which requires to be addressed. When a GP, after a consultation with a patient, issues a prescription, he will not always be aware of the precise cost of the medication, nor of whether the patient is entitled to free prescriptions. It is only when the prescription is presented for dispensing, and the pharmacist asks the patient whether they pay for their prescriptions, that it would become clear whether or not it would be cheaper for the patient to buy the medication as an over-the-counter medicine rather than paying the £6.85 prescription charge. If they do pay, a cheaper over-the-counter medicine will result in a saving to the patient and a saving to the Health Service Drug Budget because the medication has not been dispensed against the prescription.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the changes in the Minor Ailments Service delivered through pharmacies. (AQW 168/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The enhanced Minor Ailments Service began on the 1 August 2008 and remains open for pharmacists to join. It replaced the previous limited Minor Ailments Scheme, in operation since 2005. The new service offers considerable increased benefits to patients, pharmacists and GPs. The main changes that are being introduced include:

- significant additional investment, increasing the funding to some £1.5m, almost three times the previous level of funding;
- improved access for patients to professional advice and treatment in respect of an expanded range of conditions, greatly reducing the need for patients to visit their GP for the treatment of a minor ailment;
- further opportunities for pharmacists to extend their clinical skills;
- a reduction in the pressures experienced by general practitioners as a result of patients' improved access to treatment from pharmacists.
- a much improved remuneration package for pharmacists;

The enhanced Minor Ailments Service will be reviewed after 6 months to evaluate the benefits to patients, the scheme's performance and the remuneration structure.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to provide a new woman and children's hospital on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. (AQW 169/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials have worked closely with the Belfast Trust to finalise proposals for the new Women's and Children's Hospitals. The Trust is currently finalising the business case which will be submitted to the Department for assessment. Only when the business case has been submitted and scrutinised can a decision on funding and timing of the project be taken. Those decisions will of course need to be taken alongside decisions on other competing priorities emerging from the ongoing review of capital priorities which will report to me at the end of September.

Loch Cuan House in Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will urge the Trust to expedite its business plan for Loch Cuan House in Newtownards; and what has been the response so far from the Trust concerning this matter. (AQW 170/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has established a Reform and Modernisation Project Board to review all statutory residential care for older people in the Trust area, and proposals for the future of Loch Cuan House are being considered as part of this review. The Trust has indicated that a business case plan for Loch Cuan House will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment and full public consultation with all key stakeholders before a final decision is made. The Trust will hold a meeting to update residents, relatives and staff of Loch Cuan House on these proposals.

Older People in Loughiel

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are provided by his Department for older people in Loughiel. (AQW 175/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern HSC Trust provides residents of Loughiel with a full range of health and social care services including access to community nursing, GP services, social services, allied health professional services, day care services and domiciliary care. Social services are delivered to Loughiel by

the Ballymoney Integrated Team for Older People and allocation of all services is based on assessment of need. Working in partnership with the Loughgiel Community Association, the Trust has appointed a Community Development Worker for the Ballymoney and Moyle area to partner with local community organisations to maximise the independence and enhance the health and social well being of older people. In addition, Supporting People visitation officers work at the Millennium Centre in Loughgiel which offers a weekly luncheon club and activities.

Ambulances

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the age of ambulances in North Antrim. (AQW 177/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is contained in the table below:

Ambulance Station	A&E ambulances Age (years)
Ballycastle	5
	5
Ballymena	4
	4
	5
	9
Ballymoney	5
	5
	9

Ambulance Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average (i) age; and (ii) mileage, is of ambulances based in the Derry/Londonderry City Council area; and for his assessment of the ambulance service provided in this area. (AQW 283/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The average age of the ambulances based at Altnagelvin Ambulance Station, which covers the Derry City Council area, is 4 years and 8 months. Their average mileage is 83,762.

The ambulance fleet based at Altnagelvin is well maintained and fully complies with Department of Environment MOT requirements.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) 2008/09 Priorities for Action target is that from

April 2008, it should respond to an average of 70% of Category A (life-threatening) calls within eight minutes, with performance in individual Health and Social Services Board areas being improved to at least 62.5% by March 2009. Figures for the year to date show that performance in the Western Board area has exceeded this target.

Ambulance Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings have been set for the Ambulance Service for the current financial year. (AQW 284/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set challenging efficiency targets for all trusts for the three years 2008/09 to 2010/11 in order to deliver the Executive Committee's savings targets.

For the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service this translates into a target of £1.2m for 2008/09.

Access NI

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what steps he has taken to address the delays in processing disclosures/ checks being carried out by Access NI, for those people who are wishing to work in a regulated position and/ or care positions within the meaning of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order 2003, or the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Order 2007. (AQW 367/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In order to deal with AccessNI delays, my department has relaxed the rules governing employment in health and social care. In some employment circumstances, this required an amendment to existing legislation. This was done by way of The Establishments and Agencies (Fitness of Workers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, which were made on 12 August and came into operation on 13 August 2008. Where legislative amendment was required, it was restricted to those areas of health and social care where there was evidence to indicate that the impacts of AccessNI delays were greatest. As a result, the majority of employers in health and social care settings will be able to employ, pending receipt of an enhanced disclosure certificate from AccessNI, subject to a number of conditions being satisfied.

In addition, I have sought assurances from Minister Paul Goggins that AccessNI will return to full service at the earliest opportunity.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bowtown to Loughries Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how much it will cost to resurface the Bowtown to Loughries Road. (AQW 84/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised that a resurfacing scheme was carried out earlier this year on the Bowtown to Loughries road at a cost of £345,000. At this time, Roads Service also took the opportunity to carry out a minor works scheme, to remove a bad bend at a particularly narrow section of the road, at a cost of £85,000. A short section of this road near Loughries Primary School has yet to be completed following works by Northern Ireland Electricity. The estimated cost of the remaining works is £10,000, and should be completed within the next 2-3 months.

As regards AQW 85/09, Roads Service has advised me that their intention to carry out a resurfacing scheme on the Bowtown Road to Loughries Road, was notified to all the utilities, including Northern Ireland Water, by way of the Northern Ireland Street Works Register and Notification System (NISRANS) on 28 January 2008. No response was received from Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Consequently Roads Service proceeded to carry out the resurfacing scheme which is now complete, with the exception of the short section mentioned above.

I can confirm that NIW contacted Roads Service in early June of this year to arrange a meeting, to discuss a programme of proposed works in and around Newtownards. At the meeting on 10 June 2008, NIW, their consultant and contractor, presented a plan showing the various locations of the proposed works, which included the Bowtown Road. (NIW had posted a notice on NISRANS about the proposed works on 23 May 2008).

It was pointed out by Roads Service at this meeting that their resurfacing scheme, which was substantially complete at this stage, had been logged on NISRANS on 28 January 2008; and that this was the first time Roads Service had been aware of any proposed works by NIW. It was made clear by Roads Service that it would exercise its powers under the Streetworks (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, to restrict NIW from working on the resurfaced road for the maximum period of twelve months.

Bowtown to Loughries Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why Northern Ireland Water and his

Department did not co-ordinate the resurfacing and water pipe laying on the Bowtown to Loughries Road. (AQW 85/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a resurfacing scheme was carried out earlier this year on the Bowtown to Loughries road at a cost of £345,000. At this time, Roads Service also took the opportunity to carry out a minor works scheme, to remove a bad bend at a particularly narrow section of the road, at a cost of £85,000. A short section of this road near Loughries Primary School has yet to be completed following works by Northern Ireland Electricity. The estimated cost of the remaining works is £10,000, and should be completed within the next 2-3 months.

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Upgrading the Tullykevin Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will consider upgrading the Tullykevin Road, Greyabbey, to take into account the increase in traffic volume using the road. (AQW 86/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are no plans to upgrade the Tullykevin Road at present.

However, Roads Service will continue to carry out regular inspections on the Tullykevin Road to ensure that it is maintained in accordance with approved maintenance standards. Any defects identified during these inspections, will be prioritised and repaired accordingly.

Widening of the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast Bottleneck at Greenisland

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will announce the result of the public inquiry into the widening of the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast bottleneck at Greenisland.

(AQW 94/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is presently considering the Inspectors Report on the public enquiry into the widening of the A2 at Shore Road, Greenisland.

I expect to be able to publish the result of the public inquiry in October 2008.

Road Schemes Planned for East Derry/Londonderry

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what road schemes are planned for the East Derry/Londonderry constituency in the period September 2008 to December 2010.

(AQW 95/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The tables below detail the proposed schemes that my Department's Road Service has planned for the East Derry/Londonderry constituency during the period September 2008 to December 2010, based on the current level of funding.

Major Works Scheme
A2 Dualling – Maydown Roundabout to City of Derry Airport

Resurfacing Schemes	
Agivey Road at Droghed	Edenmore Road at Enagh
Quilly Road at Masteragwee	Terrydoo Road at Terrydoo
Dunhill Road at Balteagh	Dremont Road at Terrydremont
Edenbane Road at Bovedy	Carnamuff Road at Carnamuff
Castleroe Road at Riverside	Greystone Road (Irish Green Street to Scroggy Road)
Agivey Road at Mullan	Gortnaghy Housing Estate
Belraugh Road Part 2 at Boleran	Sheskin Road at Minnegallagher
Cam Road at Croaghan	Killunaght Road at Ballyharigan

Resurfacing Schemes	
Ballyquin Road at Ballyquin	Scroggy Road at Rathbready More
Linenhall Street	

Traffic Section Schemes (Programmed schemes from September 2008 to March 2009)*	
Type of Scheme	Location
Bus measures at:	Cromore Road Mussenden Road Curragh Road Agivey Road Carrowreagh Road
Footway and Islands at:	Garvagh Road, Kilrea
Pedestrian Refuge at:	Coleraine Street, Kilrea Bridge Street, Garvagh
Footway and extend layby at:	Moneygran Road, Kilrea
Provision of Footway at:	Ballymacrea Road, Portrush
Collision Remedial Schemes at:	Ballybogey Road Aghanloo Road Priestland Road
Zebra Crossing at:	Diamond, Kilrea
Shared Use Path at:	Dunderg Road, Coleraine

* The Programme for March 2009 to Dec 2010 has not been identified at present.

Network Development Schemes
B64 Garvagh Road, Kilrea – Provision of footway
U391 Dunderg Road, Macosquin – Provision of footway
A29 Atlantic Road/U300 at Islandtasserty - Carriageway realignment
C93 Ballylagan Road – Provision of footway
A2 Quilly Road – Provision of footway
U332 Ardina Road – Provision of footway
A54 Agivey Road (Mullan) - Horizontal and vertical realignment of the carriageway
B69 Drumacarny Bridge - Bridge realignment
B68 Ballyquin Road/U271 Ballyavelin Road - Junction improvement
B69 Ballyquin Road at Scrigan - Carriageway realignment
A37 Broad Road/B66 Ringsend Road - Junction improvement
C529 Drumsurn Road, Drumsurn – Provision of footway

Roads Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what type of weedkiller is used by Roads Service to treat footpaths. (AQW 112/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service carries out weed spraying in Castlereagh and Belfast North sections only. All other weed spraying on footpaths throughout the North is carried out by external contractors.

The weed killer used by Roads Service this year on the first spray, which was carried out during May and June, was a product called Xanadu. Roads Service later switched to a product called CDA Vanquish.

A survey of products used by the external contractors showed several different types of weedkiller products in use.

Cleaning Bonfire Sites and Repairing Road Surfaces

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money was spent by Roads Service cleaning bonfire sites and repairing road surfaces from 1 July to 31 August 2008. (AQW 120/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it does not monitor expenditure specifically related to bonfires. However, during the period 1 July to 31 August 2008 it is estimated that around £60,000 was spent on attending / repairing bonfire related sites.

Roads Service

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail specific Roads Service projects in which (i) the entire funding; and (ii) part of the funding, has come from revenue generated through parking fines. (AQW 138/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 138/09, I can advise you that income from parking fines is not used to fund specific projects. My Department's Roads Service budget to fund its services takes into account all income, including income from parking fines.

In relation to AQW 140/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the testing process, referred to in my previous answer, has now been completed by NCP Services Ltd and a satisfactory adhesive ticket has been identified. It is intended that these tickets will be installed, for use in all Roads Service pay and display machines over the coming weeks.

Roads Service

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5430/08, for an update on the provision of pay and display tickets that have efficient adhesive surfaces to enable them to be securely attached to car windscreens. (AQW 140/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 138/09, I can advise you that income from parking fines is not used to fund specific projects. My Department's Roads Service budget to fund its services takes into account all income, including income from parking fines.

In relation to AQW 140/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the testing process, referred to in my previous answer, has now been completed by NCP Services Ltd and a satisfactory adhesive ticket has been identified. It is intended that these tickets will be installed, for use in all Roads Service pay and display machines over the coming weeks.

Road Scheme

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost of each individual road scheme over £1 million, in each of the last 4 years; and for each of these schemes, how much the Department spent on consultants. (AQW 158/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 158/09, the table provided by my Department's Roads Service below, lists those road schemes completed at a cost of over £1 million since 1 January 2004. The total cost and the amount paid to consultants in delivering each scheme, is also provided.

The significant variation in fees paid to consultants, across the schemes listed, is due largely to the fact that on some schemes, design and supervision has been undertaken in house, whereas on others scheme development has been contracted out under the management of Roads Service Engineers.

Major Works Schemes 2004-2008			
Scheme	Total Scheme Cost (£k)	Opened to Traffic	Consultancy Fees (£k)
A8 Belfast to Larne Road - Roundabouts	1,707	Jan-04	2
A1 Flyover at Rathfriland Road junction, Banbridge	4,900	Feb-04	125 1
A6 Toome Bypass	18,741	Mar-04	804

Major Works Schemes 2004-2008			
Scheme	Total Scheme Cost (£k)	Opened to Traffic	Consultancy Fees (£k)
M1 Blacks Road to Stockmans Lane	5,787	Aug-04	162 4
A8 Belfast to Larne Road, Doagh Road to Hillhead Road Dualling + Ballynure Link	9,105	Mar-05	1,046
A1 underpass at Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore	3,300	Jun-05	90 1
Foyle Bridge, Londonderry - Strengthening	12,895	Aug-05	1,158
A7 Saintfield to Crossgar, Doran's Rock (towards Downpatrick)	1,210 5	Dec-05	15
Bann River Bridge, Portadown - Strengthening	4,226	Feb-06	26
A26 Ballinaloob (towards Ballymena)	3,846	Mar-06	13
A5 Omagh Throughpass Stage 3	12,2192	Oct-06	1,539
A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill	25,800	Nov-06	645 1
M2 Crosskeen - slip roads at Antrim Hospital	2,500 3	Jul-07	100
A1 Newry to Dundalk Link Road (NI section)	33,800	Aug-07	2,940
A514 Crescent Link	1,700 2	Dec-07	32
Skeoge Link, Londonderry	4,400 2	Mar-08	42

Notes:

- 1 Designed in-house. Consultants fee is an estimated cost of producing Environmental Statement
- 2 Final construction cost not yet agreed with Contractor.
- 3 As this scheme is an element of Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) Package 1, only estimated costs are available.
- 4 Cost of taking through statutory procedures subsumed in BDFO Package 1.
- 5 Excludes land costs.

With regards to AQW 159/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the Consultancy Service (Partnering) contract is in its 4th and final year. On completion in April 2009, the value of the

contract with Amey Consulting is estimated at £10.53 million. The table below details the amount spent during each of the four years.

Year	Amount
05/06	£1.95m
06/07	£3.15m
07/08	£2.84m
08/09	£2.59m (est)
Total	£10.53m (est)

The services delivered under this contract are essential in enabling Roads Service to deliver its identified programme of maintenance and network improvements, on time.

Amey Consultancy Contract

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent on the Department's partnering consultant Amey (formerly Owen Williams), during the current partnering contract. (AQW 159/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 158/09, the table provided by my Department's Roads Service below, lists those road schemes completed at a cost of over £1 million since 1 January 2004. The total cost and the amount paid to consultants in delivering each scheme, is also provided.

The significant variation in fees paid to consultants, across the schemes listed, is due largely to the fact that on some schemes, design and supervision has been undertaken in house, whereas on others scheme development has been contracted out under the management of Roads Service Engineers.

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Scheme	Total Scheme Cost (£k)	Opened to Traffic	Consultancy Fees (£k)
A8 Belfast to Larne Road - Roundabouts	1,707	Jan-04	2
A1 Flyover at Rathfriland Road junction, Banbridge	4,900	Feb-04	125 1
A6 Toome Bypass	18,741	Mar-04	804
M1 Blacks Road to Stockmans Lane	5,787	Aug-04	162 4

Major Works Schemes 2004-2008			
Scheme	Total Scheme Cost (£k)	Opened to Traffic	Consultancy Fees (£k)
A8 Belfast to Larne Road, Doagh Road to Hillhead Road Dualling + Ballynure Link	9,105	Mar-05	1,046
A1 underpass at Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore	3,300	Jun-05	90 1
Foyle Bridge, Londonderry - Strengthening	12,895	Aug-05	1,158
A7 Saintfield to Crossgar, Doran's Rock (towards Downpatrick)	1,210 5	Dec-05	15
Bann River Bridge, Portadown - Strengthening	4,226	Feb-06	26
A26 Ballinaloob (towards Ballymena)	3,846	Mar-06	13
A5 Omagh Throughpass Stage 3	12,2192	Oct-06	1,539
A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill	25,800	Nov-06	645 1
M2 Crosskeenan - slip roads at Antrim Hospital	2,500 3	Jul-07	100
A1 Newry to Dundalk Link Road (NI section)	33,800	Aug-07	2,940
A514 Crescent Link	1,700 2	Dec-07	32
Skeoge Link, Londonderry	4,400 2	Mar-08	42

Notes:

- 1 Designed in-house. Consultants fee is an estimated cost of producing Environmental Statement
- 2 Final construction cost not yet agreed with Contractor.
- 3 As this scheme is an element of Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) Package 1, only estimated costs are available.
- 4 Cost of taking through statutory procedures subsumed in BDFO Package 1.
- 5 Excludes land costs.

With regards to AQW 159/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the Consultancy Service (Partnering) contract is in its 4th and final year. On completion in April 2009, the value of the contract with Amey Consulting is estimated at £10.53

million. The table below details the amount spent during each of the four years.

Year	Amount
05/06	£1.95m
06/07	£3.15m
07/08	£2.84m
08/09	£2.59m (est)
Total	£10.53m (est)

The services delivered under this contract are essential in enabling Roads Service to deliver its identified programme of maintenance and network improvements, on time.

Drainage Works

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm what drainage works, including drain cleaning, has taken place at the Royal Ancient Order of the Buffalo Social Club, at 7 Castle Street, Carrickfergus. (AQW 173/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to gully / drain cleaning, my Department's Roads Service aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice per annum. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resources.

I have been advised that the gullies in the vicinity of the Royal Ancient Order of the Buffalo Social Club were cleaned on 7 November 2007 and 26 April 2008. The next scheduled clean is due later this month.

Roads Service has also advised that apart from the aforementioned scheduled road gully cleaning, it has not carried out any other drainage works at this location.

Roads Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 8468/08, to provide a list of those proposals which are already complete and those which remain outstanding. (AQW 179/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that since my last response to the Member's Assembly Question AQW 8468/08, the following proposals have been completed:

- all traffic management work involving the upgrade of signs and road markings;
- Gillistown Road junction improvement; and

- Casheltown Crossroads junction improvement.
- The following improvements were also identified as part of the B52 Largy Road route study. However, these can only be brought forward into a works programme on a priority basis, and within the level of funding available:
- Aughnahoy Road Junction Vertical realignment (to improve sight visibility and improve sight distance);
- Largy Lounge Vertical realignment (to improve sight distance);
- Duffin's Bend (improvements to the horizontal alignment to improve the sight distance, widening the existing verges and widening the existing road width);
- Chesney's Corner (provision of right turn lanes); and
- Kilknock Crossroads (provision of right turn lanes).

Sewage: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cause of raw sewage leaking into the back gardens of dwellings in the Whitehall area of Limavady on 5 and 6 September 2008.

(AQW 205/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the out-of-sewer flooding to the gardens of properties in the Whitehill area of Limavady on 5 and 6 September 2008 was caused by a blockage which resulted from a build up of rags in the sewer. The blockage was cleared on 6 September and the sewer is now operating normally.

Sewage: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development why there was a 20 hour delay in dealing with the incident involving the leaking of raw sewage into the back gardens of dwellings in the Whitehall area of Limavady on 5 and 6 September 2008.

(AQW 206/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it commits to unblock public sewers within 24 hours of being notified, as detailed in its Customer Charter. Northern Ireland Water does, however, endeavour to attend to most sewer blockages far more rapidly than this.

When out of sewer flooding was reported in the Whitehill area of Limavady on the evening of Friday 5 September 2008, Northern Ireland Water's sewer maintenance contractor was dispatched to the site. Based on previous experience it was suspected that a fault at Whitehill Wastewater Pumping Station

might be the cause of the problem. Upon investigation by a Northern Ireland Water engineer, the station was found to be operating normally. There was a delay in relaying this information back to the sewer maintenance contractor.

Northern Ireland Water's contractor attended to the blocked sewer but specialist sewer jetting equipment was required to clear the blockage. This further added to the delay. However, the contractor tankered effluent away from the sewer while the jetting equipment was being arranged. The blockage was finally cleared by 5pm on Saturday evening.

Sewage: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if there will be a full investigation into the events of 5 and 6 September 2008, in relation to the leaking of raw sewage into the back gardens of properties in the Whitehall area of Limavady; and if he will bring a report to the Committee for Regional Development with recommendations to be considered to avoid a repeat of the lengthy delay in responding to an urgent situation.

(AQW 207/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Naturally I am concerned about reports of sewage leaks affecting people's property. Information has been sought from NI Water on the matter and will be included in a response to the Member's associated correspondence on the issue. As this is an operational matter for NI Water I will not be making a report to the Regional Development Committee.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) any further work to be completed on or around the Hightown Bridge; and (ii) possible further closures of the bridge that may occur in the future.

(AQW 226/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 226/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the minor works which remain outstanding in the vicinity of the Hightown Bridge, which opened to traffic on 3 September 2008, include:

- alterations to kerbs;
- alterations to tactile paving;
- alterations to white lining;
- the laying of anti-skid surfacing; and
- top soiling and landscaping.

There are presently no plans for a full closure of the Hightown Bridge. However, when antiskid surfacing is being laid, it will be necessary to temporarily close a

lane of the Hightown Road. Traffic will be controlled by means of traffic lights during these works.

In relation to AQW 227/09, I can confirm that Roads Service has not paid a bonus to the Design Build Finance Operate contractor for rebuilding the Hightown Bridge ahead of schedule.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development if Highway Management Construction was paid a bonus for rebuilding the Hightown Bridge ahead of schedule; and if so, how much this bonus payment was. (AQW 227/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 226/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the minor works which remain outstanding in the vicinity of the Hightown Bridge, which opened to traffic on 3 September 2008, include:

- alterations to kerbs;
- alterations to tactile paving;
- alterations to white lining;
- the laying of anti-skid surfacing; and
- top soiling and landscaping.

There are presently no plans for a full closure of the Hightown Bridge. However, when antiskid surfacing is being laid, it will be necessary to temporarily close a lane of the Hightown Road. Traffic will be controlled by means of traffic lights during these works.

In relation to AQW 227/09, I can confirm that Roads Service has not paid a bonus to the Design Build Finance Operate contractor for rebuilding the Hightown Bridge ahead of schedule.

Bus and Rail Passengers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development how many (i) bus; and (ii) train, passengers travelled between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast in the last 12 months. (AQW 232/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The total number of bus and rail passenger journeys between Derry and Belfast in the last 12 months was:

Passenger Journey Numbers*	23/07/07 – 27/07/08
Ulsterbus	375,048
NIR	30,084

* The figures only include journeys that begin in Derry and end in Belfast and vice versa.

Relaying of Track

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timeline for (i) the completion of the passing loop at Ballykelly; (ii) the reconstruction and relaying of the rail-line between Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry; (iii) the establishment of an hourly service between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast; and (iv) the establishment of a direct service between Derry/Londonderry and Dublin. (AQW 233/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The relay of the track between Coleraine and Derry is still at the design stage and once completed an Economic Appraisal will be submitted to my Department for approval. However in relation to the questions raised I would make the following comments

- (i) The location of the passing loop has still to be decided. Options are being considered with Ballykelly one of them. It is hoped that sufficient information will be available by November of this year to allow a preferred option to be selected. It is expected that the passing loop will be constructed during the Derry – Coleraine track re-lay.
- (ii) Work on the reconstruction and relaying of the railway line between Coleraine and Derry is currently scheduled to commence in 2011 with completion in 2013.
- (iii) The establishment of an hourly service will follow soon after completion of the relay, achievement of the required line speed and full commissioning of the required signalling.
- (iv) There are no plans at present to establish a direct service between Derry and Dublin. The priorities for investment in the railways network at this time include increasing frequency and capacity on the Belfast to Derry line and improving frequency of the Enterprise services.:

Ballykelly Bypass

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects the Ballykelly by-pass to be completed and fully functioning. (AQW 236/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads service has advised that an assessment to develop a preferred route corridor for a bypass of Ballykelly is presently being undertaken, and is expected to be completed by the end of this year.

I can advise that a bypass of Ballykelly is included in my Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, which includes a programme of Strategic Road Improvements that are proposed over the next 10 years to 2017/18.

While I am unable to confirm a completion date for the Ballykelly Bypass, Roads Service would anticipate completion of this scheme towards the end of the Delivery Plan period.

Sewers: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in the adoption of sewers in the maritime area of Carrickfergus. (AQW 237/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the developer is aware that the sewerage system in the Maritime area of Carrickfergus must be brought up to an acceptable standard before it can be adopted by NIW.

NIW has been in contact with the developer's representative on several occasions over the summer months to discuss the work required to bring the system up to the adoptable standard. The most recent contact was on 9 September 2008. NIW and the developer have agreed the steps needed to bring the sewers to an adoption standard, however, a programme of remedial work has yet to be finalised. The formal adoption of the sewers cannot be implemented until these issues have been resolved. NIW and my department's Roads Service are continuing to work closely with the developer in order to bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

Roads Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to (i) monitor and improve road signage; and (ii) ensure that roads are regularly cleared of obstructing bushes and branches. (AQW 241/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the monitoring of road signage and the condition of roadside bushes and branches, that could endanger or obstruct road users, are identified during routine maintenance inspections. Any defective signage and overgrown trees or hedges identified during these inspections are programmed for the appropriate remedial action to be initiated.

I can further advise that Roads Service is currently undertaking a review of the Traffic Signs Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

Translink

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the decision by Translink to remove the bus service between Hilltown and Rostrevor. (AQW 270/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: This is an operational decision by Translink. I understand that Translink withdrew this loss making route as a result of extremely low patronage figures.

Road Ramps

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on road ramps in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 278/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not monitor expenditure specifically related to road humps. However, the table below provides details of Roads Service expenditure on traffic calming measures, which includes road humps, central islands, mini roundabouts, priority junctions, build-outs, chicanes and school travel and safety projects, in each of the last three financial years.

Year	Traffic Calming Expenditure
2005/06	£3,120,000
2006/07	£2,550,000
2007/08	£3,060,000

Hollywood Town Centre Development

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress his Department has made in transferring title in its car park in Hollywood to facilitate the town centre development. (AQW 309/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service have advised that discussions are ongoing with Department for Social Development officials regarding the details of the terms under which the transfer of Hibernia Street car park in Hollywood could take place. When these details have been agreed I will give this matter my earliest consideration.

Sewerage System in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to upgrade the sewerage system in East Belfast following the flooding on 12 June 2007 and 16 August 2008. (AQW 311/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently undertaking a Drainage Area Study of the East Belfast sewerage system which will seek to identify improvements required within the network. As well as sewer-related flooding, the study will also seek to address problems related to pollution from the many overflows within the network and also problems related to defective pipe work. It is expected that the study will be completed by April 2009 and that any upgrading work identified will be implemented thereafter subject to funding and priority within NIW's Capital Investment Programme.

Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the additional costs incurred by (i) Roads Service; and (ii) Northern Ireland Water, following the recent flooding. (AQW 331/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the total additional costs incurred, in responding to the flooding during the weekend of 16 & 17 August 2008, were approximately £470,000. The table below shows a breakdown of these costs.

Cost	Amount (£k)
Labour	165
Plant	26
Materials (sandbags)	9
External Contractors	65
Repairs to bridges	205
Total	470

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised that approximately £200,000 of additional costs was incurred as a result of the flooding during 16 & 17 August 2008.

This amount is an initial estimate, based on the number of staff engaged in the incident and the number of jobs attended to by the contractor. Detailed figures will become available when precise costs are returned from NIW's contractors. I have asked NIW's Director of Operations, Phil Barker, to write directly to you when the final cost is established.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

New Policies

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what new policies she has introduced since taking office in May 2007. (AQW 22/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): Since May 2007 I have introduced policies on housing and homelessness, welfare reform, pensions and benefit uptake, child maintenance, support of the voluntary and community sector including Partners for Change and charities legislation.

Standardised Rights for Tenants

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why the rights for tenants vary, depending on each housing association's individual policies and why her Department has not ensured standardised rights for all tenants. (AQW 24/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing Associations, registered by my Department, must comply with policies laid down within the regulatory framework. These provide certain rights and safeguards for all social tenants including Tenants Guarantee, secure tenancies, probationary tenancies, the House Sales Scheme and Right to Repair.

Housing Associations need to have flexibility to reflect the differing needs of the variety of client groups they serve.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what medical conditions automatically qualify for receipt of Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 57/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Entitlement to Disability Living Allowance depends on the effects that severe disability has on a person's life and not on a particular disability or diagnosis. This ensures that severely disabled people have equal access to the benefit irrespective of the cause of their disabilities. Entitlement is based on the extent of a disabled person's need for personal care and their ability to walk.

Regeneration of Estates in the Craigavon Central Area

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps have been taken to promote

the regeneration of estates in the Craigavon Central area of Upper Bann. (AQW 78/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The regeneration of social housing estates in the Craigavon Central area of Upper Bann is being addressed primarily through the Brownlow Strategy Action Plan. Since October 2004, over £3.5M has been spent on regeneration initiatives in the area including the extensive refurbishment of existing properties and selective demolitions and sale of Housing Executive land to the private sector to stimulate future development of the area. My Department has also been involved directly in promoting and co-ordinating efforts to tackle deprivation in those estates which are included in the Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Provision of Play Areas in Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development what analysis her Department has made of the level of provision of play areas in the Brownlow area of Craigavon. (AQW 82/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Responsibility for assessment of need and provision of playgrounds in the Brownlow area is primarily a matter for Craigavon Borough Council. My Department has been working with the Council to address “the perceived insufficient provision of social, play and sports facilities” in the part of the area within the Neighbourhood Renewal Boundary. It has provided funding for two multi use games areas which were constructed recently at Ardowen and Parkmore at cost of just under £257,000.

Housing Executive

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the areas of land in the North Down constituency that the Housing Executive is putting up for sale. (AQW 100/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has identified the following sites in North Down as surplus and as such they are required to offer them to the open market.

These are:

- Old Belfast Road, Bangor
- Churchill Park, Bangor
- Church Green, Holywood
- Green Road/Breezemount, Bangor
- Ballycrochan Road, Bangor
- Ashfield Drive, Donaghadee

Relocation of Housing Executive Office

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development why the Housing Executive district office in Carrickfergus is relocating to Ballymena. (AQW 104/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these two questions are linked, I shall answer them together.

The Housing Executive is not relocating its office from Carrickfergus to Ballymena. The district office will continue to be located in Carrickfergus and will continue to provide a comprehensive range of housing services.

However, as part of the Housing Executive’s Modernising Services Programme, 6 posts are being relocated to Ballymena where their work will be dedicated solely to Housing Benefit and Rent Accounting functions. The remaining 23 staff in Carrickfergus will continue to deliver housing, homelessness, response maintenance and general estate management services from that office.

Relocation of Housing Executive Office

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm how many jobs will be re-located when the Housing Executive office in Carrickfergus re-locates to Ballymena. (AQW 114/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these two questions are linked, I shall answer them together.

The Housing Executive is not relocating its office from Carrickfergus to Ballymena. The district office will continue to be located in Carrickfergus and will continue to provide a comprehensive range of housing services.

However, as part of the Housing Executive’s Modernising Services Programme, 6 posts are being relocated to Ballymena where their work will be dedicated solely to Housing Benefit and Rent Accounting functions. The remaining 23 staff in Carrickfergus will continue to deliver housing, homelessness, response maintenance and general estate management services from that office.

Cleaning and Repairing Bonfire Sites

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development for the total amount spent by the Housing Executive cleaning and repairing bonfire sites from 1 July to 31 August 2008. (AQW 119/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The costs incurred by the Housing Executive through the removal and reinstatement works associated with bonfires this

year were around £126k. This represents a reduction of around £41k on the previous year's figure.

Community Heating Schemes

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has considered the introduction of community heating schemes in new and existing social housing projects. (AQW 125/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive considers that community heating is, in terms of social housing, more practically and cost-effectively installed at newbuild stage.

As part of the New Housing Agenda, all new social housing built from 1 April this year will be required to conform to Level 3 in the Code for Sustainable Homes. In effect this will mean that these new properties will be up to 25% more energy efficient than before.

Sheltered Housing

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to provide sheltered housing in Loughgiel; and what work has been carried out to provide it. (AQW 176/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Area Supporting People Partnership which is responsible for highlighting demand for this type of accommodation has not identified any need for sheltered accommodation for this area. Consequently, there are no sheltered schemes currently within the Social Housing Development Programme for Loughgiel.

Removal of Derelict Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development when her Department will remove the derelict bridge across the Six Mile Water River in Grangers Mill, Muckamore. (AQW 184/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department owns a piece of land adjacent to the bridge. The folio of this land extends to half way across the river and therefore half the bridge. The other half is in private ownership. While the bridge is no longer used as part of a railway, it is currently being used to carry essential utilities i.e. a sewage pipe. My Officials, together with NI Water and the other owner, are currently investigating the various options available that may allow for the bridge to be removed.

I have instructed my Officials to keep you informed of developments.

Carers Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Carers Review initiated in May 2008. (AQW 199/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Preliminary work has been ongoing with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety over the summer months. It is anticipated that the review will be completed later this year.

Social Housing

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of social housing available in the Mallusk area; and what future social or affordable housing initiatives she will undertake in this area, given the widespread housing development currently taking place there. (AQW 224/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has a small estate at HydePark/Parkmount with 25 dwellings.

There are currently no schemes included in the Social Housing Development Programme for the Mallusk area. However, there were 10 first preference housing applicants in housing stress (with 30 points or more) for HydePark/Parkmount at 31st March 2008. In light of this the Programme is currently being reviewed and consideration will be given to including a small new build scheme for HydePark/Parkmount within the new programme.

Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwelling Scheme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how many homes the Housing Executive has purchased under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwelling scheme in each of the last 3 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 234/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not hold the information requested by district council area. However, the information is held by Housing Executive District Office area as indicated in the table below:

NIHE District	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
Belfast West	1	0	1
Belfast East	2	2	0
Belfast North	8	0	2
Belfast Shankill	2	0	1

NIHE District	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
Belfast South	0	0	0
Bangor	3	2	0
Newtownards	3	2	1
Castlereagh	4	1	3
Lisburn	7	1	1
Downpatrick	3	0	0
Banbridge	1	0	1
Newry	1	1	1
Armagh	1	0	0
Lurgan	2	0	1
Portadown	0	0	0
Dungannon	0	0	0
Fermanagh	3	0	1
Ballymena	4	2	4
Antrim	2	1	2
Newtownabbey 1	1	0	0
Newtownabbey 2	1	3	0
Carrickfergus	1	3	0
Larne	3	2	1
Ballycastle	0	0	1
Ballymoney	4	1	0
Coleraine	5	1	0
Waterloo Place	0	0	0
Waterside	3	0	0
Collon Terrace	0	0	0
Limavady	2	0	1
Magherafelt	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Omagh	1	0	0
Cookstown	1	0	0
Totals:	69	22	22

The Housing Executive will only consider the use of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation for families as a last resort, and then only for a maximum of 6 weeks.

Council area	2005/2006 £k	2006/2007 £k	2007/2008 £k
Antrim	1861	4797	1240
Ards	18898	6945	0
Armagh	14198	6573	7708
Ballymena	11143	12158	10380
Ballymoney	3100	15160	4820
Banbridge	5383	13948	9849
Belfast	145662	113017	32607
Carrickfergus	0	451	0
Castlereagh	1616	5833	835
Coleraine	43227	0	4650
Cookstown	6279	8427	6488
Craigavon	13615	37755	9117
Derry	1021	764	275
Down	164256	126040	54769
Dungannon	122691	115242	37341
Fermanagh	56424	34272	42
Larne	0	5770	4695
Limavady	0	0	974
Lisburn	12291	5077	1483
Magherafelt	15	0	11373
Moyle	330	0	8220
Newry & Mourne	76682	23205	917
Newtownabbey	3620	2050	85
North Down	1434	2277	0
Omagh	2975	0	0
Strabane	0	0	546
Total	706721	539761	208414

Housing Executive

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development for the cost incurred by the Housing Executive for bed and breakfast accommodation for housing applicants in each of the last 3 financial years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 235/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the Housing Executive's expenditure on this type of accommodation for the period requested.

Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the organisations and their geographical locations, that have been progressed to the economic appraisal stage for consideration for funding from the Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme. (AQW 242/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Following assessment, the organisations whose applications are

being taken forward to economic appraisal within the Modernisation Fund Capital programme and their geographical location are outlined in the table below:

Organisation	Geographical Location
Holywell Trust	Derry
Coleraine Rural & Urban Network	Coleraine
Mencap	Belfast
Confederation of Community Groups	Newry
Ards Development Bureau & Community Network	Newtownards
The Orana Children and Family Centre Ltd	Newry
Disability Action	Belfast
Belfast South Community Resources	Belfast
East Belfast Community Development Agency	Belfast
The Village Garden (Broughshane) Ltd	Broughshane
Culturlann McAdam O Fiaich	Belfast
St Columbs Park House Conference, Activity and Reconciliation Centre	Derry
Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership	Derry
Omagh Community House	Omagh
Greater Shankill Partnership	Belfast
St Peter's Youth Club	Lurgan
Youth Link: NI	Belfast
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	Belfast
Business in the Community	Derry
St Patrick's	Dungannon
Manor Street / Cliftonville Community Group	Belfast
Crumlin Together Limited	Crumlin
Boho Community Association	Enniskillen
Learmount Community Development Group Ltd	Derry
The Bytes Project	Belfast
Belfast Exposed Photography	Belfast
The Rural College Ltd	Draperstown
FHASS (First Housing Aid and Support Services)	Derry
ETB 217 Co-ordinating Committee	Dungannon
Pearse Og GFC	Armagh
Aware Defeat Depression	Belfast
New Life Counselling Service	Belfast
Inter Estate Partnership	Antrim
Crossfire Trust Ltd	Keady

Organisation	Geographical Location
Ballinran Community Association	Kilkeel
Shankill Stress and Trauma Group	Belfast
Coleraine Riding for the Disabled	Coleraine
Newington Credit Union Ltd	Belfast
Ionad Uibh Eachach	Belfast
Ballylaw Regeneration Group	Strabane
Opportunity Youth	Belfast
Kilcranny House	Coleraine
REACH Across	Derry
Hillcrest House Family Centre	Derry
Penninsula Healthy Living Partnership Ltd	Kircubbin
Playboard	Belfast
Carryduff Playcare/Playgroup	Belfast
Stepping Stones NI	Lisburn
Corpus Christi Services	Belfast
North City Training Ltd	Belfast
Orchardville Society	Belfast
Impact Training (NI) Ltd	Belfast
Newbuildings Community and Environmental Association	Newbuildings
Brackaghreilly & District Community Association Ltd	Maghera
RNIB	Belfast
Citizen's Advice Belfast	Belfast
Public Achievement	Belfast
Quaker Service	Belfast
NI Association for Mental Health	Belfast
Carleton St Community Development Association	Portadown
Shankill Lurgan Community Projects	Lurgan
Laganview Enterprise centre Ltd	Lisburn
Burnfoot Community Development Association	Dungiven
Inner City South Belfast Sure Start	Belfast
Little Orchids	Derry
SOU	Belfast
Ederney Community Development Trust	Ederney
Best Cellars Music Collective	Dundonald
Dunsford Cross Community Centre	Downpatrick

Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, which of the organisations that have progressed to the economic appraisal stage for consideration of funding from the Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme, have previously received funding from her Department. (AQW 243/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The organisations whose applications have progressed to economic appraisal within the Modernisation Fund Capital Programme and have previously received funding from the Department for Social Development are outlined in the table below:

Organisation
Holywell Trust
Coleraine Rural & Urban Network
Mencap
Confederation of Community Groups
Ards Development Bureau & Community Network
Disability Action
Belfast South Community Resources
East Belfast Community Development Agency
The Village Garden (Broughshane) Ltd
Culturlann McAdam O Fiaich
St Columbs Park House Conference, Activity and Reconciliation Centre
Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership
Omagh Community House
Greater Shankill Partnership
St Peter's Youth Club
Youth Link: NI
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group
Business in the Community
Manor Street / Cliftonville Community Group
Crumlin Together Limited
Boho Community Association
Learmount Community Development Group Ltd
The Bytes Project
Belfast Exposed Photography
FHASS (First Housing Aid and Support Services)
Aware Defeat Depression
New Life Counselling Service
Inter Estate Partnership
Crossfire Trust Ltd

Organisation
Ballinran Community Association
Shankill Stress and Trauma Group
Ionad Uibh Eachach
Ballylaw Regeneration Group
Kilcranny House
Hillcrest House Family Centre
Corpus Christi Services
North City Training Ltd
Impact Training (NI) Ltd
Newbuildings Community and Environmental Association
Carleton St Community Development Association
Shankill Lurgan Community Projects
Laganview Enterprise centre Ltd
Burnfoot Community Development Association
Inner City South Belfast Sure Start
Ederney Community Development Trust
Best Cellars Music Collective
Dunsford Cross Community Centre

HURT (Have Your Tomorrows)

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a detailed rationale explaining why an application by HURT (Have Your Tomorrows) was not progressed to the economic appraisal stage. (AQW 244/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In common with all the applications received under the Modernisation Fund Capital Programme, the HURT application was subject to independent and professional assessment against predetermined programme objectives. The criteria against which all applications were assessed were partnership and collaboration, income generation / cost reduction, improving access to services, enhanced capacity to deliver services, tackling obstacles to good relations and the delivery of services in support of disadvantaged young people.

Assessment scores were allocated against these criteria and prioritised lists compiled for each of the three schemes within the Modernisation Fund Capital Programme. These prioritised lists were then subject to scrutiny by an independent panel. This panel made recommendations as to the projects that should be taken forward to economic appraisal.

This was a highly competitive process and on this occasion the assessment score achieved by the

HURT application did not position it in the group of applications being taken forward to economic appraisal.

Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development what appeals process is in place for organisations that have been unsuccessful in bids for funding from the Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme. (AQW 245/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In common with other grant programmes within the Department for Social Development there is no formal appeal process following the assessment decision on applications made to the Modernisation Fund Capital Programme.

All unsuccessful applicants are advised of the opportunity to discuss their application with the Intermediary Body appointed to manage the implementation of the programme and no such request has been or will be refused.

New Social Housing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development whether the new social housing scheme for Rasharkin will commence on the agreed date; and if not, to detail the reasons. (AQW 250/09)

The Minister for Social Development: This scheme was originally planned to commence in 2007/2008. However, Planning Service advised that there was no sewage treatment capacity available and that an upgrade scheme by Water Service does not exist within their current capital programme. The Planning Service also had design concerns with both the scheme layout and house types and the Housing Executive's design team are currently preparing revised drawings. It is likely that the scheme will now fall into the 2009/2010 programme year.

Housing Market

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what initiatives she has in place to boost the housing market, particularly in relation to Co-Ownership; and what action she has taken so far. (AQW 268/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Earlier this year I set out my New Housing Agenda, which proposes a number of initiatives designed to assist people to become home owners and to remain on the housing ladder. Proposals include the introduction of developer contributions, extending the current house

sales scheme and the development of a mortgage rescue scheme.

I have also supported the development of shared equity schemes in Northern Ireland. These industry-led, privately financed schemes have the potential to make a contribution towards meeting housing need whilst also providing a much needed boost to the housing market.

Co-ownership is another scheme designed to help people to become homeowners. The Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association started the current financial year with a grant of £15m, which is almost 4 times its opening grant last year. In addition, my Department has bid for additional funding as part of the September Monitoring Round.

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to introduce a winter fuel allowance for (i) carers; and (ii) people with learning disabilities living independently. (AQW 298/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The level and eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment are drawn up at Westminster. Under parity arrangements these provisions are then applied in Northern Ireland.

(i) Carers have access to the full range of social security benefits and tax credits, depending on their individual circumstances, and to a wide range of support services. I am satisfied that targeting help in this way represents the best use of resources, and there are no plans at present to introduce a winter fuel allowance specifically for carers.

(ii) Help is already available through disability benefits and the disability premium in income support in recognition of the extra costs, including heating. People with learning disabilities who live independently are entitled to these disability benefits on the same basis as anyone else with a severe disability.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 26 September 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Bland v Irish Government

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will raise the case of Bland v Irish Government with the Taoiseach at the British-Irish Council, with a view to getting a commitment from the Irish Government that they will resolve all outstanding matters in this case, apologize for the injustice inflicted on the Bland family and pay adequate compensation. (AQW 416/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Justice issues do not form part of the work programme for the British-Irish Council (BIC) at present. It would therefore not be appropriate to raise the Bland case with the Taoiseach at a BIC.

This matter was previously debated in the Assembly as Private Members' Business in November 2007 and we are aware of the cross-party support for the Bland family.

Appointments to Public Bodies and Advisory Boards

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide the criteria for appointments to public bodies and advisory boards, particularly in relation to residency and nationality; and to detail the applicable equality legislation. (AQW 426/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The criteria for appointments to public bodies and advisory boards, including residency and nationality requirements (if appropriate), are the responsibility of each Departmental Minister or Ministers to

determine, taking into consideration the requirements for each position and having had due regard to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Newbuild Construction and Investment Schemes

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the economic downturn, what Executive proposals have been considered to bring forward major new build construction and investment schemes. (AQW 473/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are conscious of these issues and recently met with representatives of the Construction Industry to discuss the impact on the sector of the difficulties in financial markets, and in the commercial and domestic property markets. We had a useful discussion and follow up work is planned involving the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Strategic Investment Board to explore what further assistance we could provide to the sector.

The Executive has of course to work within finite capital budgets, but we have made clear our aim to see the delivery of the substantial programmes set out in the Investment Strategy. We are monitoring progress in this regard.

We undertook to discuss the issues raised with the SIB, particularly around the transparency of actual construction costs in major projects and around timetabling and delays.

We also offered our help in acting as a conduit between the sector and the financial institutions.

Child Poverty

Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it is on course to eradicate child poverty, as stated in the Programme for Government. (AQW 474/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Tackling child poverty is an urgent priority for us. Junior Ministers, in line with their responsibility for children and young people, will bring an early focus to this issue through the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People.

In adopting the target to 'eliminate' child poverty it is generally accepted that child poverty would be treated as being 'eliminated' if it were among the best in Europe by the target date of 2020.

Current data indicates that some progress has been met over recent years. However the current global economic climate and rising costs of living will have

an impact. We are currently assessing how this new climate will affect progress.

Children's Champion

Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide details of (i) the recent appointment of a children's champion; and (ii) any targets or programmes the Department has undertaken to promote children's rights. (AQW 480/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

(i) The suggestion by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to have a dedicated Champion for Children at senior level in each department was discussed at the first meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People on 13th March and subsequently agreed by all Ministers.

The Champion for Children and Young People in our department is Colin Jack, Head of Good Relations and Reconciliation Division and the chair of the Champions for Children and Young People's group is Eddie Rooney, Director of the Equality Directorate in OFMDFM. Responsibility for Children and Young People falls within this directorate.

The role of the Champion for Children and Young People is to:

- Liaise with, inform and advise the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to help drive forward agreed policy and to act as a senior point of contact within the department in relation to the Sub-Committee;
- support the department's role in enabling the relevant sub-groups of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to progress and produce focused achievable recommendations; and
- advise and liaise with departmental colleagues on the contribution to the 10 year strategy action planning process and raise awareness at Departmental Board level to encourage departments to ensure children's and young people's interests are fostered and their views sought on policy and strategy issues.

The first meeting of the 'Champions for Children and Young People' took place on 5th August.

(ii) Our department has a PSA target under PSA 6 – 'Ensure the central role of the rights of the child'. To deliver on this target and promote children's rights we will be distributing child rights awareness material to all children and young people which have been specifically designed to detail the articles in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in a way which will be easily understood.

We are fully committed to respecting and progressing the rights of children and young people here and will be guided and informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Action Plans for the 10-year Strategy for Children and Young People will be the key mechanism by which we will chart progress on this commitment and we hope to discuss the next draft Action Plan with the OFMDFM Committee in the near future.

As part of our commitment to improving the lives of children and young people, Junior Ministers were given particular responsibility for children and young people in June 2007. The specific focus the role of the Junior Ministers brings helps to ensure that both their needs and rights are being met and that key issues are kept high on the agenda of this government.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.

The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young people has identified 6 key priorities and established cross departmental sub-groups to take work forward. It has agreed that 'engaging with and hearing the voice of children and young people' should underpin the work of both the sub-groups and the Ministerial Sub-Committee in line with article 12 of the convention.

Furthermore, our department funds the Participation Network to raise awareness among policy makers across the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) of the need to engage with children and young people on matters which impact on their lives.

We have recently established the Strategy Review Planning Group which will be examining and reviewing all aspects of the 10-year strategy. A wide number of voluntary groups from the sector sit on this, including the Children's Law Centre.

We will continue to look for ways to raise awareness of children's rights among both children and adults.

North/South Co-Operation

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many additional areas of North/South co-operation have been (a) suggested by Ministers in the Executive; (b) agreed; and (c) not agreed, since restoration of devolution. (AQW 570/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not practice to disclose details of business discussed in the Executive. The content of Executive papers, including draft papers, is confidential.

Civic Forum

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it expects to make an announcement on whether it will reconstitute the Civic Forum. (AQW 572/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The consultation phase of the review of the Civic Forum which began in May has completed. The review team is currently analysing the information assembled, including consultation responses, with a view to presenting recommendations and options to us in the near future.

Sustainable Development Commission

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 305/09, to confirm when the post of the Commissioner on the Sustainable Development Commission will be filled. (AQW 681/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We have nothing further to add to our answers to AQW 305/09 (Official report dated Friday 19 September 2008) and AQW 137/09 (Official report dated Friday 12 September 2008).

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Applicants to Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm businesses have applied to join the Countryside Management Scheme, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 313/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): I am not able to supply the number of applications to the new Countryside Management Scheme broken down by parliamentary constituency. However I can confirm that at 15 September 2008, a total of 4428 applications had been acknowledged which when broken down by county equates to:

Antrim	812
Armagh	595
Derry	561

Down	507
Fermanagh	849
Tyrone	1104

These numbers may increase as there is a small number of applications still at processing stage.

Grants for Replanting Land

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the Woodland Grant Scheme, and other grants offered by Forest Service, will include grants for replanting land previously used as woodland. (AQW 314/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Within the Forestry Grant Schemes, grant aid is available to woodland owners for replanting in existing woodland which will result in positive environmental benefits.

The current rates for replanting are £400 per hectare for conifers and £600 per hectare for broadleaves, paid as a single instalment when planting is completed.

Loop River

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the Loop River and its tributaries (i) were last inspected; and (ii) will next be inspected; and what plans she has to increase the frequency of inspections, given the flooding that has occurred in the last 2 years. (AQW 315/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) The Loop River was last inspected on 7 November 2007. The tributaries, Glenbrook River and the Merok Burn, were inspected on 15 November 2007. In all three cases, the required works identified were implemented immediately after the inspections.

(ii) Inlet grilles on the Loop River system are afforded highest priority and inspected at least weekly and when we are advised by the Met Office of imminent heavy rainfall. Annual inspection is due early November 2008. Rivers Agency has no plans to increase frequency of routine inspections on these watercourses, but is in receipt of a recently completed feasibility report on viability of potential works to reduce risk of flooding. Options are being considered for inclusion into the Agency's work programme.

Bee-keepers

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current state of the bee population; and what action she is taking to reverse the decline in bee numbers in recent years. (AQW 325/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that there are currently 1,000 beekeepers, maintaining about 4,000 hives here. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a decline in either the number of beekeepers or the number of managed hives in recent years. Bee numbers fall in Spring following Winter losses typically 10 – 15% and then come back up again in May and June.

My staff continue to assist beekeepers in the recognition and management of their hives through inspections and advice on site, as well as talks and demonstrations at conferences arranged by the industry and at local Beekeeping Association Meetings.

Dog Control Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she intends to shift the emphasis from destruction of dogs to penalties for irresponsible owners, in any future dog control legislation. (AQW 348/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The control of dogs, including dangerous dogs, is regulated under the Dogs (NI) Order 1983, as amended by the Dangerous Dogs (NI) Order 1991. The Order designates certain types of dogs of which it is an offence to be in possession, such as the pit bull terrier. Local Councils are responsible for enforcing this legislation and may seize any dog that appears to be of a banned type. Such dogs are destroyed unless their owner can prove that they are not of a banned type. In addition, any dog which attacks people or livestock may be seized, and the dog may be destroyed at the order of a resident magistrate.

Under the legislation, owners or keepers may be prosecuted for having a dog of a banned type, or if their dog has attacked people or livestock. There are also a number of other offences regarding responsible ownership, such as keeping a dog without a licence or allowing a dog to stray.

However, I am currently reviewing the effectiveness of the legislation to deal fully with irresponsible owners.

During recent discussions with stakeholders and interested groups, I have heard conflicting views about the effectiveness of legislating for specific breeds or types of dogs rather than focusing on responsible dog

ownership. This is one of the issues that I am currently considering as part of my wide ranging Review.

While I hope to complete my Review in the coming months, I do not want to pre-empt its outcome at this stage.

Animal Welfare

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will introduce animal welfare legislation. (AQW 349/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I indicated in a previous written answer on this issue on 14 March 2008, the Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006 and, as this exercise was carried out under a different administration, I wanted to take time to fully consider the responses received.

Following my initial consideration of the comments, I have been meeting a number of key stakeholders who provided comments. This has enabled me to hear their concerns at first hand. Arrangements are also in hand for my officials to meet other stakeholders.

I welcome the outline animal welfare legislative proposals which were published by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in Dublin. I have asked my officials to discuss these proposals in detail when they meet their counterparts in DAFF in October, as I believe that it is important that animal welfare legislation in both jurisdictions is broadly compatible.

The animal welfare proposals being brought forward in the South and the primary animal welfare legislation already in place in Britain will inform my policy review and enable robust animal welfare legislation to be brought forward here.

Animal Welfare

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what organisations responded to the consultation on draft legislation on animal welfare in 2006; and why their submissions have not been made publicly available. (AQW 350/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department received 91 responses to its 2006 consultation on proposals for new animal welfare legislation which issued in 2006. This included 46 responses from organisations and 45 from interested individuals, including several who elected to remain anonymous. A list of the organisations which responded is provided in Table 1.

As I indicated in a previous written answer on this issue on 14 March 2008, I am currently considering the responses to the 2006 consultation. I have also met a number of stakeholders to hear their concerns at first hand.

Once I have fully considered the issues, taking into account the comments received, and have decided what new legislation is needed, it is my intention to release a summary of the responses to the 2006 consultation exercise.

TABLE 1. LIST OF THE ORGANISATIONS THAT RESPONDED TO 2006 CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR NEW ANIMAL WELFARE LEGISLATION

Animal Ethics Advisory Group
Animal Protection Agency
Animal Welfare Federation Northern Ireland
Anti-docking Alliance
Antrim and Down Springer Spaniel Club
Animals Need a Voice in Legislation Ireland (ANVIL)
Armagh City and District Council
ASSISI Animal Sanctuary
Ballymena Animal Welfare Society
British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC NI)
Birds First UK
British PSychological Society
British Wool Marketing Board
Captive Animals Protection Society
Channelview Boarding Kennels and Cattery
Council of Docked Breeds
Countryside Alliance Ireland
Craigavon Borough Council
Crosskennan Lane Animal Sanctuary / Cats Protection
Down District Council
Dungannon and South Tyrone Council – Environmental Health Department
Fermanagh District Council
Glenlark Nature Reserve
Greyhound Action
Greyhound Welfare NI
Hunting Association of NI
International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)
International League for the Protection of Horses (ILPH)
Irish Coursing Club (ICC)
League Against Cruel Sports (LACS)

New Life Parrot Rescue & Helpline Service
Newry and Mourne District Council
Newtownabbey Animal Welfare Support Group
Northern Ireland Badger Group
Northern Ireland Court Service
Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission
Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association
Pet Care Trust
Seafish Technology and Training
Society of Greyhound Veterinarians
The Kennel Club
Ulster Farmers' Union
Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA)
Vegetarian Economy and Green Agriculture (VEGA)
Waterside Action Group
Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster

Entry of Animals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what checks are in place in relation to the entry of animals to prevent the spread of disease. (AQW 351/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The checks are:

- 1) In relation to animals directly imported from or through Britain.
Importers of animals originating in Britain must apply for a specific licence in advance. All animals must come through the port of Larne where my Department's Veterinary Service Portal staff will carry out documentary checks on the veterinary certification and may carry out further physical and destination checks on a risk basis.
- 2) In relation to animals imported from EU countries

Those that enter the North direct from other EU countries are notified to us through the TRACES system which records movements on an EU wide basis. Importers are also required to present their paperwork to their local Divisional Veterinary Office as soon as possible after importation for checking. We may carry out physical and destination checks depending on the risk.

Currently, all ruminants (includes cattle, sheep, goats and camelids) being imported from Britain and

EU member states other than the South are being restricted at destination and are subject to specific post import testing for bluetongue.

My Department has issued regular publicity on this matter and information has gone out to the industry highlighting the risk of importation. This is available on my Department's Internet site.

Derelict Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when her Department will remove the derelict bridge across the Six Mile Water River in Grangers Mill, Muckamore. (AQW 360/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD does not own the bridge across the Six Mile Water River. Rivers Agency's powers to remove or to direct the removal of the bridge under the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 are limited.

Rivers Agency will investigate flood flow levels and the need to remove the bridge, if removal is deemed necessary. It will investigate ownership as any action to do so would have to be taken by the owners, possibly after consultation with the NI Environment Agency in relation to any built heritage value.

Projects in Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what projects her Department delivered in the Upper Bann constituency in 2007-08; and what projects have commenced, or are due to commence, in 2008-09. (AQW 362/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table lists the projects delivered in the Upper Bann constituency in 2007-2008 and the projects that have commenced in 2008. The Rural Development Programme will also offer considerable opportunities for the Upper Bann constituency, and throughout the North, during 2008-09 and beyond. My Department is currently in the process of assessing the various rural development strategies produced by local action groups which will determine funding priorities. As applications for funding can only be accepted once this process has been completed, I am unable to provide details of what projects will be delivered at this time.

PROJECTS DELIVERED IN THE UPPER BANN CONSTITUENCY BETWEEN 1 APRIL 2007 AND 31 MARCH 2008.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Projects delivered under the Rural Development Programme	
Maghera Traditions Group Workshop Weekends	Provision of traditional music, dance and song workshops over a weekend, catering for all levels of ability and based in various locations in the Maghera area.
Development & Marketing of Christian Heritage	Project to provide signage, interpretation and to enhance a number of Christian Heritage and Pre-Christian Sites along the south shore of Lough Neagh.
Pressbreak	Funding for the purchase of a 'Pressbreak' to enable more efficiency in a competitive engineering market.
Color Foto Processing	Funding for equipment to allow on site processing, printing and packaging of products.
Foymore Lodge Shooting School	Purpose-built centre, located on a small-holding in the Lough Neagh wetlands area. It will offer a range of clay pigeon shooting activities (together with a range of clay pigeon shooting equipment), safety tuition and coaching.
Hillbrook Spring Water Project	Expansion and development of business from test marketing plant to full scale production bottling water from source from Borewell.
Molloys Moving Forward	Funding Molloy Engineering, a family run business, established 25 years, to move forward with a new range of approved builders trestles to comply with new H & S regulations.
Upgrade & Development of Shop Facilities	Upgrade and modernisation of Shop which will include purchase of an Electronic Point Of Sale and installation of new shelving & displays
Bleary Farmers Hall Car Park & Boundary Fence	Removal of hedge and erection of fence along the roadside to improve visibility when leaving the car park. Removal of old toilet block and extend existing car park to provide additional car parking and prevent cars parking on the road at a dangerous bend.
Stonewall	The project focuses on the development of the ROI as an export market for Orla Havlin Designs and involves a number of component parts as follows; Product Development, Market Research and Sales prospecting, Development of Market Specific Promotional Materials, Development of Retail and Direct Sales, and investment in Capital equipment.
Master McGrath Maze	Developing a unique contemporary maze at Tannaghmore Gardens.
Greenan Glass Recycling	The purchase of a glass crusher to crush glass to dust for use in blasting and asphalt road and line coverings.
Log Recycling	A versatile and quick response log clearing operation which recycles logs and sells them bagged to the retail trade

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Projects delivered under the Rural Development Programme	
Reducing Risks / Cutting Costs – Programme Implementation	Provision of training to small rural businesses on all aspects of risk management within the workplace and development of risk assessment procedure for reducing identified risks.
Biodiesel optimisation	Plant optimisations and installation of quality assurance laboratory to test raw material and end product diesel.
Action 2 Reducing Risks Cutting Costs Operational Project	Northern Ireland Leader Network wide project assisting micro businesses to address issues regarding insurance costs.
Lough Neagh club boat	Purchase a small club boat to assist with sailing races, events, mark maintenance and training.
Kinnegoe lifeboat replacement	Replacement of lifeboat with a higher specification craft. The boat will provide a rapid response platform for persons in distress and render assistance in the most practical way and also increase safety for crew.
Disabled Boat	Purchase of a new disabled friendly training boat suitable for providing innovative training to disabled people.
Wetland Habitat work on Lough Beg	Project to rehabilitate lowland wet grassland and associated habitats at Portmore Lough for the benefit of breeding waders, wintering waterfowl and the wider biodiversity at the site.
Portmore Lough Wetland Restoration	Project to enhance the biodiversity within Portmore Lough and the surrounding Lough Neagh network of wetlands through removing 8.7 ha of scrub at RSPB's Portmore Lough reserve.
Projects delivered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	
Further and Higher Education Programmes	FE and HE programmes provided for those wishing to pursue a career in the agri-food industry are delivered at the CAFRE Campuses of Greenmount, Loughry and Enniskillen. Courses are open to those who meet the required entry criteria from across the North.
Industry training programme	Training courses for those working in the agri-food industry are delivered locally across the North and at the CAFRE Campuses of Greenmount, Enniskillen and Loughry. Training programmes delivered within the Upper Bann Constituency in 07/08 include: - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversification Challenge; • Cereal Challenge; • Commercial horticulture short courses; • Agri-environment training courses.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Projects delivered under the Rural Development Programme	
Knowledge and Technology Transfer programme	This programme aims to equip those in the agri-food industry with the knowledge, skills and experience to adopt appropriate technologies and systems within their businesses. CAFRE Technologists and Development Advisers work with the industry to encourage the adoption of the technology or system within their businesses. This is achieved through training courses, normally delivered throughout the North, Demonstration events on the College Farm/local farms or Food Processing Units and through mentoring.
Benchmarking programme	This programme involves the collection of physical and financial data from farmers and growers, the analysis of this data by CAFRE Business Technologists and comparison with similar farm businesses. Through this programme the strengths and weaknesses of farm business performance can be identified and actions to improve performance implemented. This programme is available to farmers and growers across the North.
Veterinary Projects	
Brucellosis Initiative	The Brucellosis Initiative extends to all of Northern Ireland but 2 of the farmers' meetings held in the spring of 2007 were held in the areas of Armagh and Newry. The invitation to attend either would have been open to constituents of the Upper Bann region. Similarly, the brucellosis farmers' liaison groups that are also part of the Initiative, are open to those same constituents who would want to be involved.

PROJECTS COMMENCED IN THE UPPER BANN CONSTITUENCY IN 2008 TO DATE.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project	Date of Commencement
Projects delivered by Rivers Agency		
Belmont Stream Scheme	Drainage Infrastructure Improvement Scheme	March 2008 and on-going. Expected completion in October 2008.

Child Poverty

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to tackle child poverty in rural areas. (AQW 365/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Tackling child poverty is a cross cutting issue for all departments, as recognised by the OFMdfM Committee Inquiry into Child Poverty. I am playing my part in addressing this issue through

my membership of the Ministerial Sub Committee on Children and Young People.

Child Poverty in the rural context is often compounded by other issues such as lack of access to services such as transport or childcare. In order to address this I commissioned a report into Rural Childcare that has made recommendations to a number of government departments. I am taking forward the recommendations made to DARD in the form of a Rural Childcare Programme.

This programme will be funded from the £10 million I secured in the Programme for Government to address poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Priorities for action are being developed to support projects addressing poverty and exclusion and I am hopeful that these actions will contribute towards tackling child poverty in rural areas.

The 2007 - 13 Rural Development Programme will also provide opportunities to tackle poverty in rural areas. In particular, Axis 3 of this programme will direct 5% of its budget towards projects supporting children and young people.

Expenditure Targets for European Funding Programmes

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her Department's projected underspend of European project money for 2008/09; how this compares to the year 2007/08; and to detail those programmes which are unlikely to meet their spend commitments. (AQW 375/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Expenditure targets for European funding Programmes are set on a calendar year basis.

The Department do not currently project any underspend of European Project money for 2008 or 2009.

In 2007 the Department had an underspend of £43,000 in the INTERREG Programme however this was utilised by other Measures within the Programme and no loss of EU receipts occurred as a result.

Renewing Communities Programme

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to fund isolated Protestant groups, such as churches and the Loyal Orders, which operate in rural areas. (AQW 377/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Renewing Communities Programme launched in December 2006 and my Department received funding from the Department of

Social Development to run a pilot scheme to support and help isolated protestant communities in four rural areas of the north. The programme objective was to help the groups develop capacity, increase confidence, access support and set up four rural information hubs. It is due to end in January 2009 and in advance of that date my officials have commissioned a review of the scheme and the outcome of the review will help inform, providing that future funding is available the shape and scope of any new programme.

My department is also in the process of rolling out the new Rural Development Programme and under axis 3 there are opportunities for community groups to avail of funding under some of the six measures.

Dairy Products

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what extra steps she is taking to promote Northern Ireland dairy products given a more favourable exchange rate. (AQW 402/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The European Commission State Aid rules place severe constraints on the use of Government funds for the promotion of local agri-food products both here and across the EU.

In relation to the marketing of local produce, my Department administers the Regional Food Programme. This is designed to promote quality local produce, to develop profitable and sustainable markets here, in the South and in Britain and to increase co-operation and communication between all sectors of the agri-food industry.

Under this programme, the Dairy Council, acting on behalf of the dairy industry, has received significant financial support. In 2007/08 it was awarded £162,500 for generic promotional and market research activities here and in Britain. This research has afforded local dairy companies a greater understanding of trends and developments in these markets, as well as providing data to support product innovation. This funding also supported the Dairy Council's presence at trade and consumer fairs. I am pleased to advise that the Dairy Council has recently been awarded a further £64,370, under the Regional Food Programme, to undertake similar activities during the 2008/09 year.

I am also pleased that recently the Dairy Council benefitted from EU support of circa £200,000 for a marketing campaign entitled "Morning Milk". This campaign will run in conjunction with the Danish Milk Board.

Food technologists at CAFRE continue to work with a wide range of processing businesses in

the dairy sector to identify and take advantage of niche and other market opportunities through the development of new products. Specialist training is also provided to those engaged in the development of value added products.

The dairy industry makes an important contribution to the agri-food industry. I will continue to do what I can, working within EU legislation, to support and encourage the dairy industry in their efforts to exploit new business opportunities, irrespective of the economic climate.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress her Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 431/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is making good progress in delivering its Programme for Government (PfG) and Public Service Agreement (PSA) commitments.

I outline below the main achievements to date in respect of each of the 3 PSAs in which DARD is in the lead and the four further commitments included in PfG.

PSA 4 – SUPPORT RURAL BUSINESSES

- Under Axis 1 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13, the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme is open and letters of offer are being issued. Work is progressing to launch the remaining Axis 1 schemes later this year, including the Farm Modernisation scheme.
- A Better Regulation Review, led by an independent panel and supported by officials, was set up by DARD and DoE in late 2007 with the objective of cutting the administrative burden (red tape) in the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013 (15% by 2011). The Review is expected to report at the end of November this year and will:
 - establish an estimate of the administrative burden put on farmers and agri-business by DARD and DoE regulations ;
 - provide a baseline against which progress on the PSA indicator can be measured;
 - recommend strategies on how the burden may be reduced;
 - recommend structures and processes for implementation.
- Agreement of an All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy by March 2009 is on track for

achievement. A draft Strategy was noted at the North South Ministerial Council Agriculture Sectoral Meeting on 9 November 2007 and was issued for formal consultation with key stakeholders in the North on 13 March 2008. Responses to the consultation were very supportive of the Strategy. The Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Food in Dublin also circulated the draft Strategy to its key stakeholders and the Irish Farmers Association added its support. I hope to agree the Strategy with my Ministerial colleagues at the next North South Ministerial Council Meeting.

- The new NI Countryside Management Scheme was launched on 8 June 2008 and at closure of the first application period on 29 August 2008 over 4,500 applications had been received.
- The development process for Special Environmental Projects, an integral part of the NICMS, has commenced.
- The new Organic Farming Scheme was opened to applications on 1 September 2008 (closing date 31 October 2008).
- At July an additional 115.5 hectares of agricultural land and non-agricultural land had been converted to forest and woodland.
- The number of inspected farm businesses complying with environmental cross-compliance standards is now 89.79% against a target of 90% by 2011.

PSA 17 - HELP RURAL COMMUNITIES IMPROVE THE PHYSICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THEIR AREAS

- Good progress is being made in ensuring, by 2013, 1,000 people will benefit from ICT initiatives, 2,000 people will benefit from improved mobility and 5,000 people will benefit from cultural and social-economic initiatives. These actions are being delivered by a combination of Axis 3 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13, Anti Poverty and Social Exclusion schemes and the Interreg IV 2007-13 programme. Local area strategies produced by the Councils and Local Action Groups have highlighted areas which will contribute towards the realisation of these benefits.
- In addition, an Anti Poverty and Social Exclusion policy framework is nearing completion, which will also help towards a raft of social benefits. Under Interreg IV, the Department has been working closely with the Special EU Programmes Body to agree the Rural Sub Theme of the programme, and it is intended to open calls for applications later this year.
- The Executive agreed initial proposals to develop the Rural Champion initiative and enhance the rural proofing process in April 2008. A new Interdepart-

mental Committee on Rural Policy, which I chair, and which met for the first time on 7 August, has been established to help take forward this work and to ensure rural issues are routinely considered by all Departments.

- Following preconsultation with stakeholders, proposals for Rural Champion and enhancement of the rural proofing process issued for public consultation from 13 August 2008 to 5 November 2008. After the consultation it is intended to present the final roles of Rural Champion and proposals for enhancement of rural proofing to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and Executive by the end of 2008.
- The Executive also agreed in April 2008 for me to lead development of a Rural White Paper. A paper is being produced which will outline the proposed content and process for full development of the Rural White Paper during 2009. The Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy will assist in development of the Rural White Paper and a stakeholder advisory group is currently being established. It is intended to present a paper to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and Executive by the end of 2008.

PSA 23 - MANAGING THE RISK OF FLOODING FROM RIVERS AND THE SEA

- One of the key indicators for the Rivers Agency in achieving this PSA target is the establishment of an agreed policy framework. The policy framework was approved by First and deputy First Minister in July 2008.
- An exercise to refine the number of properties at risk from base flood maps was completed in July 2008.
- A further key indicator for the Agency involved the completion of a condition assessment of flood defence infrastructure, namely urban flood defences. The asset management plan for sea defences has been completed.

PfG Commitments

Bring forward a £10.0m package to combat rural social exclusion and poverty

- A high level Anti Poverty and Social Exclusion policy framework which sets out the vision and objectives for this work is nearing completion. The Framework will look at actions to address rural need, for example fuel poverty and childcare.

Enable up to 4,700 farmers to comply with the Nitrates Directive by 2009

- Following my securing budget assurances in June 2007, significant progress has been made. Out of 4,390 applications which remain live, 4,233 had

been issued approval at 9th September. The bulk of approvals were issued before May this year. The amount of storage completed has not been aided by two wet summers, although there has been a significant expansion of work on the ground this year. 1,644 claims had been received at 9th September.

Improve the quality of life in rural areas by investing £100m in local development strategies by 2013

- This commitment is being delivered by Axis 3 and Axis 4 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13. Council and Local Action Group delivery structures have been established and are working towards calls for applications before the end of the year.

Provide a network of one-stop shops to improve access to DARD services by 2011

- An extensive pre-consultation exercise on the proposal to roll out the DARD Direct service delivery model across NI took place with key stakeholder groups, Section 75 and equality groups and DARD Staff. The EQIA consultation document for the roll out of DARD Direct was developed and issued for public consultation. The closing date for comments on the EQIA was 5 September 2008 and DARD officials are currently collating the responses received.
- Unified administration teams have been established and are being embedded at 5 interim office locations (Dungannon, Omagh, Ballymena, Coleraine and Newry). These are in addition to the DARD Direct office already operational at Inishkeen House, Enniskillen.

Future of Departmental Offices at Killane Road, Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has in relation to the future of departmental offices at Killane Road, Limavady. (AQW 587/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The public consultation phase of the EQIA on the proposed model for the roll-out of DARD Direct has recently been completed. My officials are currently preparing a final EQIA report which includes the findings of this consultation exercise and recommendations. No decisions on the final number and locations of DARD Direct offices will be taken until after this report has been fully considered.

Volumes of Fresh Milk Sold

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what volume of fresh milk was sold to other parts of the United Kingdom in the first 2 weeks of September 2008. (AQW 665/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department does not routinely collect the information requested. This information would be collected during a time of disease outbreak; however, the period referred to was not affected by disease outbreak.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

FIM World Championship Trials 2009

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what level of funding his Department will be providing for the 2009 FIM World Championship Trials. (AQW 307/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has not received any correspondence from the organisers of the FIM World Championship Trials seeking funding for their 2009 event.

Decisions about funding for motorsport events such as the FIM World Championship Trials are a matter, in the first instance, for the governing bodies of motorsport as represented by the 2x4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited.

As part of the Review of Public Administration, officials from my Department are working closely with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to progress the anticipated transfer of events budget and functions by April 2009. Following the anticipated transfer, funding may be available for specific events from the NITB.

Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement Commitments

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 432/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL, as a Department and through its Arms Length Bodies, continues to make good progress

towards delivering its commitments as outlined in the Programme for Government and Public Service Agreements.

To date in Year 1 of the Programme for Government, achievements include:

- The increased settlement to Arts Council following the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 is being passed-on directly to arts providers in the form of increased programme funding. This will contribute directly to Departmental targets for increased participation and attendance at arts and cultural events.
- DCAL has transferred the delivery of the Community Festivals Fund to local councils and this will help to increase attendance at and participation in events.
- In relation to the investment of £110m in our sports facilities by 2011, £1.5m has been invested so far. Although progress has been slow, this is to be expected in the early stages of the roll out of major capital programmes. A number of programmes are underway and others will be re-opened or introduced to ensure that this target will be met. They include the Elite Facilities Capital Programme, Building Sport Programme and Places for Sport: Surfaces. Other programmes are under consideration.
- In relation to halting the decline of adult participation in sport and physical recreation, the source of data for measurement of this target is the Continuous Household Survey (CHS). CHS 2007/08 data will not be available until Autumn 2008. Progress against this target will depend on the implementation of the draft Strategy for Sport & Physical Recreation, which has yet to receive Executive approval.
- The baseline position of the target to have 125,000 children participating in sport and physical recreation is already being exceeded. Source of data is Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey, a survey of 11-16 year olds in Northern Ireland. The survey is conducted every three years – 2003, 2007, 2010 (provisional). The participation rate is taken from the survey and multiplied by the number of 11-16 year olds in the population to estimate the number of 11-16 year olds who participate in sport. While the target is currently being exceeded, it must be borne in mind that the number of 11-16 year olds is projected to fall between now and 2011. Progress against this target will depend on the implementation of the draft Strategy for Sport & Physical Recreation, which has yet to receive Executive approval.
- A number of programmes are underway and others will be re-opened or introduced to ensure that by 2011 Northern Ireland will have a minimum of 10

new or upgraded facilities to support player/athlete development in Olympic and Paralympics sports and which will be available for community and school use. The programmes include the Elite Facilities Capital Programme, Building Sport Programme and Places for Sport: Surfaces. Other Programmes are under consideration. In addition the Big Lottery Fund can be accessed and projects funded through this scheme may also contribute to the target.

- Northern Ireland's 2012 Leadership Group for the Olympics in 2012 has been established and the first meeting was held on 26 June 2008.
- The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG)'s Nations & Regions Co-ordination Group Meetings was attended and respective work was progressed. Six-month Progress Reports co-ordinated and completed for LOCOG.
- A DCAL-led 2012 Communications Forum Group was set up with members of the key theme organisations to support the delivery of the targets set out in the NI Strategy for the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games by using a wide range of communication tools to deliver consistent key messages.
- A draft Communications Strategy was drawn up to provide the framework enabling DCAL and the key partner organisations to inform public opinion in support of the London 2012 Games.
- Media launches held for the successful Northern Ireland venues (26 Olympic & 8 Paralympic venues) included in LOCOG's Pre-Games Training Camp (PGTC) Guide launched during the Beijing Games. DCAL facilitated seminars and consultations with venue-owners and sporting bodies respectively.
- DCAL part-funded the production of Northern Ireland marketing materials for distribution at the Beijing Games. Sport Northern Ireland and DCAL presence at the Beijing Games along with a research group and team in the GB training camp in Macau.
- National Museums Northern Ireland have made good progress towards achieving 585,000 visitors by 2009 and have achieved 163,000 visitors to the sites in the first 3 months of the year. They are on track to achieve this objective.
- National Museums Northern Ireland are currently developing a digitisation strategy which will be ready by March 2009. The strategy will describe the scope and range of the collections that can or should be digitised taking account of legal and copyright issues. In the interim digitisation of the more popular collections i.e. fine art and glass photographic plates is proceeding and will be made available when the new website is developed in 2009.
- To date 8000 items from the more popular collections have been digitised by National Museums Northern Ireland.
- National Museums Northern Ireland have agreed a target of 110,000 organised educational visits by 2009. In the first three months of the Programme for Government they have achieved 61,000 organised educational visits. They are on track to achieve and possibly over achieve on this objective.
- Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 received Royal Assent on 17 June 2008. Some provisions will be commenced on 1 October 2008.
- Recruitment of members of the Board of the Library Authority is underway, with interviews completed for the post of Chairperson.
- The new IT provider for the finance and corporate services of the Library Authority has been selected, and work has begun on design and implementation of the systems.
- The Western Education and Library Board has extended opening hours with more late evenings and Saturday opening.
- Most Education and Library Boards are on target to meet the £2 per head stock target.
- Public Libraries continue to provide free access to digital resources and the internet.
- New Libraries at Grove and Bangor have been completed. Work started on site at Antrim New Library and Newtown Stewart Library.
- The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) will produce at least 6 searchable databases, all accessible via a single portal by 2011. Two databases are to be produced by March 2009. These are ready for the website and DRD ISU have been sent a draft specification to prepare the web front end.
- Since being established in September 2007, the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) for Architecture and the Built Environment has reviewed design aspects of several significant projects including one major public sector project sponsored by DCAL. This activity is largely 'demand-led' and it is expected that each year the majority of schemes reviewed by MAG will be significant projects selected by the Planning Service. MAG will continue to carry out design review of selected projects in both public and private sectors and plans to recruit expert advisors to assist it with design review.
- To date, Waterways Ireland have kept 95% of the existing waterways and navigations open from April to October. A maintenance programme for navigations is in place that will ensure the target continues to be met in future years.

- The Salmon and Eel Management Plan objectives, will be achieved by 2011. Involved in this are the transfer of the functions of the Fishery Conservancy Board (FCB) into the Department by March 2009; submission of Eel Plans by December 2008; submission of inter-departmental focus area report on protection, restoration and enhancement of salmon habitat to NASCO by December 2008 and general reporting to NASCO on progress with strategy by April 2009. Currently the Department is on course to meet these targets. The Departments Atlantic Salmon Management Strategy for NI and the cross border Foyle and Carlingford catchments was approved by the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) in June 2008. A report focusing on fisheries management strategy was well received and an ambitious programme of work to implement the overall strategy is underway. Eel Management Plans as required under EU regulation are nearing completion (due to be submitted in December 2008). Northern Ireland shall submit 3 river basin plans to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as part of the UK national submission. The North West plan is transboundary and is being developed with the Irish authorities.
- The DCAL capital programme is progressing as approved under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI). The overall capital programme is managed and monitored by the DCAL Capital Programme Management Board. The programme is delivered for DCAL across six sectors (Arts, Libraries, Sport, Museums, Inland Waterways and Inland Fisheries, and PRONI) by the Department's Arms Length Bodies. Spend to Date : £8m.
- Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC): The design for the MAC is progressing well and the plans secured full planning permission in June 2008, in line with the project programme. The Stage 1 Tender Process for contractor selection is ongoing and the preferred contractor should be appointed towards the end of October 2008. The Old Museum Arts Centre has maintained a full production programme during the pre-construction phase of the project.
- Crescent Arts Centre: The Crescent Arts Centre has appointed Gilbert Ash NI Ltd as the preferred contractor for the construction phase and they began work on site in September 2008. The Crescent organisation decanted to temporary accommodation on the Ormeau Road and is offering a full programme of activity to the public for the duration of the construction works.
- The Ulster Hall: The Ulster Hall project has made significant progress on site and the construction work is due to be completed in January 2009.
- The Playhouse Theatre, Londonderry: The Playhouse project has made significant progress on site and the construction work is due to be completed early in 2009, i.e. January or February, dependant upon the outcome of an 'Extension of Time Request' by the Contractor. The Playhouse decanted to St Columb's Theatre, on Orchard Street adjacent to the City Walls, for the duration of the project and has maintained a full programme of activity for clients and the public.
- An Gaeláras: The An Gaeláras project in Londonderry has made significant progress on site and the construction work is scheduled for completion in March 2009. The design for the An Gaeláras building has been chosen as one of the Irish entries in the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale 2008. An Gaeláras has continued to offer a full range of activity during the construction project.

Developments on key arts infrastructure projects

- Significant progress has been made in the delivery of the key arts infrastructure projects in Belfast and Londonderry. The organisations taking forward the developments have all maintained a full programme of activity during the construction phase of the projects by decanting to alternative premises and/or producing and touring work off-site. The developments on the key projects are detailed below:
- Lyric Players' Theatre: The old Lyric theatre has been demolished and Gilbert Ash NI Ltd has been appointed as the preferred contractor to build the new theatre. The Lyric and Contractor are working to agree a contract price for the construction project and hope to begin work on site in November 2008. The Lyric is running a full off-site production programme for the duration of the construction project.
- Waterside Theatre, Londonderry: Phase 1 of the Waterside Project, The Gateway Studio, is completed and was opened officially on 13 June 2008. Phase 2, the new Foyer, is due to be completed in October 2008. The Waterside Theatre delivered a full programme of activity during the Phase 1 construction.
- Nerve Centre, Londonderry: The purchase of the existing Nerve Centre building and the adjacent Youth Hostel building has been completed and work is ongoing to refurbish and develop these into usable space.
- Gasyard Development Trust, Londonderry: Project completed on programme and within budget.

Paralympic Athletes

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the total number; and (ii) location of sports facilities that will be used as training camps by Paralympic athletes training for the 2012 Olympic Games, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 546/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Eight of Northern Ireland's sports facilities are included in the Pre-Games Training Camp (PGTC) Guide for the 2012 Paralympic Games. Inclusion in the PGTC Guide does not guarantee that the venue will be selected by a National Paralympic Committee (NPC). Inclusion in the guide is the rubber stamp from the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) that the facilities are suitable. The Guide was circulated to NPC's during the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games.

The location of the eight venues broken down by parliamentary constituency, are as follows:-

Venue	Parliamentary Constituency
Antrim Forum Complex	South Antrim
Ballyholme Yacht Club	North Down
Bangor Castle Leisure Centre	North Down
Bangor Sportsplex	North Down
Mary Peters Athletics Track	Belfast South
University of Ulster at Jordanstown	East Antrim
Carrickfergus Sailing Club	East Antrim
Queen's Sport, Queen's University Belfast	Belfast South

EDUCATION

Millisle Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education when repair work will start on Millisle Primary School, particularly the installation of new windows. (AQW 107/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt dom go gcuirfear tús le hobair ag Millisle Primary School chun áiseanna leithris nua a sholáthar i mí Dheireadh Fómhair. Tá soláthar fuinneog nua ag an chéim pleanála faoi láthair agus tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh

an obair seo críochnaithe faoi dheireadh na bliana airgeadais.

I have been informed by the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board that work will commence at Millisle Primary School to provide new toilet facilities in October. The provision of new windows is currently at the planning stage and it is envisaged this work will be complete by the end of the financial year.

Works at Movilla High School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to provide an outline of the works to be done to Movilla High School; and to give an estimated commencement and completion date for these works. (AQW 171/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt dom go bhfuil obair ag an chéim pleanála chun na háiseanna eacnamaíochta baile a fheabhsú ag an scoil. Cuirfear tús leis an obair i dtrátha dheireadh na bliana airgeadais seo agus mairfidh an obair thart ar 8 seachtain sula mbeidh sí críochnaithe.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board that work is in the planning stage to upgrade the home economics facilities at the school. The work will commence towards the end of this financial year and will take approximately 8 weeks to complete.

Early Retirement Enhanced Packages

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have taken early retirement enhanced packages in the (i) controlled sector; (ii) maintained sector; (iii) integrated sector; (iv) Irish medium sector; (v) independent sector, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 223/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas líon na múinteoirí atá ag fáil pinsin bhreisithe agus cnapshuime faoin Scéim Cúitimh um Luathscor i ngach bliain airgeadais le 5 bhliana airgeadais anuas:

The number of teachers receiving enhanced pension and lump sum under the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme in each of the last 5 financial years is as follows:

Management Type	No of teachers receiving additional service credit as part of compensation for premature retirement					
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 (to 31.08.08)
Controlled	119	157	254	222	210	4
Maintained Ccms/ Other Maintained	181	179	254	251	217	0
Controlled Integrated/ Grant Maintained Integrated	2	5	4	5	10	0
Irish Medium	0	1	0	2	3	0
Voluntary Grammar Sector	52	31	69	67	117	0
Total	354	373	581	547	557	4

Classroom Assistants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education if (i) a timetable for the payment of arrears to classroom assistants has been established by Education and Library Boards; and (ii) for an update in the progress made in relation to these payments. (AQW 256/09)

The Minister of Education: The Boards have paid all of the “one-off” compensatory payments to those classroom assistants who returned their ‘Variation of Contract Form’ following the Collective Agreement reached on 30 November 2007.

Is próiseas níos casta é íocaíocht riarastí i leith na bpostmheastóireachtaí a siardhátaíodh go dtí 1995 agus bíonn tráthúlacht na n-íocaíochtaí ag brath ar chomhaontú startha gairme agus jabthuaisirisci dhaoine aonair.

Payment of arrears in respect of the job evaluations backdated to 1995 is a more complex process and the timing of the payments depends on the agreement of individual career histories and job descriptions. It is not possible to detail when individuals will receive arrears as this will depend on when the documentation is signed off and returned to the individual Boards. However, all Boards are committed to working to a timetable of calculating and paying arrears by 31 March 2009 for all classroom assistants who are entitled to them.

Proposed Closures

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed (i) closure of St Aloysius’ High School, Cushendall; and (ii) amalgamation of St Comgall’s College, Larne, and St MacNissis, Garron Tower. (AQW 339/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an Roinn ag breathnú togra forbartha faoi láthair ó na hÍontaobhaithe agus ó Chomhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil maidir le cónascadh St Aloysius’ High School, St Comgall’s College agus St MacNissi’s College, Garron Tower ar láithreán Garron Tower.

The Department is currently considering a development proposal from the Trustees and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools for the amalgamation of St Aloysius’ High School, St Comgall’s College and St MacNissi’s College, Garron Tower on the Garron Tower site. The department’s assessment includes an examination of the options considered and the issues raised during the consultation exercise. I will make a decision on the proposal as soon as possible.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the weekly cost per pupil of the Middletown Autism project when it is fully implemented; (ii) what that cost would be when extrapolated for the 8,500 people on the Autistic Spectrum in Ireland; and (iii) whether she has consulted the Children’s Commissioner or the Equality Commission in relation to the equality agenda. (AQW 353/09)

The Minister of Education: The estimated weekly staffing costs for educational support for a child undergoing a placement of up to five weeks period, in the Learning Support Centre, when the Middletown Autism project is fully implemented, is approximately £912. There will be other associated costs for overheads, but these cannot be attributed accurately at this stage.

The Middletown Centre for Autism will offer a range of services, only one of which will be the specialist educational assessment of children with autism. This service is not targeted at all children with autism in Ireland, but rather for those whose existing provision could be better tailored to meet their specific needs and who are causing particular challenges to their educational setting. For the majority of children, their special educational needs will continue to be met by schools and Education and Library Boards (ELBs) with the associated costs met in the normal way through school and ELB budgets. An extrapolation

for all children with autism of the estimated costs for assessment of those attending the Centre is therefore not relevant.

Maidir le comhairliúchán le Coimisinéir na bPáistí, ba mhaith liom aird an Chomhalta a dhíriú ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar a cheist AQW 5008/08 a foilsíodh sa tuairisc oifigiúil ar 4ú Aibreán 2008. Ní dheachaigh mo Roinn i gcomhairle leis an Choimisiún Comhionannais i ndáil le hIonad Choillidh Chanannáin.

With regard to consultation with the Children's Commissioner, I have met with the Children's Commissioner and the Equality Commission where special needs and equality issues have been to the fore of our discussion. I am fully committed to the equality agenda and am particularly keen to ensure that all children, and especially those with special educational needs, fully realise their individual potential. The vision of the Department of Education is 'to ensure that every learner fulfils his or her full potential'. Considerations of equality are therefore central to everything that the Department does in relation to children and young people affected by educational disadvantage.

Middletown Autism Project

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education if (i) the Middletown Autism project buildings meet Regulation Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) standards; and (ii) the recognition has been or will be applied for; and if not, how the physical provisions of the site will be classified. (AQW 355/09)

The Minister of Education: Members of the Middletown Building Sub-group, established by officials from the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science, began a series of meeting with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's Registration and Inspection Unit, the predecessor to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), in 2002. These meetings culminated in an assessment report on the proposals for the residential accommodation at Middletown by RIU in January 2003. Subsequent to that report, ongoing contact has been made with RQIA since 2006 and officials have visited the Centre and offered advice to the Integrated Design Team on the refurbishment proposals.

The Building Sub-group members are cognisant of the need to ensure fully compliant standards are in place to meet the needs of this vulnerable group of children.

Tuigean baill foirne ón Ionad go gcaithfidh siad aighneacht fhoirmiúil a dhéanamh chuig RQIA le haghaidh gnéithe cónaithe an tsoláthair a chlárú

agus bhí ball sinsearach foirne i dteagmháil le RQIA cheana féin le fáil amach faoin phróiseas maidir le hiarratais agus maidir leis na caighdeáin a éilítear le haghaidh chlárú RQIA.

Personnel from the Centre are aware that they must make a formal submission to RQIA for registration of the residential elements of the provision and a senior staff member has already been in contact with RQIA to establish the application process and the standards required for RQIA registration. The classification of the residential aspects of Centre will be formally classified as part of the application for registration.

Middletown Autism Project

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education if the Middletown Autism project will be operated on the basis of a private boarding school; and if so, (i) how many children will be resident in each intake; (ii) what will the duration be of each intake; (iii) how many courses are planned each year; and (iv) if each intake will be continuous or operated on a weekday basis only. (AQW 357/09)

The Minister of Education:

The Middletown Centre for Autism is not a school, but it is anticipated that for the purposes of the Centre's residential accommodation the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority will regard the management of that accommodation as akin to that of a boarding school.

There will be a maximum of 20 children resident in each intake for the learning support service. In addition, there will be a maximum of 4 children, who may be accompanied by parents, resident in separate living space.

The 20 children resident in the accommodation blocks will stay for a period of approximately 5 weeks. The 2-4 children staying with their parents will attend the Centre for a comprehensive 2 day assessment.

The Centre is not planning to run "courses" for children. The residential stages of approximately 5 weeks will be for multi-disciplinary, educational assessments of the particular special educational needs of children with autism.

It is envisaged that two cohorts of 20 referrals will be dealt with concurrently by two learning support teams. In the course of each 5 week cycle, one team will work with 20 referrals in residential placement and the other team will be on field work – 2 weeks on pre-planned consultation visits, 2 weeks on post placement support visits and 1 week on preparatory work in connection with the next cohort of referrals.

It is expected that the Learning Support Service will develop its capacity to 140 placements per year, providing for a maximum of 20 children for each of 7 cohorts.

Beidh gach áit curtha in oiriúint do shainriachtanais an pháiste. D'fhéadfaí go mbeidh roinnt páistí ann ar bhonn laethúil, bunaithe ar a riachtanais mheasúnaithe, agus d'fhéadfaí go mbeidh cuid eile acu ina gcónaí ann de réir na hoíche nó ar bhonn seachtainiúil.

Each intake will be tailored to the specific needs of the child. Some children may operate on a daily basis, based on their assessed needs, while some may be resident on a nightly or weekly basis.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education what arrangements she has made with the (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; and (ii) Health and Social Services Boards, in relation to emergency and other health services for those who will attend residential courses at the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism; and how the cost of these services will be met and by whom. (AQW 359/09)

The Minister of Education: The Centre will employ a specialist member of staff to provide first line medical and nursing care. Management of the Centre have already been in discussion with local health and social services authorities and it the intention to enter into an agreement with local GP services to provide initial and routine emergency services.

Díolfaidh an tionscadal as aon chostais dhíreacha a bhaineann le baill foirne atá fostaithe ag an Ionad. Ní bheidh an tIonad freagrach as gnáthsheirbhísí éigeandála agus sláinte a sholáthraítear do pháistí sa cheantar.

Any direct costs of staff employed by the Centre will be met by the project. The Centre will not be responsible for normal emergency and health services provided for children in the area.

It should be stressed that the Middletown Centre for Autism is currently developing criteria for referral of children. The Centre will not take referrals of children whose medical needs are so significant or so complex that they cannot be met by local services, north and south.

Extended Schools Funding

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education how much money has been offered to each school in the

Upper Bann constituency under Extended Schools funding for 2008/09; compared to funding allocated to each school for 2007/08. (AQW 376/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá na sonraí a iarradh leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

The details requested are set out in the table below.

In light of the very positive indications given by the Finance Minister to the Assembly on June Monitoring about the importance of the Extended Schools programme and the potential to meet the bid for £5m re-submitted in the September monitoring round I had asked officials to put in place arrangements to ensure that additional allocations were made in July for school planning and continuity of the programme.

School Ref. number	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	2007/08	2008/09
5116189	Millington Nursery School	Upper Bann	9,545	1,472
5136217	St John The Baptist Nursery	Upper Bann	9,430	1,461
5136631	Drumnamoe Nursery School	Upper Bann	8,300	1,270
5010992	Lurgan Model PS	Upper Bann	22,971	22,885
5011127	Carrick PS	Upper Bann	31,079	30,849
5011129	Hart Memorial PS	Upper Bann	28,520	28,261
5011190	Tullygally PS	Upper Bann	20,729	19,694
5011596	Craigavon PS	Upper Bann	16,503	15,813
5016007	Millington PS	Upper Bann	35,984	18,009
5016065	Dickson PS	Upper Bann	18,918	18,745
5016080	Drumgor PS	Upper Bann	26,450	26,163
5016117	Ballyoran PS	Upper Bann	27,313	27,543
5016543	Moyallon PS	Upper Bann	20,729	2,565
5031103	Tannaghmore PS	Upper Bann	37,812	4,934
5031184	St Anthony's PS	Upper Bann	35,317	35,570
5031669	St John's PS	Upper Bann	17,624	17,365

School Ref. number	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	2007/08	2008/09
5036043	St Mary's PS	Upper Bann	31,798	3,991
5036101	St Brendan's PS	Upper Bann	31,510	31,941
5036173	St John The Baptist PS	Upper Bann	31,050	31,481
5036586	Presentation PS	Upper Bann	0	19,435
5036633	St Francis PS	Upper Bann	38,238	38,376
5230088	St Paul's Junior High School	Upper Bann	34,328	34,397
5230213	Lismore Comprehensive School	Upper Bann	41,860	41,952
5230256	Drumcree College	Upper Bann	30,648	27,945
5250216	Brownlow Int College	Upper Bann	33,293	33,264
5316521	Ceara Special School	Upper Bann	13,915	7,015
Totals			653,864	542,396

NIPSA Staff

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the clearance of the business case on grading and salary increases for NIPSA staff in the Western Education and Library Board. (AQW 391/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir fostóirí cás gnó i láthair na Roinne ar 29 Lúnasa 2008. Eisíodh freagra tosaigh ar 2 Meán Fómhair 2008 a shainaithin gur éilíodh tuilleadh eolais agus eisíodh freagra tosaigh foirmiúil ar 8 Meán Fómhair a shainaithin na bearnaí criticiúla eolais sa chás gnó.

The Department received a business case from the employers on 29 August 2008. An initial response was issued on 2 September 2008 identifying that further information was required and a formal initial response issued on 8 September which identified the critical information gaps in the business case. The Department will give urgent consideration to the business case which it must be satisfied is robust, consistent and evidence based before it can be presented to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

NIPSA Members

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to avert industrial action by NIPSA members in support of their pay and grading claim. (AQW 392/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir fostóirí cás gnó i láthair na Roinne ar 29 Lúnasa 2008. Eisíodh freagra tosaigh ar 2 Meán Fómhair 2008 a shainaithin gur éilíodh tuilleadh eolais agus eisíodh freagra tosaigh foirmiúil ar 8 Meán Fómhair a shainaithin na bearnaí criticiúla eolais sa chás gnó.

The Department received a business case from the employers on 29 August 2008. An initial response was issued on 2 September 2008 identifying that further information was required and a formal initial response issued on 8 September which identified the critical information gaps in the business case. The Department will give urgent consideration to the business case which it must be satisfied is robust, consistent and evidence based before it can be presented to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Transfer Test

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if there is a statutory requirement for Primary Schools, in all of the recognised sectors, to provide accommodation within their premises to facilitate the transfer procedure tests at primary seven. (AQW 397/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon fhoráil shonrach reachtúil ann a éilíonn ar bhunscoileanna cóiríocht a sholáthar leis an teist aistrithe a éascú.

There is no specific statutory provision obliging primary schools to provide accommodation to facilitate the transfer test.

Class Sizes

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education how many classes in the Upper Bann constituency currently have more than the recommended number of pupils. (AQW 417/09)

The Minister of Education: In the 2007/08 year there was one Foundation Stage class in the Upper Bann constituency that had more than the recommended 30 pupils enrolled. There is no recommended class size for other primary pupils.

Ní chruinníonn an Roinn eolas ar mhéideanna ranganna in iarbhunscoileanna.

Information on class sizes in post primary schools is not collected by the Department.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what progress her Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 433/09)

The Minister of Education: Rinneadh dul chun cinn maith i leith na dtáscairí ar fad agus tá mé sásta go mbeimid ábalta na spriocanna a leagadh do 2011 a bhaint amach.

Good progress has been made against all the indicators and I am satisfied that we are on course to meet the targets set for 2011. Achievement of the commitment on the creation of the new Education and Skills Authority remains subject to the passage of the legislation through the Assembly

Life-Start Mid-Ards Organisation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education if the underspend due to be returned to her Department has been committed to any particular projects; and if she would consider offering funding to the Life-Start Mid-Ards organisation. (AQW 446/09)

The Minister of Education: End of Year Flexibility, (EYF), monies are currently the only under-spends that are due to be returned to my Department. These resources remain committed to individual schools and the Education and Library Boards.

Faoi láthair, maoiníonn mo roinn Mid Ards Life Start trí Ards Sure Start chun cuartaíocht bhaile agus seirbhísí tacaíochta a sholáthar. Tá buiséid go hiomlán leithdháilte agus níl aon acmhainní eile ar fáil.

My department through Ards Sure Start currently fund Mid Ards Life Start to provide home visiting and support services. Budgets are fully committed and no further resources are available.

Rainey Endowed School

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what measures her Department has taken to advance the new build programme for Rainey Endowed Grammar School, Magherafelt. (AQW 460/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil gá le foirgneamh nua scoile ag Rainey Endowed School agus is féidir liom a chur in iúl duit go bhfuil an Roinn ag plé leis an tionscadal seo mar thosaíocht agus tá sí tiomanta dona bheith ag obair go dlúth leo siúd a bhfuil baint acu leis an tionscadal d'fhonn é a thabhairt ar aghaidh.

I am aware of the need for a replacement school building for Rainey Endowed School and can assure you that the Department is treating this project as a priority and is committed to working closely with those involved with the project to move it forward. The Department is currently engaged with the Department of Finance and Personnel in ensuring that a robust business case is in place to allow the project to proceed to the next stage of advertising the project to the market.

School Sports Facilities

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action her Department is taking to encourage schools to co-operate with local football clubs to make use of school sports facilities after hours. (AQW 479/09)

The Minister of Education: Under the Recreation and Youth Service Order 1986 the responsibility for the provision of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities lies with District Councils.

Through the Department's Extended School programme almost 450 of our most socially disadvantaged schools have been identified for funding.

Our policy seeks to establish each extended school as the hub of its local community engaging positively and actively with neighbouring schools, statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations in an effort to meet the needs of the pupils in the school. As part of the process of preparing their Extended School action plans, schools were therefore asked to consult with local community and statutory organisations to establish if there are particular community needs which could be met by the school. Greater use of sports facilities would certainly fall into that category.

Of course we cannot expect schools to be able to respond positively to all requests and in the case of sports facilities, indoor or outdoor, wear and tear and insurance will be important considerations but closer links between the school and its community is a key element of the policy and one which we are seeking to develop.

Ag féachaint do ghnáthchaitheamh agus gnáthchuimilt agus d'árachas, ba é an cur chuige ab fhearr ná go rachfadh clubanna áitiúla peile atá ag iarraidh úsáid a bhaint as áiseanna spóirt go díreach chuig an scoil le plé a dhéanamh ar na socrúithe a d'fhéadfaí bheith ann.

In view of the issues of wear and tear and insurance, the best approach would be for local football clubs wishing to avail of sports facilities, to approach the school direct to discuss what arrangements might be possible.

Champion for Children

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to provide details of (i) the recent appointment of a children's champion; and (ii) any targets or programmes her Department has in place to promote children's rights. (AQW 483/09)

The Minister of Education: The suggestion by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to have a dedicated Champion for Children at senior level in each department was discussed at the first meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People on 13 March and subsequently agreed by all Ministers.

The Champion for Children and Young People in the Department of Education is Louise Warde Hunter, Head of Early Years, Youth and Schools Finance, and the chair of the group is Eddie Rooney, Director of Equality in OFMDFM.

The role of the Champion for Children and Young People is to;

- Liaise with, inform and advise the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to help drive forward agreed policy and to act as a senior point of contact within the department in relation to the Sub-Committee.
- They will also support the department's role in enabling the relevant sub-groups of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to progress and produce focussed achievable recommendations.
- The Champions will advise and liaise with departmental colleagues on the contribution to the 10 year strategy action planning process and raise awareness at Departmental Board level to encourage departments to ensure children's and young people's interests are fostered and their views sought on policy and strategy issues.

The first meeting of the 'Champions for Children and Young People' took place on 5th August.

Children's rights are embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and in Section 75(1) of the NI Act 1998. All policies and programmes in the Department of Education are scrutinised to ensure compliance with the convention and the Equality requirements of Section 75.

Tá an Chomhairle don Ógra ag tabhairt faoi chomhairliúchán faoi láthair ar fhorbairt Líonra don Óige d'fhonn gur féidir leis an Rialtas glór an aosa óig a chluinstin i dtaca le saincheisteanna a bhaineann leo de réir Airteagal 12 den UNCRC. Cuirfear toradh an chomhairliúcháin sin faoi bhráid na Roinne níos moille san Fhómhar.

The Youth Council is currently undertaking a consultation on the development of a Network for Youth to enable the voice of young people to be heard by Government on issues that affect them in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC. The outcome of that consultation will be presented to the Department later in the Autumn.

North Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what percentage of school children were statemented in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 484/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla seo thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF STATEMENTED PUPILS IN ALL SCHOOLS – NEELB – 2007/08

Year	Percentage of total enrolment statemented
2003/04	2.82%
2004/05	3.04%
2005/06	3.20%
2006/07	3.35%
2007/08	3.46%

Source: school census 2007/08

Notes:

1. All schools include nursery, primary, post primary and special schools.
2. Statemented pupils are those pupils at stage five of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

Requests for Statutory Assessments

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education how many requests for statutory assessment were made in each primary school in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 5 years; and to detail this figure as a percentage of the entire primary school population. (AQW 485/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt dom nach gcoinnítear an t-eolas seo ar an fhormáid a iarradh agus nárbh fhéidir é a thabhairt ach ar chostas díreireach.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the North – Eastern Education and Library Board that this

information is not held in the format requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Education and Library Boards

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to confirm if each Education and Library Board uses common criteria in relation to statutory assessment. (AQW 486/09)

The Minister of Education:

Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne dom gur chomhaontaigh an Grúpa Athbhreithnithe um Chritéir Réigiúnda critéir réigiúnda, ar bhonn chúig Bhord, sna catagóirí riachtanais speisialta oideachais (SEN) seo a leanas le héifeacht ó mhí Mheán Fómhair 2006:-

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the Regional Criteria Review Group agreed regional criteria, on a five Board basis, in the following special educational needs (SEN) categories with effect from September 2006:-

- severe learning difficulties;
- social, emotional and behavioural difficulties;
- physical or medical difficulties;
- sensory impairments – hearing and visual difficulties;

It has also been agreed by all five Boards to implement regional criteria in the following SEN categories with effect from September 2008:-

- learning difficulties;
- specific learning difficulties (literacy).

In addition, action has also been agreed to address the following SEN categories as follows:

- (i) speech and language difficulties – a five Board sub group was established in June 2008 with the brief of drafting regional criteria;
- (ii) assessment of pre-school children – following an initial meeting of South Eastern and Southern Education and Library Board specialist Senior Educational PSychologists, a paper is to be brought to the Principal Educational PSychologists Group with, in due course, draft criteria being presented to the Regional Criteria Review Group for consideration.

Home to School Transport Policy

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to outline the transport policy for integrated schools in the Western Education and Library Board area. (AQW 498/09)

The Minister of Education: The current home to school transport policy applied to the Integrated sector in the Western Education and Library Board is consistent with the policy applied to all school sectors across all five Education and Library Board areas.

Under this policy, Education and Library Boards are required to make such arrangements as they consider necessary to facilitate the attendance of pupils at grant-aided schools. The current arrangements which were introduced in September 1997 restrict transport provision to pupils who have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of their home (2 miles for primary school age pupils and 3 miles for post-primary school age pupils).

Chun críocha na socruithe iompair, tá sainmhíniú beacht ag an téarma ‘scoil fhóirsteanach’. Baineann sé go heisiach leis na catagóirí bunaithe oideachais, mar atá scoileanna rialaithe, scoileanna faoi chothabháil, scoileanna imeasctha agus Gaelscoileanna, agus, i gcás na hearnála gramadaí, scoileanna sainchreidmheacha agus neamh-shainchreidmheacha.

For the purposes of the transport arrangements the term ‘suitable school’ has a precise definition. It relates solely to the established educational categories of controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium, and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

Strabane Grammar School and Strabane High School

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in relation to the proposed merger of Strabane Grammar School and Strabane High School. (AQW 499/09)

The Minister of Education: Bunaíodh Bord Eatramhach Gobharnóirí agus chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair moltaí isteach ar líon na n-áiteanna agus na n-iontógálacha don scoil chónasctha agus tá an Roinn ag breithniú na moltaí faoi láthair.

An Interim Board of Governors has been established and the Western Education and Library Board has submitted proposals for capacity and intakes for the merged school which the Department is currently considering.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what has been the cost to date of operating the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 506/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl an tÚdarás Oideachais agus Scileanna (ESA) le bheith i ngníomh go dtí 1 Aibreán 2009. Bunaíodh Foireann Feidhmithe an ESA le forfheidhmiú an ESA a thabhairt ar aghaidh agus tabhaíodh costais de £1,814,878 go dtí seo.

The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is not due to come into operation until 1 April 2009. The ESA Implementation Team was established to take forward the implementation of ESA and the costs incurred to date are £1,814,878.

Entitlement Framework

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the role played by the Department for Employment and Learning, in partnership with her Department, in relation to the delivery of the Entitlement Framework. (AQW 520/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) are seeking, through their respective programmes, to bring forward a co-ordinated approach to 14-19 provision. 14-19 provision, whether at school, Further Education (FE) College or training organisation, must enable young people to acquire qualifications that will lead to further and higher education, training or employment and therefore help them become active contributors to society and the economy.

The Entitlement Framework (EF) is a major focus in the development of 14-19 provision and DE has worked closely with DEL to support the development of collaborative arrangements among schools and between schools and FE Colleges through various programmes, including the 4-year Vocational Enhancement Programme. This co-ordinated approach is continuing with the new support arrangements which have been put in place for the 2008/09 school year.

Tá scoileanna ar fud an tuaiscirt ag obair i gcomhar le Coláistí FE chun Pobail Áitiúla Foghlama (ALCanna) a fhorbairt a fhéachann le comhsholáthar a phleanáil agus a chomhordú ar bhealach comhleanúnach.

Schools across the north are working with FE Colleges in the development of Area Learning Communities (ALCs) which seek to plan and co-ordinate collaborative provision in a coherent way. The development of these ALCs complements the wider development of area-based planning within education. Representatives from DEL and the FE sector have a key role (alongside representatives from the wider education sector) on the Central and Local Area Groups which are taking forward the current Area-Based Planning exercise for Post Primary Education.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to (i) improve pay conditions for education welfare officers; and (ii) meet with trade unions in relation to this issue.

(AQW 545/09)

The Minister of Education: Fuair an Roinn cás gnó ó na fostóirí ar 29 Lúnasa 2008. Sainithníodh bearnaí criticiúla eolais agus scríobh an Roinn chuig fostóirí ar 8 Meán Fómhair ag sonrú go mbeadh orthu tabhairt faoi na bearnaí eolais seo.

The Department received a business case from the employers on 29 August 2008. Critical information gaps were identified and the Department wrote to employers on 8 September to have these addressed. As soon as the necessary material is available and the Department is satisfied that the business case is robust, consistent and evidence based, the Department will expedite its presentation to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The terms and conditions of employment of Education Welfare Officers are a matter for the Education and Library Boards, as employers. There are established industrial relations procedures between the employers and staff representatives by which these issues are addressed.

I will wish to see this issue resolved as soon as possible in order to avoid any detriment to children's education.

Maintenance in Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown by school of the £217 million backlog of maintenance work to be carried out on schools, highlighting work that has health and safety implications. (AQW 548/09)

The Minister of Education: The draft agenda for the next NSMC meeting in Trade and Business Development Sectoral format is under discussion between my officials and officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and in that context I will consider the prioritisation of agenda items. Once the agenda is agreed it will be issued to the Executive and the Assembly.

Business Case for Educational Campus at Lisanelly, Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education for a timeline for the completion of the business case for an educational campus on vacated Ministry of Defence

land at Lisanelly, Omagh; and when she expects the business case to be forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQW 553/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an cás gnó á thabhairt chun críche faoi láthair agus táthar ag súil leis go gcuirfear i gcrích é sna chéad chúpla seachtain atá romhainn. Tá sé beartaithe go gcuirfear faoi bhráid na Roinne Airgeadais agus Pearsanra é an mhí seo chugainn.

The business case is currently being finalised and is expected to be completed with the next few weeks. It is intended that it will be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel next month.

Technology Block at Edmund Rice College

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education (i) for her assessment of the success of the project to build a new technology block at Edmund Rice College; and (ii) to detail (a) the total cost of the project; (b) the time taken to complete the project; and (c) the new facilities available. (AQW 588/09)

The Minister of Education: Having viewed at first hand the new facilities at Edmund Rice College, it is my view that the project has been a great success. The school now has a modern, state of the art Technology & Design and Home Economics facilities enabling it to fully meet the curricular needs of its pupils.

The total cost of the construction is £1.4m with a further £340,000 provided by the North Eastern Education Board for the provision of furniture & equipment for all of the new accommodation.

D'fhaomh an Roinn an gá le bloc nua teicneolaíochta i bprionsabal in 2002, agus cuireadh na céimeanna riachtanacha pleanála i gcrích faoi 2006. Tosaíodh an obair tógála ar 30 Bealtaine 2007 agus críochnaíodh in Iúil 2008 í.

The need for a new technology block was approved in principle by the Department in 2002, and all of the necessary planning steps were completed by 2006. The construction work got underway on 30 May 2007 and was completed in July 2008.

The new accommodation includes the following:-

- Four manufacturing rooms each with an associated systems/planning room;
- Head of Department office;
- Storage and other ancillary accommodation;
- A new Home Economics classroom and associated storage; and
- A multi-purpose area.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education what consideration was given to (a) the qualifications required; (b) nature of duties; (c) areas of responsibility; and (d) pay scales between education welfare officers and comparable grades in other Departments, in setting the current pay levels for education welfare officers. (AQW 612/09)

The Minister of Education: The matter of setting pay and terms and conditions of service for Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) is one for the Employers who, in the case of EWOs, are the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). I understand, from the ELBs that matters of pay and terms and conditions are dealt with through the Joint Negotiating Council (JNC) and the parties to that are the ELBs and non-teaching Trade Unions, which include NIPSA.

EWOs pay and terms and conditions fall under the NJC Pay and Terms and Conditions of Service. The process agreed with the Trade Unions to determine the appropriate grade of all such posts is Job Evaluation. The post of EWO was first evaluated in 1997 which resulted in the post being evaluated at the grade of Senior Executive Officer.

Tá nádúr na ndualgas agus na réimsí freagrachta rithabhachtach agus postmheastóireacht á déanamh agus déantar mioniniúchadh orthu. Ní bhreathnaítear na cáilíochtaí atá ag daoine, ach breathnaítear an t-eolas agus na scileanna a éilíonn an post atá de dhíth le feidhmíocht shásúil an phoist sin a bhaint amach.

The nature of duties and areas of responsibility are of prime importance in the conduct of a job evaluation exercise and are examined in great detail. The qualifications held by an individual are not considered, but rather the knowledge and skills required by the post that are necessary for its satisfactory performance. No direct comparison of the pay scales of EWOs is made with other comparable grades in other Departments; rather, each post subject to evaluation is compared to the common criteria of the job evaluation scheme and in this way the value or rate of pay is established relative one to the other.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education if her Department has carried out any comparison of (a) the qualifications required; (b) nature of duties; (c) areas of responsibility; and (d) pay scales between education welfare officers and comparable grades in other Departments. (AQW 613/09)

The Minister of Education: Is iad na fostóirí a shocraíonn pá agus téarmaí agus coinníolacha seirbhíse Oifigigh Leasa Oideachais (EWOanna) agus

i gcás EWOanna, is iad na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) na fostóirí.

The matter of setting pay and terms and conditions of service for Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) is one for the Employers who, in the case of EWOs, are the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). I understand, from the ELBs that matters of pay and terms and conditions are dealt with through the Joint Negotiating Council (JNC) and the parties to that are the ELBs and non-teaching Trade Unions, which include NIPSA. The Department is not directly involved in this process.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the role of education welfare officers. (AQW 614/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann Oifigigh Leasa Oideachais (EWOanna) tacaíocht do dhaltai agus dá dteaghlaigh, i gcás nuair a bhíonn fadhb ann le freastal leanúnach rialta ar scoil.

Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) support pupils, and their families, where sustained regular attendance at school is a problem. Regular attendance at school is essential if a child or young person is to achieve their full potential and take full advantage of the opportunities to learn provided thorough school. EWOs, therefore, have an important role to play in the challenge of improving the outcomes of all our children.

Pupils Leaving School with No Qualifications

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education what proportion of pupils left school with no qualifications, broken down by ethnic background, in each of the last 3 academic years. (AQW 690/09)

The Minister of Education: Féach an tábla seo thíos.

Please see the table below

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEAVERS ACHIEVING NO FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS BY ETHNIC ORIGIN⁽¹⁾

	2004/05 ⁽³⁾	2005/06	2006/07
White ⁽²⁾	851 (3.4%)	795 (3.1%)	720 (2.9%)
Minority Ethnic Groups ⁽²⁾	14 (6.4%)	22 (7.8%)	24 (7.9%)
Total Leavers	873 (3.5%)	817 (3.2%)	744 (3.0%)

Source: School Leavers Survey

1. Excludes special and independent schools
2. 'Minority Ethnic Groups' includes Irish Travellers. The 'White' figures do not include Irish Travellers.
3. In 2004/05 there were 24 pupils for whom an Ethnic group was not given.

Pupil Enrolment in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of pupils in the North Down area that were not enrolled in year eight in schools in North Down. (AQO 131/09)

The Minister of Education: Nuair a tháinig deireadh leis an phróiseas iontrála ag deireadh mhí Bealtaine 2008 bhí 73 páiste ina gcónaí i nDún Thuaidh nár éirigh leo áit a fháil i gceann ar bith de na scoileanna a chuir siad ar a liosta ar a bhFoirm Aistrithe.

When the admissions process concluded at the end of May 2008 there were 73 children resident in North Down who had not gained admission to any of the schools listed on their Transfer form. When this happens, such applicants are invited by the relevant Education and Library Board Transfer Officer to consider schools not listed on their Transfer form but which have places available. This procedure was followed and almost all have been placed with the exception of two children whose families are resident in Bangor, and remain unwilling to accept Year 8 places which are available within a reasonable travelling distance.

Visits by Educational Psychologists to Schools

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to increase the number of visits by educational psychologists to schools. (AQO 171/09)

The Minister of Education: Le blianta beaga anuas tá cistí breise tugtha ag an Roinn Oideachais do Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne chun níos mó síceolaithe oideachais a oiliúint agus a fhostú d'fhonn a chur ar a gcumas freastal ar éileamh méadaithe ar chuidirteanna scoile.

In recent years the Department of Education has provided Education and Library Boards with further funds to train and employ additional educational psychologists in efforts to enable them to meet increased demand for school visits.

Since 1999 the number of educational psychologists in training at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) has been increased from 5 to 12 per annum, through the provision of additional resources. This increase in trainees has been sustained following the move to a 3-year Doctorate in Child and Adolescent PSYchology course, which replaced the 1-year Master's course in 2006. The Department currently provides funding of approximately £600K per annum to the 5 Boards and QUB, to support the training and placements of the 12 educational psychologists.

The Department continues to work with the Boards and QUB to consider future manpower requirements and to help ensure that supply matches demand.

In addition the vacancy control measures, in place because of the Review of Public Administration, have been lifted in relation to the recruitment of permanent educational psychology staff due to the unique situation of the educational psychology service.

Most Boards operate a Time Allocation model of service delivery to schools which ensures that all schools have a fair share of educational psychologists time. The one Board which does not operate this model, the South-Eastern Education and Library Board, ensures that every school receives a consultation visit early in the school year.

The number of visits to schools by educational psychologists is governed by the resource available to the Boards and Boards currently have a number of vacancies due for instance to career breaks, recruitment difficulties, maternity leave, illness and unfilled posts. Although the first cohort of 12 educational psychologists trained to doctorate level will not qualify until June 2009, there are 24 additional trainees annually, undertaking significant placements with Boards and currently providing support for Board psychology services.

Quite often demand for psychology visits to schools will exceed supply but I have been assured by the Chief Executives of the Boards that all possible steps are being taken to mitigate against ongoing staffing difficulties. Some Boards, for example, have been able to recruit additional educational psychologists to cover for others' absences.

Importantly the Department is currently undertaking a review of Special educational Needs & Inclusion in an attempt to address a number of issues associated to the current SEN framework including inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision. The proposals which have emerged from the review are due to issue for public consultation in the autumn term of 2008.

Furthermore the Department has recently agreed to a regrading of educational psychologists salaries which will be backdated to September 2001. This will add to the attractiveness of the posts when Boards are recruiting new officers.

Availability of Modern Languages Teachers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that a fully expert modern languages' teacher will be available to every primary school in the future. (AQO 139/09)

The Minister of Education: Trí theanga a fhoghlaim ag aois óg bíonn tairbhe ann do thaitneamh agus do scileanna teanga na ndaltaí, agus beidh mé ag breathnú soláthair teangacha i mbunscoileanna i gcomhthéacs chur chuige straitéisigh i leith teangacha ag gach leibhéal.

Learning a language from an early age benefits pupils' enjoyment and language skills, and I will be considering primary language provision in the context of a strategic approach to languages at all levels.

There is already a range of good practice in primary schools and I introduced the Primary Languages Programme in the 2007/08 school year. This provides peripatetic support for primary schools wishing to deliver Spanish and Irish, and is expanding, including looking at support for newcomer languages.

The programme also provides opportunities for the professional development of existing primary teachers. To date 284 primary schools have been allocated tutors through this programme.

Taken together, the strategic approach, existing good practice, and programme expansion will allow us to build provision and support the professional development of an increasing number of primary teachers to enable them to teach a second language.

Transfer Arrangements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the post-primary transfer procedure for children currently in P6. (AQO 216/09)

The Minister of Education: Sna tograí a chuir mé faoi bhráid an Fheidhmeannais ar 15 Bealtaine 2008 rinneadh cur síos ar an phróiseas aistrithe chuig iarbhuideochas agus tá mé ag dréim leis go dtiocfaidh sé in éifeacht le haghaidh Aistrithe sa bhliain 2010

The proposals which I brought before the Executive on 15 May 2008 and communicated to post primary Principals on 12 June 2008 described the process for transfer to post-primary education which I envisage taking effect for Transfer 2010. To summarise, in September 2010 pupils will begin to transfer to post-primary school at 11 on the basis of non-academic admissions criteria which will be specified in Regulations and will include geography, family criteria, community and socially disadvantaged criteria. To facilitate transition to the new arrangements grammar schools will, for a three year period, be able to apply for bilateral status which will allow for selection of up to 50% of a school's intake in 2010, reducing to 30% and 20% in the two ensuing years.

The pupils who transfer in 2010 will make informed choices about their educational pathway based on the full Entitlement Framework when they reach age 14 in 2013.

Modern Language Graduate Teachers

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of modern language graduates going into teaching. (AQO 136/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas líon iomlán na mac léinn a bhain céim amach i gcúrsaí in Oideachas tosaigh do Mhúinteoirí Nuateangacha (PGCE) ag Ollscoil na Banríona Béal Feirste agus ag an Ollscoil Oscailte le cúig bliana anuas:

The total number of students graduating from Modern Languages initial Teacher Education (PGCE) courses at Queen's University Belfast and the Open University over the past five years is as follows: -

2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
40	46	48	39	35

Transitional Test for Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education to give an update on the transitional test for post-primary transfer being constructed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. (AQO 167/09)

The Minister of Education: Go dtí go mbreathnaíonn an Feidhmeannas mo thograí beartais agus as siocair nár thángthas ar chomhréiteach faoin am seo maidir le bealach chun tosaigh, tá socrúithe curtha i bhfeidhm agam lena chinntiú go bhforbraítear tástáil mar bheart teagmhasachta.

Pending consideration by the Executive of my policy proposals and in the absence at this stage of an agreed way forward, I have put in place arrangements to secure the development of a test as a contingency measure. It takes time to develop, trial and deliver a high-quality test that is fit-for-purpose and robust. The test will focus on literacy and numeracy and not require the distortion of the primary curriculum.

Guidance to Schools on Transfer Procedure in 2009

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education what guidance she has given to primary schools for the transfer procedure next year. (AQO 192/09)

The Minister of Education: Eisíodh treoir ar an chóras aistrithe maidir le hiontrálacha i mí Mheán Fómhair 2009 chuig gach scoil ar 28 Lúnasa 2008 i bhfoirm Imlitir 2008/16, agus tá cóip di ar fáil ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne ag http://www.deni.gov.uk/the_procedure_for_transfer_from_primary_to_post-primary_education__2008_09-2.pdf

Guidance on the transfer procedure relating to admissions in September 2009 issued to all schools on 28 August 2008 in the form of Circular 2008/16, a copy of which can be viewed on the Department's website at http://www.deni.gov.uk/the_procedure_for_transfer_from_primary_to_post-primary_education__2008_09-2.pdf

Access to School Transport

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail how many children in the South Down areas, administered by the Southern Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board, are unable to access school transport even though older siblings, attending the same school, are able to travel on school buses provided by these Boards. (AQO 151/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt ar an eolas faoi 4 páiste a chuir isteach ar iompar lamháltais chun taisteal ar sheirbhísí ar a mbíonn siblí níos sine ag taisteal ar bhonn lamháltais.

The Southern Education and Library Board is aware of 4 children who made application for concessionary transport to travel on services already travelled by older siblings on a concessionary basis. Transport was not offered initially due to concerns about potential overcrowding but I can advise that each of these children has now been granted travel on a concessionary basis although no guarantees can be given to these pupils that concessionary transport will be available in future years.

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board does not hold information on the number of siblings who have not been allowed to travel on Board transport when their older siblings are availing of such services. In certain circumstances, say in the event of a school closure, only those pupils enrolled in the school at the time of closure may receive transportation under exceptional circumstances to another school. Subsequently, other siblings, who have not been affected by the closure, will be assessed in the normal way and may therefore not be eligible for transport assistance.

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

(2 miles for primary age pupils and 3 miles for others) of the parents' home or where no such suitable school exists within that distance.

As you may also be aware the Department, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development, has put in place a number of safety measures on school buses including the abolition of the practice of three children sharing a two person seat from September 2007 (except in exceptional circumstances); the abolition of standing on dedicated school buses by September 2009; the fitment of improved lighting and signage to improve the visibility of school buses, expected to be introduced from 2009; and fully seatbelting the Education and Library Boards' school bus fleet by 2011.

Following the abolition of the 3-for-2 seating concession, Education and Library Boards are no longer able to transport the same number of concessionary passengers, as the previously spare seats are now required for those pupils eligible for home to school transport.

Transformation Criteria for Integrated Schools

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the transformation criteria for integrated schools. (AQO 190/09)

The Minister of Education: Agus mé ag breathnú iarratais ar aistriú chuig stádas imeasctha caithfidh mé na rudaí seo a chur san áireamh: inmharthanacht fhadéarmach na scoile; an dóchúlacht go mbainfidh an scoil an leibhéal riachtanach imeasctha amach; agus an tionchar a d'fhéadfaí bheith ag an aistriú stádais ar scoileanna eile sa cheantar.

In assessing an application for transformation to integrated status I must consider the long-term viability of the school; the likelihood that the school will achieve the required level of integration; and the possible impact of transformation on other schools in the area.

Transformed schools are expected to have minority community representation of 10%, in their first year of transformation, and demonstrate that this will increase to 30% over time. This, I believe, presents schools with an achievable target initially, but one that provides a strong basis from which to meet the longer-term requirement of a realistic level of mixing.

None of this matters, of course, if a school is not viable in the long term, or is likely to have a significant impact on the enrolment of other schools in the area. It is my job to balance the wishes of parents with the need to provide children in all sectors

with a high-quality educational experience. It is my belief that the Sustainable Schools policy and the proposals for Area Based planning, currently out for consultation, will provide the strategic context within which the wishes of parents, and the needs of children, across all sectors can be accommodated.

Circular 2008/16

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the legal standing of circular 2008/16 issued on 29 August 2008. (AQO 157/09)

The Minister of Education: In Imlitir 2008/16 leagtar amach na socruithe d'aistriú ón bhunoideachas go dtí an iarbhuoideachas a bheidh i bhfeidhm sa scoilbhliain 2008/09, maidir le hiontrálacha i mí Mheán Fómhair 2009.

Circular 2008/16 sets out the arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education which will operate in the 2008/09 school year, relating to admissions in September 2009. It does not in itself have statutory force but it communicates to all schools the legislative framework for admissions as set out in the various Education Orders and supporting regulations. This extends to communicating to schools their statutory duties and responsibilities (and those of others) within the admissions process – as set down in law. The circular makes it clear in its opening paragraphs that it is a practical communication of various Education Orders but that these Orders are the authoritative version of its content.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education when she intends to introduce the relevant legislation for the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 170/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé ar intinn agam an reachtaíocht seo a thabhairt isteach a luaithe is féidir sa seisiún seo den Tionól.

It is my intention to introduce this legislation as soon as possible in this session of the Assembly.

Performance of Schools

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Education to explain the wide variation in performance in schools; and if she is aware of the gap in performance between grammar schools. (AQO 236/09)

The Minister of Education: Cé go bhfuil caighdeáin fhoriomlána fós ard agus cé go mbaineann cuid mhór scoileanna i ngach earnáil torthaí iontacha

amach, aithním go bhfuil scoileanna ann a bhfuil tearcghnóthachtáil le sonrú iontu.

While overall standards remain high with many schools across all sectors achieving excellent outcomes, I recognise that there are real pockets of underachievement.

The gap in pupil achievement has been highlighted by OECD in their Programme for International Student Assessment Surveys in 2003 and 2006. It is a statement of fact that there is an unacceptable gap between the highest performing schools, and those performing at a lower level. This gap is evident across all phases and sectors, including the grammar sector, and exists even when comparing schools with similar intakes. When we examine the performance of grammar schools there can be a gap as wide as 20 percentage points in the percentage of pupils achieving 7 good GCSEs which include English and Maths. The reasons for the gap differ from school to school.

Our proposed School Improvement Policy, 'Every School a Good School', sets out the key characteristics of effective schools and our school improvement interventions will be shaped by the extent to which those characteristics are present or absent and by evidence of educational underachievement at pupil, class or school level. It is very clear, though, that all schools – including grammar schools – can improve and this needs to be accepted by all. At a system level it is equally clear that educational underachievement needs to be addressed wherever it is identified and our school improvement policy, when finalised, will make clear how that will happen.

School Curriculum

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what requirements will be placed on primary schools to teach the curriculum, rather than preparing for tests that may not be taken. (AQO 180/09)

The Minister of Education:

Éilíonn an dlí go soláthraíonn scoileanna an curaclam reachtúil do dhaltai den aois éigeantach scoile. Táimid anois i lár chlár céimnithe trí bliana chun curaclam athbhreithnithe reachtúil a chur i bhfeidhm.

Schools are required by law to deliver the statutory curriculum for pupils of compulsory school age. We are in the middle of a three year phased programme of implementing a revised statutory curriculum. This will better prepare children for life and work in the 21st century, providing them with the education and skills they need. Teachers are receiving training, and teaching materials and support are being provided

to help all schools to deliver the revised curriculum. Until such time as the revised curriculum becomes statutory, the previous curriculum remains a requirement.

Schools are also required by law to provide assessment outcomes for pupils at the end of Key Stages 1-3 to the Department, through the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. In addition, schools are required by law to report to parents.

Neither the Department nor parents will accept any diminution in young people's experiences and opportunities to achieve in school. This will especially be the case if such a situation arose because of teaching to a test for the purposes of post-primary selection.

I am clear that I do not want the transfer arrangements to impact negatively on the revised curriculum. All schools are required to deliver the statutory curriculum and associated assessment and reporting arrangements.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Kilcooley Women's Education Development Group

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department is taking to match fund the Kilcooley Women's Education Development Group. (AQW 259/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department is not an accountable Department for any of the expenditure within the PEACE III Programme, which is administered by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). I understand that a project which is successful in its application to PEACE III will receive all relevant funding from SEUPB.

Property Owned by Queen's University, Belfast

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of residential and commercial properties owned by Queen's University Belfast; and the number of these properties that are currently vacant. (AQW 285/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not hold this detailed information. However, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) has advised that the university owns a total of 110

residential and commercial properties, three of which are currently vacant.

Type of property	No. owned by QUB	No. currently vacant
Residential	100	3
Commercial	10	0

Construction Industry

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to combat growing unemployment for workers in the construction industry. (AQW 444/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers to help the unemployed find work including those in the construction industry. The services include mandatory work-focused interviews; action planning for certain clients and measures designed to improve the job prospects for those who have become unemployed. These services are subject to regular review to ensure that the public Employment Service in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose in the delivery of Welfare to Work policies.

Plumbing and Heating Courses

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many plumbing and heating courses are available in further education colleges. (AQW 450/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The following Apprenticeship Frameworks are offered by Further Education Colleges in the areas of Plumbing and Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (HVACR). (The number of classes in any one course will be determined by the number of enrolments):

- Belfast Metropolitan College – Level 2 Plumbing and Level 2 HVACR;
- Northern Regional College – Level 2 Plumbing;
- North West Regional College – Level 2 Plumbing;
- South Eastern Regional College - Level 2 Plumbing, Level 2 HVACR, and Level 3 HVACR;
- South West College – Level 2 Plumbing; and
- Southern Regional College – Level 2 Plumbing.

Plumbing and Heating Courses

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the criteria for access to plumbing and heating courses in each of the further education colleges. (AQW 451/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: SummitSkills is the sector skills council responsible for setting the entry criteria for Apprenticeship Frameworks in plumbing and heating. SummitSkills has stipulated that applicants for Apprenticeship Frameworks at Level 2 and Level 3 require a total of 16 points, derived from all GCSE results; this must include two grade 'C' GCSE qualifications in Maths and English.

These entrance requirements must be observed by all Further Education colleges and training organisations offering plumbing and heating Apprenticeship Frameworks.

Plumbing and Heating Courses

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many places are available in plumbing and heating courses, broken down by further education college. (AQW 452/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A total of 506 places are available in heating and plumbing courses broken down by Further Education College as follows:

- Belfast Metropolitan College – 63
- Northern Regional College – 83
- North West Regional College – 52
- South Eastern Regional College – 144
- Southern Regional College – 100
- South West Regional College – 64

Plumbing and Heating Courses

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students have enrolled in plumbing and heating courses for the 2008-09 academic year, at each further education college. (AQW 453/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Enrolment for courses at all Further Education courses is still underway. To date 297 students have enrolled in heating and plumbing courses, broken down as follows:

- Belfast Metropolitan College – 29
- Northern Regional College – 47
- North West Regional College – 29

- South Eastern Regional College – 87
- Southern Regional College – 54
- South West Regional College – 51

Plumbing and Heating Courses

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, what happens to a plumbing and heating course not receiving its full quota of students.
(AQW 454/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
In the event that a course does not attract sufficient numbers, it may not be financially viable for that course to proceed. On such occasions, Colleges endeavour to accommodate students by combining classes, offering suitable alternative provision, or referring students to alternative training providers.

Entitlement Framework

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the role played by his Department in relation to the delivery of the Entitlement Framework.
(AQW 508/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE) have been working closely on collaborative arrangements between schools and FE Colleges for the introduction of the Entitlement Framework (EF), one of the major elements in the development of education for 14-19 year olds.

Previously, collaboration between schools and colleges has been directed through the Vocational Enhancement Programme (VEP) pilot, which ended in June 2008. The VEP enhanced the profile of professional and technical education and encouraged collaboration between post-primary schools and FE colleges.

DE has introduced new support arrangements for collaboration between schools and other education providers for the 2008/09 academic year which build on the approach developed through the VEP. From September 2008 the responsibility for the funding and administration of the replacement of the VEP transferred to DE, post-primary schools and the Education and Library Boards.

Additionally, FE Colleges are working with partner schools in the development of Area Learning Communities, which seek to plan and co-ordinate post primary education.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's role under the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 509/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The Department for Employment and Learning's main role under the Review of Public Administration is to liaise with the Department of Education in relation to the establishment of the policy and legislative framework for the proposed Education and Skills Authority, specifically focussing on those of its proposed functions which directly relate to DEL's work, such as the education of 14 - 19 year olds, jointly with DE, and the vocational qualifications framework.

Within the context of the RPA, Enterprise Ulster was dissolved by the Department with effect from 30 June 2007.

Day Release Students

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) if a day release student can continue with the academic part of their course if their employer can no longer provide them with employment; and (ii) what grants are available for them to continue with their course.
(AQW 559/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
Under Training for Success, the Pre-Apprenticeship training component is designed for young people aged 16 to 18 who have been assessed as capable of undertaking a Level 2 Apprenticeship, but have not yet found employment. This training component can also accommodate any eligible Level 2 apprentices who have been made redundant, but who wish to continue working towards achieving a professional and technical qualification.

The Department has asked Sector Skills Councils to specify the employability skills and professional qualifications that are to be delivered under Training for Success' Pre-Apprenticeship component. In the main qualifications specified (Technical Certificates) are the same qualifications that comprise the initial part of a Level 2 Apprenticeship Framework. Some Sector Skills Councils, however, have specified different Technical Certificates from those delivered under an Apprenticeship Framework.

Participants undertaking Training for Success are eligible for a Training Educational Maintenance Allowance of £40 per week. Furthermore, eligible participants can access additional funding in relation to childcare and travel costs.

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how much contact his Department has had with the Sector Skills Council (SSC) since 1 January 2008; and what activities have been planned by his Department to promote the development of relationships between SSCs and local employer networks. (AQW 562/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Within the Department, Sectoral Development Branch (SDB) is the sponsor branch responsible for liaison and support of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in Northern Ireland. Officials from the branch regularly meet with the SSC Northern Ireland National Managers, attend meetings of the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, and attend specific SSC organised events and stakeholder group meetings.

The Department provides funding to the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, which acts as a collective voice of the Sector Skills Councils. One of the key aims of the Alliance is to promote understanding of the role of the Sector Skills Councils amongst employers, employer organisations, and other stakeholders, regionally and sub-regionally. Project funding has been provided to specific SSCs to support employer engagement.

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) to outline the current relationship his Department has with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs); (ii) confirm that there is a consistent role for all SSCs; and (iii) what his Department's target for achievement is. (AQW 564/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) Sectoral Development Branch is the sponsor branch within my Department responsible for liaison and support of the Sector Skills Councils in Northern Ireland. It provides advice and guidance to Sector Skills Councils on the production and implementation of their Sector Skills Agreements and also provides funding for projects to support this work. My Department also works with, and provides financial support to, the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils to assist with the development and promotion of the Skills for Business Network in Northern Ireland. Officials attend meetings of the Alliance and meet regularly with Northern Ireland Sector Skills Councils managers.
- (ii) The original remit for the Sector Skills Councils were set by the Sector Skills Development Agency and agreed by government. The Agency

also had the monitoring and funding role. With the recent abolition of the Sector Skills Development Agency these functions are now carried out by the newly established UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Northern Ireland, through my Department, is a co-sponsor of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and Sectoral Development Branch monitors Sector Skills Council performance in Northern Ireland.

- (iii) The Department's target is for all 25 Sector Skills Councils to have achieved their Sector Skills Agreements by December 2008.

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department has monitored the activity of Sector Skills Councils to ensure progress on the 'Further Education Means Business' and 'Success Through Skills' strategy reports. (AQW 565/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: FE Means Business and Success through Skills are delivered through a number of projects. The Department has established a Project Managers Group which meets on a quarterly basis to oversee these projects.

One of the projects through which FE Means Business is delivered, is the Reform of Vocational Qualifications. The Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) play a key role in this, and work closely with the Department to ensure that fit for purpose Sector Qualifications Strategies, and qualifications based on National Occupational Standards, are developed to meet the needs of employers within the sector footprint.

The Employers' Skill Needs Analysis project is one of a number of projects through which Success through Skills is implemented. The aim of this project is to put in place a suite of Sector Skills Agreements across all 25 sectors. Sector Skills Council activity in completing this work is monitored by the Department and reported to the Project Managers Group.

Reduction in Construction Activity

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what changes he is considering to his Department's skills priority list, in response to the reduction in construction activity. (AQW 567/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has commissioned a forecast of future skills needs in Northern Ireland based on short,

medium and long term economic predictions. This, in conjunction with other forms of Labour Market Information, such as the All Island Skills Study and information from the Skills Expert Group and six Workforce Development Forums, will inform the Department's decision on whether it will be necessary to review the sectors which it targets.

Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the course provision relating to (i) sport; (ii) the creative industries; and (iii) the arts, at Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster. (AQW 627/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Both institutions provide a number of courses in the areas of sport, the creative industries and the arts. This information has been placed in the library.

Land in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to sell land owned by his Department in the North Down area. (AQW 663/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning does not own any land in the North Down area.

Remuneration of FE College Chairpersons

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for a timeframe for completion of the business case for the remuneration of Further Education College Chairpersons. (AQO 207/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A business case was submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel in April 2008, however, it was unsuccessful as it was considered there was insufficient evidence to support the request, particularly as similar posts in Great Britain are not remunerated. A fundamental review of college governance arrangements is planned for autumn 2008 which will include the issue of remuneration.

Steps to Work Programme

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a detailed explanation for the award of a contract to provide the 'Steps to Work'

Programme to a contractor currently the subject of a Proteus and Departmental investigation. (AQO 210/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am aware that an investigation by the Special European Union Programmes Body has taken place regarding a complaint against a Lead Contractor that has been awarded a Steps to Work Contract.

I am not aware of any grounds for not awarding the contract.

Supply of Labour to the Construction Industry

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to promote the supply of labour into the construction industry. (AQO 160/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The primary responsibility for the promotion of opportunities in specific industry sectors falls to the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC). In this sector ConstructionSkills is the SSC responsible for assessing the number of new entrants required for the construction sector and also promoting the construction industry as an attractive sector to join. It does this through a variety of initiatives including its Positive Image campaign and Women into Construction network.

My Department provides many opportunities for people to train in construction occupations through the Further Education Colleges, the Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI provisions.

Apprenticeships are employer-led. Without employers there would be no apprentices and to improve opportunities for individuals I introduced all-age apprenticeships with effect from 1 September 2008 along with enhancing the eligibility criteria by affording opportunities to those contracted to work 21 or more hours per week.

Skills for Financial Services Sector

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to increase the skills base for the financial services sector. (AQO 130/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

In addition to work of the Financial Services Sector Skills Council, the Skills Expert Group (SEG) has established a Financial Services Future Skills Action Group to examine the skills needs of the sector in detail. In addition to my Department's work on industry relevant qualifications, the Belfast Metropolitan College and the North West Regional

College have launched Financial Services Career Academies.

Furthermore, the Department has commissioned Foundation Degree Forward to investigate the viability of investing in the development of an employer based Foundation Degree in Financial Services for the market in Northern Ireland. The report is currently being considered by my Department.

Training for Success Programme

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the Training for Success programme in relation to outputs in areas of high social exclusion. (AQO 201/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The first recruitment for Training for Success began on 3rd September 2007. As this was in general designed to be a 52 week programme, the Department is only now beginning to receive details of the first cohort of participants who have completed. The provision is also operated on a continuous basis, so participants can enrol at any stage during the year. Consequently, not all participants would have begun the provision in September 2007, and will therefore not have reached the completion stage.

On this programme, trainers and participants agree personal milestones reflecting individual occupational preferences and personal and social development needs. Milestones can include accredited qualifications such as Essential Skills in numeracy, literacy and information technology. They can also address areas such as employability skills, confidence building, health and safety, life skills, equal opportunities, drug and alcohol awareness and interview skills.

To date, 6,236 milestones have been achieved, with 1,442 Essential Skills achievements. Of these, 2,273 milestones and 615 Essential Skills achievements can be mapped against the 36 'Neighbourhood Renewal Areas'.

Further Education Teachers' Salary Dispute

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on the Further Education Teachers' salary dispute. (AQO 147/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In June 2008, the University and College Union (UCU) agreed to a suspension of industrial action by college lecturers in pursuit of their pay claim, and college employers agreed to suspend the proposed disciplinary action against staff. I understand that the college employers and unions will seek to put in place a "one

off" pay deal for the 2008/09 year. Both sides also aim to address longer term pay and conditions issues with the assistance of the Labour Relations Agency.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the financial pressures being experienced by the Belfast Metropolitan College and any impact on courses and capital projects. (AQO 150/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College has informed my Department of an anticipated deficit in its accounts in 2008/09. The College's financial difficulties have been attributed to the cost of internal re-structuring and some down-turn in performance in 2007/08, during a period of considerable change. In co-operation with the Governing Body, my Department has commissioned an Efficiency Review to establish more precisely the cause and extent of the College's financial difficulties. There is no suggestion that capital projects or courses will be adversely affected during any period of corrective action on College finances.

Match Funding for ESF Training Projects

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to comment on the availability of public sector match funding for European Social Fund training projects. (AQO 196/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2007-13 provides projects with 65% programme funding, made up of 40% from European Union Funds and a 25% contribution from the Department for Employment and Learning. The remaining 35% 'match funding' must be secured independently from other public sources by the project promoters. This is the same procedure as used for previous European Social Fund Programmes. Of the 76 projects selected for funding, to date 63 have secured their match funding for this year.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many (i) courses; and (ii) places, were offered at the Ards campus of the South Eastern Regional College this year; and how many places have been filled to date. (AQO 214/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The South Eastern Regional College has informed me

that a maximum of 8,382 places will be offered across 481 courses at the Ards Campus during the 2008/09 academic year.

To date, 1,172 places have been filled. However, course enrolment takes place throughout the academic year. Final data on the number of places filled by the College will not therefore be available until the end of the academic year (July 2009).

Pathways to Work Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the progress of the Pathways to Work scheme. (AQO 199/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Pathways to Work scheme is now available throughout Northern Ireland. Performance so far has been as good as, and in some respects better than, in Great Britain. 2,091 people have been helped into work through Pathways and increases in off-flow from benefits of 8% to 10% have been achieved. We expect to publish a detailed interim evaluation soon.

Stranmillis University College

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what meetings he has held with the senior management of Stranmillis University College over the last six months. (AQO 161/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I met with the Chair of the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College, on 18 June 2008.

STEM Courses

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration has been given to measures to promote the uptake of STEM courses at university. (AQO 159/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with the Department of Education, has initiated a review of STEM subjects in schools and Further Education colleges. The outcomes of the review, expected shortly, consider progression routes to higher education and employment, including the links to the skills and innovation needs of the wider economy.

Both Departments will consider carefully the recommendations in the review report in order to promote STEM in Northern Ireland.

Examples of best practice exist already. The Step-Up programme, operated by the University of Ulster, has been running successfully for 7 years and actively involves the university, schools, local industry, local hospitals and government agencies. The programme encourages pupils from secondary schools in disadvantaged areas to study science at university.

Northern Ireland universities are also working to complement the work of Government in aiming to increase the number of high quality school-leavers going on to take STEM subjects at university.

For example, Queen's University Belfast provides a scholarship of £1000 to students who achieve three grade As at A level and who study a STEM subject (except Medicine and Dentistry).

Meetings with the Transferors Representatives

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what meetings he has held with representatives of the Transferors Representatives regarding the future of teacher training. (AQO 166/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I met with two representatives of the Transferors Representatives Council on 5 June 2008 to discuss the future of teacher training in Northern Ireland.

Step to Work Contracts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to conduct an urgent review of the Step2Work procurement process prior to the Step2Work Contracts going "live", given concerns about the procurement process. (AQO 146/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Steps to Work tendering process was managed by Central Procurement Directorate and I am content with the advice and guidance received from them. The procurement process is quality assured and meets the ISO 9001 standards and also adheres to the 12 principles of Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy as laid down by the Executive in May 2002. Any review of the Procurement Process would be a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Science Park at Magee Campus

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has held discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the development of a Science Park

facility at the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster. (AQO 224/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I have not held formal discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the development of a Science Park facility at the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster.

The facility is initially the responsibility of the Minister for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI).

I would be happy to be involved in discussions if this would be useful.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Reconnect Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what grants are available under the Reconnect scheme; and what the maximum available grant is. (AQW 238/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): The household renewable energy grant scheme, 'Reconnect', closed to applications on the 31 March 2008. It is expected that the target of 4000 renewable energy installations will be met. The maximum grant available under the scheme was £15,000.

Rising Energy Costs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to help the private sector cope with rising energy costs. (AQW 363/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department has no role in determining energy prices but strives to create market conditions that over the long term will drive down energy prices. Northern Ireland's electricity market was fully opened to competition to all customers from 1 November 2007. The gas supply market in the Phoenix Natural Gas licence area of Greater Belfast, Lisburn and Larne was opened to all customers from 1 January 2007.

The Single Energy Market should result in downward pressure on wholesale electricity costs that will ultimately be reflected in lower retail prices. The latest electricity price review includes Public Service Obligation (PSO) charges being allocated equally

across all consumer groups and helps deal with a long standing call from business for a fairer allocation of the PSO element of the electricity tariff. In addition, the Department is committed to a greater proportion of energy coming from renewable sources to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and their associated global price volatility.

Invest NI has funded local Carbon Trust activities since 2002. Since that time £120 million of potential energy savings have been identified in Northern Ireland businesses which has led to over £50 million in actual savings per year through implementation of energy saving and efficiency measures in the private sector. Invest NI is planning to fund Carbon Trust to the tune of £13.4million up to March 2011 to expand and develop Carbon Trust activities with the private sector in Northern Ireland.

As well as advisory and technical visits and reports on efficiency measures Carbon Trust offers interest-free loans to assist companies to install energy efficient machinery and plant. 147 companies have benefited from the loans over the last five years.

As Northern Ireland's economic development agency Invest NI promotes innovation, enterprise and international competitiveness in Northern Ireland businesses. It encourages and supports research and development of energy efficient and renewable energy technologies. It also manages the local delivery of UK-wide programmes such as the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme and Envirowise that are designed to assist business reduce material consumption, minimise waste production and capitalise on commercial exchange of materials, waste and water – all of which also lead to reduced energy costs.

Projects in Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what projects her Department delivered in the Upper Bann constituency in 2007-08; and what projects have commenced, or are due to commence, in 2008-09. (AQW 366/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Details of projects delivered in the Upper Bann constituency in 2007-08; and projects which have commenced, or are due to commence in 2008-09 are listed in the attached tables.

In addition to the projects listed, Reconnect, the household renewable energy grant scheme which closed to applications on 31 March 2008 had Northern Ireland wide coverage in 2007/08 including Upper Bann. Up to 50% grants were paid for the following technologies; Solar PV, Solar Hot Water, Wind

Turbines, Small Scale Hydro, Heat Pumps, Wood Fuelled Boilers and Wood Pellet Stoves.

Also, in 2007/08, buildings within the Craigavon Borough Council area benefited from the installation of wood derived biomass heating. This, combined with additional energy efficiency measures and other forms of renewable technologies on each site show best practice across many sectors within the area.

NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD PROJECTS

Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency delivered in 2007/08	Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency due to commence in 2008/09
Armagh Down Tourism Partnership	Armagh Down Tourism Partnership
	St. Patrick & Christian Heritage Signature Project
	Enterprise Barge Restoration Project, Craigavon
	Bringing People Closer to Nature at Portmore Lough Craigavon

INVEST NI PROJECTS

Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency delivered in 2007/08	Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency due to commence in 2008/09
Business Support to Almac Clinical Technologies Ltd	Industrial Land Development – Completion of projects to further develop three industrial estates in the Constituency.
Business Support to Evron Foods	
Business Support to Moy Park Foods	
Business Support to W D Irwin & Sons Ltd	
Business Support to Radius Plastics Ltd	
Business Support to Armaghdown Creameries Ltd	
Business Support to Crossbows Optical Ltd	
Business Support to Victor Bowman	
Business Support to Huhtamaki (Lurgan) Ltd	
Business Support to K-Space (NI) Ltd	
Business Support to Vogue Surrounds Limited	
Business Support to Kestrel Foods Ltd	
Business Support to Mind Associates Ltd	

Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency delivered in 2007/08	Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency due to commence in 2008/09
Business Support to Delta Trading Ireland Ltd	
Business Support to Dooloop Limited	
Business Support to Almac Clinical Services Ltd	
Business Support to Interface Europe Ltd	
Business Support to Darryl T E Hylands & Beverley A Hylands	
Business Support to Magowan Originals Ltd	
Business Support to Douglas Architectural Systems Ltd	
Business Support to Brian McCoy	
Business Support to Jackson Reece Ltd	
Business Support to Deluxe Art & Theme Limited	
Business Support to David & Thomas McClimond	
Business Support to Alan Little Limited	
Business Support to Growmoor Horticulture Ltd	
Business Support to Titan Environmental Ltd	
Business Support to Seagoe Technologies Ltd	
Business Support to Portadown Locksmiths Limited	

E II & EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME PROJECTS

Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency delivered in 2007/08	Projects specific to Upper Bann Constituency due to commence in 2008/09
Brownlow Limited	
Craigavon Innovation Centre, Technology Park	

Reconnect Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the evaluation of the renewable energy based Reconnect scheme will be published.
(AQW 389/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Reconnect programme, which ended on 31st March 2008, is currently being evaluated by independent consultants in line with the Department's evaluation protocol.

It is anticipated that the report will be available for me by the end of November 2008.

After I have considered the report, it will be forwarded to the ETI Committee and published on the DETI website.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress her Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments.

(AQW 468/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI's Corporate Plan, 2008-11, and the accompanying Operating Plan for 2008/09, have been developed to ensure full consistency with the key PfG / PSA priorities that fall to my Department. These priority areas are:

- Improving manufacturing and private services productivity (PSA 1);
- Increasing employment (PSA 3); and
- Tourism (PSA 5).

The Department also has responsibility for some action points in the context of two other PSAs: Housing, Urban Regeneration and Community (PSA 12); and Protecting our Environment and Reducing our Carbon Footprint (PSA 22).

During the first quarter of 2008/09 the Department and its NDPBs have made good progress on key targets. Examples include the delivery of:

- 7 inward investment projects offering 203 jobs;
- £19.4m of wages and salaries secured from inward investment and growth from locally-owned clients;
- £29m investment in Research & Development; and
- 21 Export Start projects exporting to GB.

Going forward, we need to recognise that the downturn in the global economy is likely to make it harder to deliver some PSA targets, in the short to medium term at least. This applies particularly to those targets which depend on investment decisions by companies and those which depend on expenditure decisions by the tourist industry and by tourists.

DETI will continue to monitor results closely.

Tariff Levels

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will detail the current tariff levels levied on (i) domestic customers via the Home Energy tariff; (ii) small businesses and farms via the farm popular tariff; and (iii) large businesses via the multi rate tariff, and show how these tariff levels have changed in the period 2003 to 2008.

(AQW 596/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NIE Energy has provided the Department with this information, which is tabulated below.

	NIEES Electricity prices in p/kWh (excluding VAT and climate change levy)			
	Domestic	Farm	Small business	Medium business
Tariff	Home Energy	Farm Popular	Popular Option	MV multirate
Apr-03	9.38	9.2	9.8	7.3
Apr-04	9.64	9.2	9.8	7.7
Aug-04	9.64	10.0	10.2	8.2
Apr-05	9.95	10.5	11.1	8.5
Apr-06	11.02	11.6	11.9	9.3
Apr-07	10.69	11.2	11.9	9.7
Nov-07	11.11	11.5	11.6	10.4
Jul-08	12.66	13.2	13.2	12.3
Oct-08	16.88	17.7	17.1	14.2

	Annual charges (including VAT but excluding climate change levy)			
	Domestic	Farm	Small Business	Medium business
Tariff	Home Energy	Farm Popular	Popular Option	MV multirate
Apr-03	£325	£2,339	£1,726	£22,682
Apr-04	£334	£2,339	£1,726	£23,671
Aug-04	£334	£2,531	£1,803	£25,402
Apr-05	£345	£2,652	£1,956	£26,205
Apr-06	£382	£2,938	£2,092	£28,647
Apr-07	£370	£2,841	£2,103	£29,945
Nov-07	£385	£2,915	£2,045	£32,117
Jul-08	£439	£3,347	£2,324	£38,078
Oct-08	£585	£4,485	£3,016	£44,005

Notes:

1. Electricity prices in p/kWh from published rates.
2. VAT has been included in the table of annual charges - 5% domestic

and 17.5% non domestic except Farms where a composite 15% has been assumed (based on 80%/20% business/domestic use).

3. Climate change levy (CCL) has been excluded from all business and farm charges.
This is currently 0.456 p/kWh.
4. Annual fuel price adjustment has been included in the multirate tariff price up to July 2008.

Satellite Technology

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to develop the approach to broadband from March 2009, particularly in relation to the services currently provided by satellite technology. (AQW 729/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is actively working on an approach to next generation broadband services. A consultation has already taken place with the telecoms industry and the wider business community and we are considering the best way forward for Northern Ireland. Specifically in relation to satellite, when the contract with BT ends on 31st March 2009 the satellite product provided under the contract will no longer be available and customers are being informed of this. However, recognising the importance of the availability of broadband communications for the economy as a whole, my Department is issuing a tender worth up to £1.1m, inviting commercial companies to bid to continue to provide broadband services across all of Northern Ireland. It is expected that when complete, arrangements will be in place to continue the provision of broadband services, so that any business and any household who wishes to avail of a broadband service will be able to do so.

Assistance for Businesses

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what steps her Department is taking to assist businesses in the current economic climate. (AQO 152/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has developed a programme of actions and initiatives designed to help businesses to tackle the potential impact of a sustained economic downturn. In particular, it has focused on the areas of cash flow management, cost reduction and improving production efficiency.

At the end of this month, Invest NI will hold two awareness seminars, in Belfast and Cookstown, to offer practical specialist advice to businesses. These will be followed by a series of similar events across its Regional Office Network.

As a follow on from these, Invest NI will also offer up to five days free on-site diagnostic support to those clients with an identified urgent business need with the objective of developing remedial actions.

In addition to its wide range of existing programmes, Invest NI is also currently developing a number of new products in key areas such as cost reduction and energy efficiency. It has also added a new 'Beat the credit crunch' section to the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website. This provides practical advice and guidance in managing finance and steps to improve efficiency.

In relation to the market for foreign direct investment, there is some evidence that the volume of investment decisions is declining and that investors are deferring their expansion plans. Nevertheless, Invest NI is seeking to exploit this situation by marketing Northern Ireland as a cost competitive location. It is targeting investment prospects which are driven by cost reduction or are seeking to position themselves in preparation for the situation improving.

Abbey and Invest NI Financial Services Training Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many school leavers will benefit from participation in the Abbey and Invest NI Financial Services Training Scheme. (AQO 181/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Abbey School Leavers Programme is a pilot initiative that has generated significant interest. 120 applications were received for the 12 available places.

The Programme commenced this month and the successful entry-level participants are expected to progress over four years to become Mortgage Advisors or Team Managers within Abbey. Successful applicants will also be awarded Chartered Banker status, which is a degree level qualification, and which includes the award of certificates in mortgage and investment advice.

If the Programme proves successful in Northern Ireland, it is expected to be rolled out to other key Abbey locations across the UK next year.

Provision of Heat and Power to Local Communities

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what consideration she has given to the formation of co-operatives or

initiatives to encourage companies to provide heat and/or power to local communities. (AQO 219/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: DETI issued a call for energy from waste projects in October 2006. This brought forward several projects that generate heat and power from waste for use on the commercial site where the energy is being produced. In addition, the Department of Environment and Department of Finance and Personnel have recently approved the outline business case for the arc21 Waste Infrastructure project. This project includes an energy from waste facility, with the potential to develop a district heating system.

DETI is also exploring with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, the inclusion of Northern Ireland in a technical analysis of the potential for district heating networks.

DETI commissioned research in 2007 into the creation of renewable energy based Energy Services Companies, known as ESCO's, in Northern Ireland. There are currently three organisations in Northern Ireland offering ESCO services. The research identified some significant constraints and barriers to further market development. These will require further consideration, not least because of the high level of capital investment required.

Relocation of Businesses to Northern Ireland

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to encourage businesses based in the Republic of Ireland to relocate to Northern Ireland. (AQO 156/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Invest NI's marketing and sales strategy for identifying and attracting inward investment opportunities from the Irish Republic, focuses on the Financial Services and ICT / Software sectors.

The Northern Ireland sales proposition is:

Firstly, that it can complement and support the future success of existing operations in the Irish Republic;

Secondly, that it offers a completely separate pool of labour from the rest of the island and has major concentrations of highly skilled workers at competitive costs and lower levels of attrition; and,

Thirdly, that it offers geographical and cultural proximity to the existing Irish operations. This offers management efficiencies and mitigates against many of the negative aspects involved with setting up in offshore locations.

Invest NI implements direct marketing and sales campaigns in the greater Dublin area and elsewhere in Ireland, notably Cork, Limerick and Galway.

Utility Regulator

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the utility regulator to ensure that the proposed rises in energy costs by privately owned utility companies are justified. (AQO 202/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I met the Utility Regulator to discuss the proposed price rises by NIE Energy and Phoenix Supply Ltd. I received assurances on the level of detailed scrutiny which his office conducted. Moreover, my Department was fully involved in the consultation process before the Regulator concluded that the increases, while disappointing, were justified on the basis of significant increases in wholesale fuel costs.

My Department has no direct role in determining energy prices, but strives, in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, to create market conditions that, over the long term, aim to drive down energy prices.

However, in light of the concerns about the scale of the electricity price rise in particular, I sought proposals from the Regulator about how best to ensure full public confidence in the tariff setting process. I am pleased that he has responded by confirming that he has commissioned an independent review by the former Regulator, Douglas McIlldoon.

Renewable and Indigenous Energy Supplies

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the outline actions her Department intends to take to accelerate the introduction of renewable and indigenous energy supplies, for electricity generation, heating and transport sectors. (AQO 218/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Sustainability and maximising use of renewable energy will be a key focus of a revised Strategic Energy Framework which my Department is currently developing. The ETI Committee was briefed on this matter last week.

Following consultation on that strategic work, I aim to publish a Framework in 2009. This will set out the actions that will take to increase significantly renewable energy use across the range of energy sectors.

In parallel, my Department is reviewing the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation to provide more support to emerging technologies; starting work on a renewable heat policy; proceeding with a Strategic Environmental Assessment to facilitate the development of offshore wind and tidal potential; and working with the Department for Transport in GB on the UK-wide Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation.

Carbon Trust Funding

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many companies have reduced their energy costs as a result of Carbon Trust Funding. (AQO 178/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Carbon Trust's activities in Northern Ireland are funded by Invest NI.

Carbon Trust activities have helped to reduce the energy costs of 941 companies in Northern Ireland over the five years to 31 March 2008. Events and workshops have provided specialised energy technology best practice training to over 4,000 delegates.

Carbon Trust has identified energy savings of over £100 million through on-site energy audits and technical assessments. Approximately £50 million pounds worth of energy savings have thus far been realised through supported projects. Future savings in lifetime energy costs are projected to be in the region of £222 million, which equates to 2 million tonnes of carbon saved. The projects have also generated more than £70 million of work in the service sector of the Northern Ireland economy.

The Carbon Trust forecasts that a further 360 companies will benefit directly from its activities over the next three years.

Redundancies in the Building Industry

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many redundancies there were in the building industry during the period January to August 2008. (AQO 241/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Companies are legally required to notify the Department of impending redundancies when they affect 20 or more employees. Under this criterion, the Department has been notified of no such confirmed redundancies in the construction sector during the period January to August 2008.

Between January and August 2008, the number of claimants of unemployment related benefits whose

usual occupation was in the Construction Industry increased by 1,005 or 22% to 5,585. This compares with an increase of 5,087 or 21% in the total number of claimants in Northern Ireland over the same period.

North West Gateway Initiative

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what role her Department has played in the North West Gateway Initiative. (AQO 197/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has been involved in the North West Gateway Initiative since its launch in 2006. There have already been significant outcomes in terms of investment in telecommunications and energy infrastructure, the promotion of the North West as a tourism and investment location and the development of regional business/academic clusters. Officials from my Department and Invest NI participated in a joint OFMDFM and Department of Foreign Affairs led delegation to update North West stakeholders in July 2008.

Increased Unemployment of Construction Workers

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to combat the growing number of construction workers becoming unemployed. (AQO 200/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department does not have responsibility for the construction sector in Northern Ireland.

However, my colleague Nigel Dodds, Minister of Finance and Personnel, has advised that Government spending on construction has been increasing significantly over recent years. Spend last year is expected to have exceeded £1.2 billion which represents about 40% of the industry's total turnover. The level of public sector spend is set to continue to increase with the Investment Strategy for 2008-2011 and beyond.

Departments are currently working to deliver capital investment of £1.8 billion during this financial year and it is hoped that this increased investment by Government will offset some of the current pressures on the construction industry.

Economic Inactivity

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what efforts her Department is undertaking to reduce the rate of economic inactivity. (AQO 175/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI's role is to contribute to growing a dynamic, innovative economy; the top priority in the Programme for Government. As part of this, the Department is working to raise employment levels by increasing inward and domestic investment, and also through the promotion of business growth. This will provide employment opportunities for all in the labour market, including those currently classified as economically inactive.

DETI and Invest NI also encourage employers to source, where appropriate, labour from the economically inactive. For example, Invest NI works closely with DEL to ensure that its existing clients and prospective inward investors are made aware of the benefits of utilising DEL programmes, such as Bridge to Employment, to source suitable employees, including those from the economically inactive.

DETI does not have any specific targets within the Programme for Government in relation to reducing the level of economic inactivity. However it continues to work alongside DEL which has the lead policy responsibility, and resources, for delivering the targets within PSA 3.

Increase in Gas and Electricity Prices

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what actions her Department intends to take in light of the recent announcement of increases in gas and electricity prices. (AQO 217/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The recent gas and electricity price increases were the subject of detailed scrutiny by the Utility Regulator, who concluded that the increases were justified as a result of significant increases in wholesale fuel costs.

However, in light of the concerns about the scale of the electricity price rise in particular, I sought proposals from the Regulator about how best to ensure full public confidence in the tariff setting process. I am pleased that he has responded by confirming that he has commissioned an independent review by the former Regulator, Douglas McIlDoon.

ENVIRONMENT

Craigavon Divisional Planning Office

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment the average length of time it takes to process a planning application from application to approval, in the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 295/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): The average length of time taken to process a planning application to approval in the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office is set out in the table below.

AVERAGE PROCESSING TIME (IN WORKING WEEKS) FROM APPLICATION TO DECISION FOR APPROVALS IN CRAIGAVON

	06/07	07/08
Major	36	32
Intermediate	44	49
Minor	21	19

Source: 07/08 Dataset

Figures are only available for the 06/07 & 07/08 financial years. We are currently in the process of preparing the 05/06 – 02/03 data and hope to have this information available during October 2008. The median is provided as average.

Craigavon Divisional Planning Office

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment how many valid planning applications have been received by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 296/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of valid planning applications received by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office is highlighted in the table below.

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT DISTRICT

	06/07	07/08
Armagh	1012	979
Banbridge	974	819
Craigavon	1109	1034
Newry & Mourne	2066	1624
Total	5161	4456

Figures are only available for the 06/07 & 07/08 financial years. We are currently in the process of

preparing the 05/06 – 02/03 data and hope to have this information available during October 2008.

Craigavon Divisional Planning Office

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been approved by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 297/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of planning applications approved by the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office is highlighted in the table below. Figures are only available for the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 financial years. We are currently in the process of preparing the 2005/2006 – 2002/2003 data and hope to have this information available during October 2008.

APPLICATIONS APPROVED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT DISTRICT

	06/07	07/08
Armagh	899	1333
Banbridge	685	957
Craigavon	847	989
Newry & Mourne	1230	1880
Total	3661	5159

Party Wall etc. Act 1996

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will introduce legislation similar to the Party Wall etc. Act 1996. (AQW 299/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to introduce such legislation.

Historic/Listed Buildings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what powers his Department has to ensure that necessary restorative and protective work is carried out on historic/listed buildings; and how many times these powers have been invoked, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 300/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has powers to protect buildings of 'special architectural or historic interest' which are listed under Article 42 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 (the Order).

Planning Control

Article 44 of the Order provides control of works for demolition, alteration or extension of listed buildings.

Over the past three years the following consultations have taken place on proposed works to listed buildings -

September 05 - August 06	1638
September 06 - August 07	1773
September 07 - August 08	2025

Urgent Works Notice

Article 80 (1) of the Order states that 'Where it appears to the Department that works are urgently necessary for the preservation of –

(a) a listed building, ...the Department may, subject to the following provisions of this Article, execute the works, which may consist of or include works for affording temporary support or shelter for the building.'

This power has been used on one occasion, over the last three years, in July 2008 - to protect a listed building at risk - the Stable Block in Sion Mills.

Compulsory Acquisition

Article 109 of the Order provides the statutory authority for the compulsory acquisition of listed buildings. The first (and only) compulsory acquisition of a listed building under this Order – the Stable Block at Sion Mills – was completed on 19 July 2008, when the building was brought into my Department's ownership.

Temporary Listing: Building Preservation Notices (BPNs)

Article 42A of the Planning Amendment Order 2003 provides for so called 'spot listing' of buildings which appear to be of special architectural or historic interest and which are '... in danger of demolition or alteration in such a way as to affect its (their) character as a building of such interest,'

Over the past three years the following BPNs have been issued –

September 05 - August 06	0
September 06 - August 07	3
September 07 - August 08	9

Historic/Listed Buildings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will review the current levels of grants available to owners of historic/listed buildings to enable necessary repairs and restoration to proceed; and what action he will take to co-ordinate Departmental funding with other sources. (AQW 301/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has completed a review of the levels of grant-aid to listed buildings and a new grant-aid scheme was launched on 20 May 2008. As a result of the review, grant-aid at 35% is now available for the repair or maintenance of Grade B2 secular buildings - which were previously ineligible - as well as for all other grades of secular buildings.

The rate of assistance for grade B1 buildings has been increased from 20% to 35% and the new level of grant has been set at 35% for most eligible cases. For thatched roofs grant-aid is available to fund 75% of costs. Related professional fees of appropriately qualified advisors can also be grant-aided at 75%. Enhanced grant-aid of 90% may be applicable to owners of listed buildings who are in receipt of Income-based Job Seekers Allowance, Income Support or Guaranteed Pension Credit.

In addition, a new grant initiative, of up to £500K per annum has been set aside to help fund Building Preservation Trusts or other charities seeking assistance with the acquisition costs of Listed Buildings at Risk in Northern Ireland.

An additional £1.5m, on top of the existing budget of £2.4m, has been made available to help fund this new grant-aid scheme.

Grant-aid is also available for churches of Grade B+ and above. A separate review of funding for ecclesiastical buildings has just commenced.

My Department currently engages with other government departments and external funders to establish funding input from other sources along with the conditions and programmes for such funding. In addition, representatives of the Department attend 'funders' meetings for larger grant-aided schemes, for example, the Crescent Arts Centre and Ulster Hall conservation projects.

Pollution

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department is taking, in conjunction with other relevant departments, agencies and councils, to protect streams in the Three

Milewater and Six Milewater catchment areas from pollution risks. (AQW 302/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is working with a range of organisations including the following:

- Department of Education;
- Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure;
- Northern Ireland Water;
- Local Councils and Angling Clubs; and
- Local Stakeholder Groups.

A number of problems have already been identified in these catchments and work is underway to address them. These include problems with sewage discharges, cross connections in storm sewers and work to develop re-instatement plans following recent fish kills.

In addition, a range of targeted measures are planned to deal with potential problems in both catchments to reduce the risk of water pollution in the future.

North/South Confederation of Councillors

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to comment on the situation regarding funding of the North/South Confederation of Councillors. (AQW 316/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has had several approaches from the North-South Confederation of Councillors for a financial contribution. However, due to limited resources and serious pressures on the budget, the Department has been unable to make an offer of funding.

Wind Turbines

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment how many wind turbines there are in the South Antrim constituency; and to detail the locations and owners of those wind turbines that are publicly owned. (AQW 327/09)

The Minister of the Environment: 44 wind turbines have been granted planning approval within the South Antrim Constituency.

There are currently 8 applications for wind development within the planning system proposing a total of 20 turbines.

The only wind turbine in this area known to be publicly owned is that at Antrim Area Hospital.

Divisional Planning Offices

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment how many commercial planning applications have been (i) submitted; (ii) approved; and (iii) rejected, over the last 2 years, broken down by Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 345/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has provided the following statistics detailing how many commercial planning applications have been (i) submitted; (ii) approved and (iii) rejected, over the last 2 years, broken down by Divisional Planning Office.

Commercial applications include planning applications for shops, car parks, hotels and restaurants, offices and motor trade facilities.

Division	No. Commercial Applications Received 06/07	No. Approved 06/07	No. Refused 06/07
Ballymena	207	148	18
Belfast	378	326	16
Craigavon	237	177	25
Downpatrick	207	205	19
Headquarters	17	7	0
Londonderry	255	192	34
Omagh	255	197	28

Division	No. of Commercial Applications Received 07/08	No. Approved 07/08	No. Refused 07/08
Ballymena	200	155	15
Belfast	353	296	20
Craigavon	219	206	26
Downpatrick	208	185	9
Headquarters	11	3	1
Londonderry	243	206	46
Omagh	252	222	28

Applications received in any year may not be determined in the same year. Therefore direct comparisons between 06/07 and 07/08 figures should not be made.

These figures have been extracted from a live database 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.

Draft ABL Plan 2016

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment when the draft Antrim, Ballymena and Larne area plan 2016 will be published; and to detail the reasons for the 7 year delay in its publication. (AQW 414/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I regret that progress on the draft ABL Plan has not been as quick as my Department would have desired. This has resulted from limited resources, competing work priorities and unprecedented workload pressures in both the Operations Directorate and Strategic Planning Directorates of Planning Service. I am aware that unfortunately my Department has been unable to achieve the timescale for publication of the draft ABL Plan 2016 of the last quarter of the 07/08 financial year, or at the latest the first quarter of the 08/09, which my predecessor Arlene Foster advised you of in her letter to you of 27th November 2007. This further delay is due to the judicial challenges to the Environmental Reports which accompanied the Draft Northern and Magherafelt Area Plans and the Department's appeal of the judgement arising from those challenges which has now been referred by the Appeal Court to the European Court of Justice.

My Department is currently considering the implications of this referral for its entire development plan programme and I will ensure that you are advised of any implications arising for the publication timescale for the draft ABL Plan 2016 as soon as it becomes practicable to do so.

DVA Expenditure

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the money spent on the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) in each of the last 3 years, broken down by each DVA location. (AQW 448/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below provides the detail of Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) expenditure in respect of each DVA location.

DVA Testing Expenditure	2005/06	2006/7	2007/08
Location	£	£	£
Armagh	684,233	755,925	838,815
Ballymena	1,107,579	1,214,661	1,561,335
Belfast	1,912,356	2,311,155	2,160,406

DVA Testing Expenditure	2005/06	2006/7	2007/08
Location	£	£	£
Dill Road Belfast	20,699	24,033	19,462
Coleraine	1,080,934	1,256,760	1,264,886
Cookstown	1,184,088	1,536,434	1,289,604
Craigavon	1,012,613	1,120,101	1,217,496
Downpatrick	761,341	834,183	933,975
Enniskillen	782,929	850,927	959,843
Larne	890,144	874,563	993,488
Lisburn	1,047,373	1,149,967	1,170,877
Londonderry	1,112,717	1,206,149	1,259,431
Waterside House Londonderry	9,006	11,165	10,273
Mallusk	1,214,946	1,318,565	1,468,831
Newry	1,147,467	1,185,007	1,337,088
Newtownards	1,646,329	1,816,311	2,018,838
Omagh	849,849	786,516	910,052
HQ Belfast	6,398,549	6,427,917	7,438,534
Enforcement	1,382,916	1,428,034	1,545,348
	24,246,068	26,108,373	28,398,582

DVA Licensing Expenditure	2005/06	2006/7	2007/08
Location	£	£	£
Coleraine	15,269,592	16,260,178	15,334,470
Armagh	212,758	219,959	235,131
Ballymena	239,747	236,089	239,179
Enniskillen	109,064	110,209	117,445
Londonderry	127,138	168,267	169,287
Omagh	150,309	149,832	173,684
Downpatrick	171,228	165,476	177,469
Belfast - Vehicle Licensing	444,198	368,643	405,650
Belfast - Road Transport Licensing	1,786,927	1,626,201	1,711,807
	18,510,961	19,304,854	18,564,122

Shortfall in Rates Revenue

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of the shortfall in rates revenue being experienced by Armagh City and District Council; and if he will discuss remedial options, such as transitional relief, with council officials. (AQW 461/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Rating policy is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel. I understand that the Minister for that Department will address your concerns.

Increase in Levels of Council Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment what recommendations his Department will make to the new councils, given that they will be assuming responsibility for the increase in expenditure of existing councils investing in a number of capital and refurbishment programmes, resulting in annual loan charges. (AQW 466/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Matters relating to assets and liabilities of existing councils will be addressed by the Policy Development Panel responsible for finance and estates and the Strategic Leadership Board. The agreed way forward will be contained in primary legislation and in detailed guidance for councils.

Delivery of PfG and PSA Commitments

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 469/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment is actively progressing delivery of its Programme for Government (PfG) and Public Service Agreement (PSA) commitments.

The first monitoring round of Year 1 of the PfG has highlighted progress to date including:

- A certificate of professional competence scheme for bus drivers launched on 10 September 2008 with the launch for lorry drivers on target to take place before the end of September 2009;
- Positive progress on the targets set for the reduction in the number of people and children killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions;
- Ongoing consultation with Assembly Statutory Committees prior to producing a Draft River Basin Management Plan for public consultation;

- Air quality objectives achieved at all government monitoring sites for 2007 (still to be achieved at council monitoring sites in Belfast, Newtownabbey and Newry for nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter);
- Ongoing development and delivery of departmental biodiversity implementation plans and the establishment of challenging targets to declare 25 new Areas of Special Scientific Interest during 2008/2009 and 75 during 2008/2011;
- Draft or adopted development plans produced covering almost 60% of the region. A Judicial challenge has delayed the production of a further 3 draft development plans which would increase coverage to 90% of the region;
- Detailed policy proposals for the reform of the planning process currently being prepared for public consultation in 2008/2009; and
- Implementation structures and delivery mechanisms in place and delivery programme on target for the 11 new councils with their new functions, to become operational in 2011. Preparation of three Bills to give effect to the Executive's decision to transfer powers to local government.

My Department will face challenges in achieving some PfG targets particularly the implementation of the NICS wide Shared Corporate Services and Office Estate Services.

PAD Process

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the pre-application discussion process for planning applications relating to projects deemed to be of strategic importance.

(AQW 501/09)

The Minister of the Environment: While pre-application discussions (PADs) were formally introduced in December 2007 the approach had been used before this in some of the larger applications. One application which benefited from the approach was that for a new Public Record Office which was determined within 6 months.

One proposal has completed the formal PAD process, which took approximately 3 months, the application was submitted in June 2008. The Strategic Projects Division is confident that it will be processed within 6 months, in accordance with the Programme for Government target.

At present there are 18 proposals at PAD stage.

Clearly, if PADs is to be a success in terms of speeding up the process there are obligations on everyone involved in the planning process, including

agents, through a mutual commitment to improve the quality of applications and maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory process quickly. However, the early indications are very positive.

Dog Fouling

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to enable councils to increase the penalties for dog fouling to increase pressure on irresponsible dog owners.

(AQW 505/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Plans for increased fines for dog fouling have been considered by my officials under the Clean Neighbourhoods agenda. The Clean Neighbourhoods agenda, once implemented, will extend and strengthen existing legislative powers and create new additional powers for District Councils to enable them to deal more effectively with a wide range of local environmental quality issues, including dog fouling.

The timescale for progressing the Clean Neighbourhoods agenda is, however, subject to competing priorities and resource constraints facing my Department. I am also conscious of the impact on Councils of the Review of Public Administration and our intention to implement the agreed structural reform package by 2011. In the circumstances I have decided to defer any further consideration of the Clean Neighbourhoods agenda and associated new primary

legislation until 2011 by which time the structural reform package should be implemented and to allow my officials, in the meantime, to concentrate on higher priority environmental issues.

Planning Policy

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that planning policy is in line with the ever changing agriculture industry, particularly in relation to diversification into tourism projects. (AQW 526/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Revised draft PPS14 brings planning policy into line with current agricultural policies on farm diversification. I hope the Executive will consider the revised draft at the earliest opportunity. If there is no agreement, I will shelve the revised draft and we will live with the existing policy. This would mean residential development in rural areas continuing to be hampered by restrictive planning policy, and planning policy on farm diversification continuing to lag behind rural development policies.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage reduction in greenhouse gas emissions was achieved in the (i) energy; (ii) transport; (iii) housing; (iv) agriculture; and (v) public sectors, between May 2007 and May 2008.

(AQW 560/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no statistics available to assess the percentage reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between May 2007 and May 2008. The latest information available is based on calendar years and compares 2006 with 1990. The relevant 'Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland' is available at <http://www.naei.org.uk/reports.php>.

Newtownards Driver and Vehicle Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many MOT and PSV inspections have been carried out in Newtownards Driver and Vehicle Agency in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 571/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Agency conducts MOT tests on private cars, motorcycles and large passenger carrying vehicles. Public Service Vehicle (PSV) tests are carried out on taxis and buses.

Detail of the number of MOT, PSV and goods vehicle tests carried out in the years 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 at the Newtownards Test Centre is included in the following table.

Financial Year	Number of MOT tests	Number of PSV tests	Number of goods vehicle tests
2005/06	63,971	1,231	4,727
2006/07	71,653	1,199	5,183
2007/08	72,747	1,296	5,419

Allotments

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to list how many local authorities provide land for the provision of allotments; and to detail the amounts of land that are provided by each district council area for this purpose.

(AQW 575/09)

The Minister of the Environment: District councils have a discretionary power in the Allotments Act (Northern Ireland) 1932 to provide allotments for use by residents in their districts.

My Department does not hold central records of councils that provide allotments or the amounts of land provided by those councils for that purpose. My Department will however contact councils to request this information and I will write to you in due course.

Driver and Vehicle Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the income of each Driver and Vehicle Agency centre, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 576/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The following tables provide the detail of Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) income for each of the last 3 years.

DVA TESTING – INCOME

	2005/06	2006/7	2007/08
Location	£	£	£
Armagh	894,567	993,400	1,074,967
Ballymena	1,794,455	2,144,868	2,309,392
Belfast Dill Road Belfast	2,736,658	3,318,877	3,254,077
Coleraine	1,711,643	1,836,103	1,952,873
Cookstown	1,677,138	1,843,259	1,823,009
Craigavon	1,304,549	1,552,967	1,743,251
Downpatrick	1,051,245	1,166,286	1,302,244
Enniskillen	1,081,929	1,204,345	1,314,824
Larne	1,137,762	1,272,227	1,388,869
Lisburn	1,435,648	1,608,255	1,743,296
Londonderry	1,649,759	2,027,858	2,182,087
Waterside House, Londonderry Mallusk	1,807,894	2,192,163	1,976,902
Newry	1,704,062	1,953,111	1,981,414
Newtownards	2,428,724	2,965,006	2,996,051
Omagh	1,068,164	1,131,680	1,207,150
HQ Belfast	673,992	403,055	753,810
Enforcement	1,382,916	1,428,034	1,545,348
	25,541,105	29,041,494	30,549,564

Income for Driving Test locations at Dill Road, Belfast and Waterside House, Londonderry are included in the totals for Belfast and Londonderry.

DVA LICENSING – INCOME

DVA Licensing Local Offices mainly collect Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) on behalf of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). This is accounted for by DVLA in the VED Account and is not recorded by individual location. The total amount of VED collected in Northern Ireland in the last three years was:

	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	2007/08 £
VED (collected by Vehicle Licensing)	75,588,220	76,463,602	79,417,814
VED (collected by Car Dealers)	5,876,177	6,437,899	7,247,082
VED (collected by Post Offices)	56,272,907	60,516,175	68,388,111
	134,737,304	143,417,676	155,053,007

DVA Licensing income as stated in the Annual Accounts is as follows:

	Note	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	2007/08 £
Driver Licensing Fees & Other Income	1	4,796,851	4,906,883	5,021,385
DVLA Driver Licensing Subsidy	2	-	397,211	-
Vehicle Licensing Division	3	11,825,917	12,104,290	11,748,929
Taxi Licensing Fees	4	937,810	1,058,805	1,301,415
Road Freight Licensing Fees	4	421,333	422,755	483,390
		17,981,911	18,889,944	18,555,119

Notes:

1. Driver Licensing fees and other income are mainly collected in Coleraine.
2. DVLA Driver Licensing Subsidy is the income received under the Fees Pooling Order from DVLA whereby DVLA subsidise the deficit on the drivers fee account.
3. Vehicle Licensing Division income is the amount charged to DVLA to cover the total costs of the Vehicle Licensing Division (excluding depreciation and cost of capital).
4. Taxi Licensing fees and Road Freight Licensing fees are collected in Corporation Street, Belfast.

Pollution Incidents in the Quoile River

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to list the pollution incidents in the Quoile River, Downpatrick, that have occurred in the last five years. (AQW 578/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since 1 January 2004, 14 pollution incidents affecting the Quoile River have been reported to, and verified by, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and its predecessor body - the Environment and Heritage Service.

Details of the date, description and severity of each incident are listed in the attached Appendix.

Date	Description	Severity
18/04/2004	Sewage In Quoile At Downpatrick	Low
21/01/2004	Sludge From Downpatrick Sewage Works Discharging To Quoile	Low
28/06/2005	Sewage Fungus In Stream At Inch Abbey Road, Downpatrick	Low
27/04/2006	Sewage In Waterway At Quoile Road, Downpatrick	Low
29/09/2006	Oil In Protected Marsh At Ballydugan Road, Downpatrick	Low
01/02/2006	Sewage Fungus In Stream At Inch Abbey Road, Downpatrick	Low
12/03/2007	Sewage In Quoile, Inch Abbey Downpatrick	Low
25/04/2007	Oil In Stream At Inch Abbey Road, Downpatrick	Low
28/06/2007	Grey Coloration In Stream At Cathedral View, Downpatrick	Low
18/10/2007	Sewage Overflow At Inch Abbey Road Sewage Pumping Station, Downpatrick	Low
12/05/2008	Raw Sewage Quoile River Downpatrick	Low
29/08/2008	Oil In The Quoile	Low
12/09/2008	Sewage To Quoile At D'patrick Sewage Works	Medium
12/09/2008	Storm Overflow To Quoile At D'patrick Sewage Works	Medium

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what investigations have been carried out on the recent fish kills in the Quoile River, Downpatrick. (AQW 579/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, in conjunction with the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the Agri-Food

and Bio-Sciences Institute, undertook an extensive investigation of the Quoile River following receipt of a report of dead fish on Friday 29 August 2008 at 09:10 hours:-

- the Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works was visually checked and sampled and found to be discharging a good quality effluent;
- a discharge of oil in a small tributary of the Quoile was detected. An oil absorbent booming system was used to catch and recover the oil. This is not, however, considered to have caused the fish kill; and
- an extensive chemical sampling programme was undertaken. The results did not identify the presence of any pollutants in the river, however, it did confirm the presence of low levels of oxygen throughout the water column in the Quoile Pondage.

NIEA has concluded that the most likely cause of the recent extensive fishkill was insufficient oxygen levels for the fish in the Quoile River to survive.

Quoile River, Downpatrick

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has carried out research into the purposes for which the lands adjacent to the Quoile River, Downpatrick, were previously used. (AQW 586/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has not carried out research into the purposes for which the lands adjacent to the Quoile River, Downpatrick, were previously used.

However, NIEA is aware of a disused landfill site at Inch Abbey close to the banks of the Quoile River upstream of Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works.

Chief Executive of Craigavon Borough Council

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment to investigate the legality of the suspension of the Chief Executive of Craigavon Borough Council, to ensure that all proper legal and disciplinary procedures were followed and that the best interests of rate payers were adhered to.[R] (AQW 594/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has no power to intervene in personnel issues within district councils.

I understand however that Craigavon Borough Council has taken legal advice, and has been assisted by the Local Government Staff Commission, in reaching a decision to suspend the Chief Executive.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the salaries sacrifice childcare voucher scheme will be available to civil servants.(AQW 10/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): An information launch about the new salary sacrifice scheme will take place during week commencing 22 September. This will help staff to understand the scheme and the implications for them if they decide to participate. The scheme will begin once the new civil service payroll system comes into operation at which point applications to participate in the scheme will be invited and will be processed as quickly as possible.

Introducing a new payroll for 25,000 staff is a very complex and high risk project, and thorough testing is essential to ensure, so far as possible, that the risks will be minimised when it goes live. Our present forecast is that the new payroll will be launched in October, subject to the new payroll system meeting the required criteria for implementation. A final decision on this will be made by 20 October.

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the reasons why a pensioner from Scrabo Rd in Newtownards has been waiting for a response to his Lone Pensioner Allowance since April and to provide a date when this matter will be resolved; and if he will investigate why staff were not available to handle the numerous telephone calls being made by an elected representative on this matter. (AQW 403/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Lone Pensioner Allowance was introduced on 1st April 2008 and is administered jointly by Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Land and Property Services had a challenging timeframe in which to develop the necessary IT functionality for this new rate relief, and initial plans for this to 'go live' in May had to be postponed until June after testing revealed some difficulties.

There are still IT issues to be resolved in those cases where applicants are claiming Housing Benefit/ Rate Relief, and also with regard to the electronic transfer of data from the Housing Executive. I have asked officials to ensure that these matters are resolved as quickly as possible.

Land and Property Services would welcome the opportunity to investigate why staff were not available

to handle telephone calls and will contact you to establish more details.

Confederation of British Industry Report

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report into public procurement policy; and what action he is taking in response to its recommendations. (AQW 415/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I welcome the findings from the CBI Northern Ireland survey on public procurement – delivering value for money. Central Procurement Directorate within my Department facilitated a workshop on 12 September 2008 at which the CBI NI survey findings were discussed. The workshop was attended by CBI NI representatives and government procurement professionals. Discussions at the workshop resulted in agreed actions aimed at further improving public procurement in Northern Ireland.

Civil Servants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil servants there are at grade 7 and above, broken down by department. (AQW 427/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of civil servants at Grade 7 and above, based on headcount, employed in each of the 11 Government Departments and their agencies is set out in the attached table.

NUMBER OF CIVIL SERVANTS AT GRADE 7 AND ABOVE, IN THE 11 NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES, AT 1 AUGUST 2008

Department	Numbers at Grade 7 and above
DARD	274
DCAL	26
DE	113
DEL	55
DETI	62
DFP	354
DHSSPS	126
DOE	165
DRD	103
DSD	120
OFMDFM	76
Total	1474

Note: Staff on career break are included.

HR Connect

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many officials are engaged off site with the HR Connect contractor; and who is covering for their duties while they are supporting the contractor. (AQW 440/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are 28 staff from the HRConnect Project Team working predominantly off site in support of the design, build and test of HRConnect. The Project Team staff are a dedicated resource responsible for implementation of the project and therefore do not have other duties assigned to them.

In addition to the Project Team, a variable number of staff from individual Government Departments are periodically involved in designing, observing and testing elements of the HRConnect solution, and reviewing the associated documentation. The time commitment required varies significantly from week to week but is not on a full time basis. These staff continue to perform their normal duties with any cover required organised on a local basis.

Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain why his officials have not processed the Salary Sacrifice scheme by communicating with civil service staff, to ensure that the benefits of the Salary Sacrifice scheme will be sequential with the implementation of the HR Connect Payroll scheme. (AQW 441/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Over the last few months my officials have been working with Employers for Childcare to finalise the documentation for the Salary Sacrifice scheme, including the promotional material.

An information launch about the new salary sacrifice scheme will take place during week commencing 22 September. This is designed to help staff to understand the scheme and the implications for them if they decide to participate. The scheme will begin once the new civil service payroll system comes into operation at which point applications to participate in the scheme will be invited and will be processed as quickly as possible.

Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the repeated delays in the implementation of the new civil service payroll, if he will now make the Salary Sacrifice scheme independent of the payroll

system and implement it without further delay.
(AQW 442/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A Salary Sacrifice scheme has to be operated via a payroll system. The current NICS payroll computer systems could cope with the Salary Sacrifice scheme but this would require considerable manual interventions by payroll staff. At present, the priority for these staff has to be the development and testing of the new payroll system.

Our present forecast is that the new payroll will be launched in October, subject to the new payroll system meeting the required criteria for implementation. A final decision on this will be made by 20 October.

An information campaign about the salary sacrifice scheme will be launched during week commencing 22 September and, once the new payroll system is operational, applications to participate in the scheme will be invited and processed as quickly as possible.

Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will use his Department's funds to compensate civil service staff who have been unable to benefit from the implementation of the Salary Sacrifice scheme for childcare vouchers, as a result of the failure by his Department and the payroll contractor to implement the new payroll system.
(AQW 443/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is no legal or contractual obligation on the NICS to introduce such a scheme nor do staff have a right of access to the scheme. Its introduction is entirely at the discretion of management and, therefore, the issue of compensation does not arise.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments.
(AQW 470/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel is making sound progress against its 23 Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and although there has been some minor slippage against some of the targets, the Department remains largely on track to meet its Programme for Government (PfG) and PSA commitments.

To date in Year 1 of the PfG, achievements include:

- Account NI has now been implemented in four Departments. Delays in stabilisation of the system for Wave 1 Departments has resulted in a rescheduling of implementation for subsequent Departments and

a programme plan is in place to complete implementation by the revised target date of 31 July 2009.

- The first waves of HR Connect services were introduced in 2007 and early 2008. It is anticipated that all services will be operational by the end of 2008.
- The Department of Education (DE) migrated to the ICT Shared Services Centre, IT Assist, in April 2008. IT Assist now provides services to DFP, DRD, Roads Service, DCAL, PRONI, DOE, OFMDFM, DETI and DE. The project remains on track for remaining Departments to be migrated by April 2009.
- Network NI is now operational in Phase 1, 2 and 3 sites, a total of 114 sites in all. The project remains on track for completion by 30 September 2009.
- Records NI is now available to 15,500 NICS staff, with over 2.5 million records stored in the TRIM system. The project will be closed at the final Project Board in September 2008, at which time Records NI will move to a sustainable operational line of business service.
- The contract for NI Direct Phase 1 telephony services was awarded to Steria in July 2008. OFCOM has confirmed that NI Direct may use 101 as its short digit number, work is underway to procure the supporting telecoms service and progress to establish the selected services is ahead of schedule.
- The BRAVO e-sourcing system went live on 6 May 2008, providing easier access to all Central Procurement Directorate tender opportunities.
- The NICS Diversity and Equality Plan 2008-11 has been approved and will be published on the NICS intranet in the coming weeks.

Progress against 3 of the targets in the PfG for which DFP is responsible has taken a little longer than planned:

- Bids for Workplace 2010 were received in June 2008 and assessment is ongoing. This is a complex procurement and contract signature is not anticipated before the end of March 2009.
- Whilst the target to establish a citizen facing theme based website by March 2009 will be met, the consolidation of 70% of NICS Departmental and Agency websites by March 2009 will not be achieved due to recent problems with the security of some Departmental websites. This work will resume following a security review, penetration testing and any remedial work required.
- The target to revise and publish a new Learning and Development Strategy for the Senior Civil Service by June 2008 was not met. A draft strategy has been completed and was considered by the Selection and Development Permanent Secretaries sub-group on 16 September 2008

Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what scoping his officials have carried out with civil servants in relation to the uptake of the Salary Sacrifice scheme; and if he will communicate the necessary information to civil servants to allow the immediate implementation of the scheme. (AQW 510/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is estimated that around 830 (3%) NICS staff will participate in the Salary Sacrifice scheme. This is based on advice from childcare voucher providers that between 3-5% of staff in any organisation will take vouchers. However, this is largely based on experience in Great Britain where there is possibly greater reliance on registered childcare than in Northern Ireland.

An information launch about the salary sacrifice scheme took place during week commencing 22 September and, once the new payroll system is operational, applications to participate in the scheme will be invited and processed as quickly as possible. Our present forecast is that the new payroll will be launched in October, subject to the new payroll system meeting the required criteria for implementation. A final decision on this will be made by 20 October.

Civil Servants

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why there is a continued delay in the introduction of (i) Childcare Vouchers and (ii) the Salary Sacrifice scheme, for civil servants. (AQW 538/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service Salary Sacrifice childcare voucher scheme will be implemented following the introduction of the new civil service payroll system.

Introducing a new payroll for 25,000 staff is a very complex and high risk project, and thorough testing is essential to ensure, so far as possible, that the risks will be minimised when it goes live. Our present forecast is that the new payroll will be launched in October, subject to the new payroll system meeting the required criteria for implementation. A final decision on this will be made by 20 October.

An information campaign about the salary sacrifice scheme will be launched during week commencing 22 September and, once the new payroll system is operational, applications to participate in the scheme will be invited and processed as quickly as possible.

Steps to Work Programme

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why there is no appeals process for candidates applying for the Steps to Work contract. (AQW 543/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The procurement of contracts for the Steps to Work Programme was managed by Central Procurement Directorate which, as part of its Customer & Supplier Charter, has a formal complaints procedure which provides for an internal investigation of procurement processes where concerns are expressed.

Central Procurement Directorate's formal complaints procedure is a two stage process. The first stage is an investigation by the Divisional Director responsible for the area of work in which the complaint has arisen. If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the Divisional Director's response, the complainant can ask for the matter to proceed to stage two and the second investigation will be carried out by the Director of Central Procurement Directorate. Finally should the complainant remain dissatisfied, having gone through the two stages, they may ask their MLA to refer their complaint to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman for investigation.

Ministry of Defence Land in Lisanelly

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department has received a business case from the Minister of Education for an educational campus on vacated Ministry of Defence land in Lisanelly, Omagh; and if so, to provide an update on the progress of the business case. (AQW 554/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not yet received a business case from the Minister of Education for the development of an educational campus on the Lisanelly site in Omagh.

Intractable Epilepsy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many infant deaths due to intractable epilepsy have been recorded in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 781/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In the last 5 years (2003-2007^p) there was one infant death registered, in 2007, where epilepsy¹ was recorded as the underlying, or main, cause of death. However, the cause of death was not recorded as intractable epilepsy.

During the same time period, there were five further infant deaths where epilepsy¹ was mentioned on the death certificate as a secondary cause of death.

On two of these five occasions, intractable epilepsy was recorded as a secondary cause of death.

^p Data for the year 2007 is provisional.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code G40.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

New Fire Station for Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when Ballymena will be provided with a new Fire Station. (AQW 209/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to Mr Mervyn Storey on 27 May 2008 (AQW 7000/2008).

Ballymena Fire Station

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there will be cuts in the number of whole-time fire-fighters based at Ballymena Fire Station. (AQW 211/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I indicated in my written answer to you in December 2007 (AQW2555/08), the issue of staffing levels at fire stations across Northern Ireland is a matter for the Chief Fire Officer of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Any adjustments in staffing are taken in the context of ongoing assessment of risk and other relevant factors.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency savings plan for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 213/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have agreed year one efficiency proposals but no decisions have been made in relation to years two and three. It is my intention to bring these proposals to the Health Committee in the near future.

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency savings plan for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 215/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have agreed year one efficiency proposals but no decisions have been made in relation to years two and three. It is my intention to bring these proposals to the Health Committee in the near future.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency savings plan for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 216/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have agreed year one efficiency proposals but no decisions have been made in relation to years two and three. It is my intention to bring these proposals to the Health Committee in the near future.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency savings plan for the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 217/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have agreed year one efficiency proposals but no decisions have been made in relation to years two and three. It is my intention to bring these proposals to the Health Committee in the near future.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency savings plan for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 218/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have agreed year one efficiency proposals but no decisions have been made in relation to years two and three. It is my intention to bring these proposals to the Health Committee in the near future.

Maternity Services

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken

to recruit maternity staff to Craigavon Area Hospital to facilitate the expansion of maternity services to enable 300 additional births each year. (AQW 229/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Whilst specific recruitment and retention issues are a matter for the Health and Social Care trusts, the Southern Trust has assured me of a very positive response to recent advertisements in the press for Band 5/6 midwives. The Trust is confident that, following the interview process, the vacancies identified for staff midwives will be filled.

Social Workers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the procedures in place to ensure that social workers dismissed and discredited in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, cannot re-establish themselves in either jurisdiction. (AQW 231/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a number of safeguards to ensure social workers from another jurisdiction are prevented from working with children or vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland (NI) if deemed unsuitable. These include:

- all practising social workers in Northern Ireland are subject to registration with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), the regulatory body for the social care workforce (www.niscc.info);
- anyone seeking employment in a care or regulated position in NI should not be appointed without written references and a criminal record check by Access NI (www.accessni.gov.uk), which includes a check against the statutory Disqualification from working with Children and Vulnerable Adults List; and
- where an application for a criminal record check indicates that someone has lived in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) within the past 5 years, PSNI will, as part of normal cross-border policing arrangements, seek relevant information from An Garda Síochána on that applicant.

Decisions regarding the employment of social workers in the ROI are outside the remit of DHSSPS. However, as part of the North South Ministerial Council arrangements, the DHSSPS is working with the Department of Health and Children (ROI) to identify areas where both jurisdictions can work more closely together, including the vetting of those wishing to work with children and the potential for mutual exchange of information for this purpose.

A system of statutory registration for health and social care professionals was established in the ROI

in 2007. An information sharing protocol will be put in place between the NISCC and this body when registration of social workers in the ROI goes live.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have applied and been refused for Health Service dentists in the Ards and Strangford areas, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 239/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Statistics on the number of people who have applied and been refused for Health Service dentists in the Ards and Strangford areas in each of the last 3 years are not available.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients are registered with Health Service dentists in (i) Ards; and (ii) Strangford. (AQW 264/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- There were 38,364 patients living in the Ards District Council area that were registered to a Health Service dentist at September 2008.
- There were 53,316 patients living in the Strangford Parliamentary Constituency area that were registered to a Health Service dentist at September 2008.

Source: Central Services Agency

AccessNI

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to improve the speed of the Protection of Vulnerable Adult (POVA) and the Protection of Children Act (POCA) process, for those employed to look after children in nurseries and playgroups. (AQW 265/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process for carrying out pre-employment checks on those working with children and vulnerable adults changed on 1 April 2008, with the establishment of a new Northern Ireland Criminal History Disclosure Body, AccessNI. The operation of AccessNI is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office.

In August 2008, I acted to assist employers facing difficulties caused by AccessNI delays by allowing

a temporary suspension of the requirement to have a completed enhanced check, subject to rigorous application of a range of measures that are feasible in the present time. In some areas this required an amendment to legislation requiring enhanced disclosure certificates from AccessNI. Legislative amendment was restricted to those areas of health and social care impacted most by AccessNI delays, based on evidence obtained by my department. As a result, the majority of employers in health and social care were enabled to employ individuals, pending receipt of an enhanced disclosure from AccessNI and subject to a number of conditions being satisfied. On the advice of the Department of Education, which carries policy responsibility for early years, this arrangement did not extend to those working in nurseries and playgroups, however, this position will be kept under review.

I have asked my officials to closely monitor developments. This is being done in cooperation with Department of Education officials and the Regional Quality and Improvement Authority. In addition, I have sought assurances from Minister Paul Goggins that AccessNI will return to full service at the earliest opportunity.

Carers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to what level of (i) social work; and (ii) medical expertise, do carers fall short of. (AQW 273/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Carers provide valuable support to family members or friends who may not be able to manage without this help because of frailty, illness or disability. This support often takes the form of social or personal care but carers are not required to have any formal levels of medical or social work expertise. A carer may however require training to help them carry out their role, for example, training in lifting and bathing or the use of aids and equipment, and if this is the case Health and Social Care Trusts are responsible for assessing the carer's training needs and ensuring that those agreed needs are met.

Registered Preschool Playgroups

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many registered preschool playgroups there are per head of population, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 276/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available in the format that you have requested.

Ambulance Fleets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the size of the ambulance fleet for the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 288/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised me that fleet data are maintained on the basis of its operational divisions which are aligned with Health and Social Services Board areas. The numbers of A&E ambulances assigned to each Board area are as follows:

Health and Social Services Board area	A&E ambulances
Eastern	42
Northern	36
Southern	28
Western	26

Ambulance Fleets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the size of the ambulance fleet for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 289/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised me that fleet data are maintained on the basis of its operational divisions which are aligned with Health and Social Services Board areas. The numbers of A&E ambulances assigned to each Board area are as follows:

Health and Social Services Board area	A&E ambulances
Eastern	42
Northern	36
Southern	28
Western	26

Ambulance Fleets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the size of the

ambulance fleet for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 290/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised me that fleet data are maintained on the basis of its operational divisions which are aligned with Health and Social Services Board areas. The numbers of A&E ambulances assigned to each Board area are as follows:

Health and Social Services Board area	A&E ambulances
Eastern	42
Northern	36
Southern	28
Western	26

Ambulance Fleets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the size of the ambulance fleet for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 291/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised me that fleet data are maintained on the basis of its operational divisions which are aligned with Health and Social Services Board areas. The numbers of A&E ambulances assigned to each Board area are as follows:

Health and Social Services Board area	A&E ambulances
Eastern	42
Northern	36
Southern	28
Western	26

Ambulance Fleets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the size of the ambulance fleet for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 292/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised me that fleet data are maintained on the basis of its operational divisions which are aligned with Health and Social Services

Board areas. The numbers of A&E ambulances assigned to each Board area are as follows:

Health and Social Services Board area	A&E ambulances
Eastern	42
Northern	36
Southern	28
Western	26

Missing Medical Records

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many medical records have gone missing in each of the last 3 years, broken down by Health and Social Services Board; and what action he is taking to address this. (AQW 318/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested.

Breast Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with breast cancer in the (i) Ards; and (ii) Strangford areas, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 320/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the incidence of breast cancer (ICD-10 C50) in the Ards and Strangford areas is detailed in the tables below.

(I) TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF BREAST CANCER (ICD-10 C50) IN ARDS LOCAL GOVERNMENT DISTRICT 2003-05

Year	Incidence
2003	43
2004	58
2005	47

Notes:

1.1% of these cancers could not be assigned to a patient's resident Local Government District.

(II) TABLE 2: INCIDENCE OF BREAST CANCER (ICD-10 C50) IN STRANGFORD PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA 2003-05

Year	Incidence
2003	50
2004	79

Year	Incidence
2005	60

Notes:

1.1% of these cancers could not be assigned to a patient's Parliamentary Constituency of residence.

This information was provided by Northern Ireland Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Availability of Herceptin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the herceptin drug is available to all patients that need it. (AQW 321/09)

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.

Ambulance Cover in the Ards Borough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that ambulance cover in the Ards Borough will not be affected by restrictions in neighbouring areas. (AQW 322/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have secured an additional £12.1m in revenue funding to be invested in ambulance service

development over the CSR period to enhance provision and response. Additionally, £14.5m capital funding will be made available during this period, of which NIAS has earmarked £10.4m for fleet replacement.

The Ambulance Service proposals for efficiency savings and the planned programme of investment in ambulance services during the CSR period will deliver a net increase in paramedic cover across Northern Ireland. These proposals will be supplemented by measures to better manage demand for ambulance transportation to hospital by offering appropriate alternative care pathways to patients with less clinically urgent conditions.

What this will mean for the people of Ards Borough and elsewhere in Northern Ireland is that there will be more ambulance vehicles on the road capable of responding promptly to emergencies.

Women's Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what grants have been issued to Women's Groups from (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) Health and Social Services Boards; and (iii) his Department, over the last 2 years in the North Down area. (AQW 341/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following grants set out in the attached Annex A have been issued to Women's Groups in the North Down area by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, the Eastern Board and my Department over the last two years.

ANNEX A

Organisation	Board Funding		Trust Funding		Departmental Core and Project Funding		Children's Fund	
	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08
North Down & Ards Women's Aid	£8,575	£18,116	£36,221	£37,127	-	-	£12,242	£12,498
Women's Resource Development Agency (North Down & Ards)	£900	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Women's Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what grants have been issued to Women's Groups from (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) Health and Social Services Boards; and (iii) his Department, over the last 2 years in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 342/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The following grants set out in the attached Annex A have been awarded to Women's Groups in the Western Health and Social Care Trust Area from the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the Western Health and Social Services Board and my Department.

ANNEX A

Organisation	Board Funding		Trust Funding		Departmental Core and Project Funding		Departmental Children's Fund	
	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08
Derry Well Woman	£28,300	£17,608	£100,060	£88,856	-	-	-	-
Omagh Women's Area Network	£5,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Roe Valley Women's Area Network	£4,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Foyle Women's Aid	-	£5,107	£62,340	£24,414	-	-	-	-
Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group	-	-	-	£500	-	-	-	-
Women's Aid Fermanagh	-	-	£10,000	£24,250	-	-	£48,461	£49,673
Women's Aid Omagh	-	£6,950	£30,435	£35,916	-	-	-	-
Women's Aid	-	£3,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Waterside Women's Centre	-	-	£2,935	-	-	-	-	-
Derry Women's Centre	-	-	-	-	-	-	£46,344	£47,503

Women's Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what grants have been issued to Women's Groups from (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) Health and Social Services Boards; and (iii) his Department, over the last 2 years in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 343/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following grants set out in the attached Annex A have been issued to Women's Groups in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, the Northern Board and my Department over the last two years.

ANNEX A

Organisation	Board Funding		Trust Funding		Departmental Core and Project Funding		Departmental Children's Fund	
	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08
Triangle Women's Association	-	-	£46,285	£231,404	-	-	-	-
Women's Aid Cookstown	-	-	£41,717	£42,070	-	-	-	-
Women's Aid Ballymena	-	-	£56,072	£57,283	-	-	-	-
Women's Aid Coleraine	-	-	£47,535	£48,723	-	-	-	-
Causeway Women's Aid	£29,873	-	-	-	-	-	£67,939	£69,637
Women's Aid (Antrim, Ballymena, Larne, Coleraine, Newtownabbey)	£89,086	£15,578	-	-	-	-	£36,076	£36,977
Cookstown District Women's Group	£24,750	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rasharkin Women's Group	£36,033	£73,312	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dunclug Partnership Group (Well Woman Project)	£22,984	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mid Ulster Women's Network	-	£18,466	-	-	-	-	-	-
Women's Resource & Development Agency – Community Direct	£4,127	£3,914	-	-	-	-	-	-

Women's Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what grants have been issued to Women's Groups from (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) Health and Social Services Boards; and (iii) his Department, over the last 2 years in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 344/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following grants set out in the attached Annex have been issued to Women's Groups in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, the Southern Board and my Department over the last two years.

Organisation	Board Funding		Trust Funding		Departmental Core and Project Funding		Departmental Children's Fund	
	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08	2006/07	2007/08
Women & Family Health Initiative (South Armagh Ltd)	£21,500	£10,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Women & Family Health Initiative (LIR House)	£10,000	£10,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Women & Family Health Initiative	£20,000	£30,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chrysalis Women's Centre	£3,750	-	£29,616	£29,616	-	-	-	-
First Steps Women's Group	£1,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Craigavon & Banbridge Women's Aid	-	£5,000	£28,000	£30,000	-	-	-	-
Women Aid Newry	-	£5,000	£33,756	£23,756	-	-	-	-
Newry & Mourne Women Ltd	-	£2,650	-	-	-	-	-	-
SAVAL Ladies Society	-	£500	-	-	-	-	-	-
Greenbank Circle of Women	-	£500	-	-	-	-	-	-
Redrock Ladies Group	-	£729	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cookstown & D'gannon Women's Aid	-	£2,494	£3,000	£5,000	-	-	-	-
Springwell Family Centre	-	-	£61,520	£47,308	-	-	-	-
Armagh Widows	-	-	-	£312	-	-	-	-

Asbestos

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's policy when asbestos is detected in buildings which fall under his responsibility. (AQW 368/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care facilities which fall under my responsibility are required to comply with The Control of Asbestos Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Compliance with health and safety guidance, including that issued by this Department, and legislation in relation to its estate is the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Trusts, and in this regard, each Trust reports annually to my Department on their compliance status across a number of Controls Assurance Standards, including Health and Safety.

The Belfast HSC Trust manage risk of all their estate and buildings until such times as replacement facilities are provided.

Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital and Children's Hospital are meeting health and safety standards, in line with the Department's guidance and legislation. (AQW 369/09)

Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on the Royal Children's Hospital and Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital in each financial year since 2002; and to provide a breakdown of the purpose of this spending. (AQW 370/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: Belfast Trust advises that from 2002/03 to 2007/08 £2.501m of capital expenditure was incurred with respect to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children and £2.656m was spent on the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital. In addition £2.155m was spent on the Women and Children's Hospital project at these locations.

These costs represent capital works and equipment (monitoring equipment, scanners etc) for the two sites and do not include ongoing maintenance costs.

Royal Children's Hospital

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the cost of women and babies being transported in crisis situations to adult intensive care or the Royal Children's Hospital within the Royal site or to other hospitals in 2006/07 and 2007/08. (AQW 371/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: NIAS does not record activity data on a basis which would allow identification of the cost of transport for this patient group.

Similarly, it is not possible to identify at the source hospital what part of the destination hospital a mother and/or her child are going to, nor is it possible to identify retrospectively staff time spent accompanying a patient on such journeys.

Health and Social Care Reforms

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which agencies will remain under the Health and Social Care Reforms. (AQW 383/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is proposed that the following Agencies will remain under the Health and Social Care Reforms:

- NI Practice and Educational Council;
- NI Medical and Dental Training Agency;
- NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency;
- NI Social Care Council;
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

In addition, it is also proposed that the Health Estates Agency, an Executive Agency of the Department, will remain within the Department.

Separately to the RPA further consideration is being given to the position of the NI Blood Transfusion Service.

Health and Social Care Reforms

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which agencies will cease to exist under the Health and Social Care Reforms. (AQW 384/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is proposed that the following Agencies will cease to exist under the Health and Social Care Reforms:

- Central Services Agency
- the NI Regional Medical Physics Agency
- the Health Promotion Agency

In addition, it is proposed that the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland will cease to exist and its functions will be subsumed into the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority.

Health and Social Care Reforms

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost will be to implement the Health and Social Care Reforms. (AQW 385/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I expect the total cost of implementing HSC structural reforms to be some £98m. The vast majority of this will fund the costs of early retirements and voluntary redundancies that will facilitate the achievement of £53m recurring savings from administration.

Patient Client Council

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what will be the function and cost of the proposed Patient Client Council. (AQW 386/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposed Patient and Client Council, which is planned to come into operation from 1 April 2009, subject to Assembly approval, will have the following functions of:

- representing the interests of the public;
- promoting involvement of the public;
- providing assistance (by way of representation or otherwise) to individuals making or intending to make a complaint relating to health and social care;
- promoting the provision of advice and information to the public about the design, commissioning and delivery of health and social care; and
- such other functions as may be prescribed.

The annual running costs remain subject to approval of a final business case.

Commissioning Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the makeup and size will be of the five local commissioning groups. (AQW 387/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is proposed that there will be 17 members of each of the five Local Commissioning Groups and each will be made up as follows:-

- 4 General Medical Practitioners,
- 1 pharmacist,
- 1 dentist,
- 4 elected local representatives,
- 2 social care professionals,
- 1 nurse,
- 1 public health medicine professional,
- 1 Allied Health Professional, and
- 2 Health & Social Care related voluntary sector representatives.

Health Service Dentists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service dentists are in East Londonderry and Foyle constituencies. (AQW 388/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) At 15 September 2008, Central Services Agency figures show that there are 42 and 46 dentists¹ registered to provide Health Service dental treatment in the East Londonderry parliamentary constituency and Foyle parliamentary constituency respectively².
- (ii) Information is not available for AQW 390/09.

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

1. Figures include Principal dentists only; figures exclude assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
2. Based on location of the dental surgery where the dentist is employed.

Health Service Dentists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dentists

have vacancies for Health Service patients in the East Londonderry and Foyle constituencies. (AQW 390/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) At 15 September 2008, Central Services Agency figures show that there are 42 and 46 dentists¹ registered to provide Health Service dental treatment in the East Londonderry parliamentary constituency and Foyle parliamentary constituency respectively².
- (ii) Information is not available for AQW 390/09.

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

1. Figures include Principal dentists only; figures exclude assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
2. Based on location of the dental surgery where the dentist is employed.

Osteoporosis

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people in each Health and Social Care Trust have been diagnosed with osteoporosis. (AQW 400/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people diagnosed with osteoporosis in each Health and Social Care Trust is not available.

Volunteer Groups Assisting Those Affected by Suicide

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to support volunteer groups who provide assistance to those affected by the loss of people through suicide. (AQW 404/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the current financial year, a total £2.0m from the overall suicide prevention strategy budget of £3.2m has been allocated to the four Health and Social Services Boards specifically for use in supporting local communities with the development of suicide prevention and bereavement support initiatives.

Suicide Awareness

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has been given to assist suicide awareness and help groups in 2006 and 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 405/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Services Boards have advised that the information requested is not available by parliamentary constituency for 2006 or 2007.

The table below provides a breakdown of suicide prevention community support funding allocated to Health and Social Services Boards in the financial years 2006/07 and 2007/08. This funding was used to support local communities with the development of initiatives that will help achieve a reduction in the levels of suicide and self-harm.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT PACKAGE FUNDING

Board Area	Funding 2006/07 (£)	Funding 2007/08 (£)
Eastern	534,511	772,525
Northern	169,848	363,960
Southern	129,591	389,785
Western	120,050	273,730

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 471/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am absolutely committed to ensuring the timely and effective delivery of my Department's PSA commitments. Robust delivery plans are in place or are being finalised for all targets, and progress is being overseen by a dedicated Service Delivery Unit within the Department.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulances in the Western Health and Social Care Trust have broken down while on duty in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 488/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The requested information is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

NIAS is a regional service and in the event of vehicle non-starts or breakdowns will deploy reserve vehicles held in ambulance stations or the nearest available operational ambulance as appropriate.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much investment his Department has put into ambulance provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 490/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provides a regional service which is funded on a capitation basis by the four Health and Social Services Boards. The funding provided by the Western Health and Social Services Board is shown in the table below.

Year	Funding (£million)*
2004/05	£5.47m
2005/06	£6.025m
2006/07	£8.694m
2007/08	£8.707m
2008/09	£10.226m

* Figures do not include capital charges.

Disabling Neurological Conditions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to improve social care services for people with multiple sclerosis and other disabling neurological conditions. (AQW 525/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Multiple Sclerosis (MS) sufferers and people with other neurological conditions benefit from the Physical and Sensory Disability Programme of Care and have access to a range of services including respite, therapy services, day-care services and wheelchair services; all of which are based on a clinical assessment of their needs. Through the Comprehensive Spending Review process, additional respite placements were secured for people with a physical and sensory disability, including MS and other neurological conditions, which will realise 200 additional placements by the end of April 2011.

In addition, £7m is available on a regional basis to allow patients with MS and other neurological diseases to access disease modifying drug therapies. Since March 2008, in line with my Priority for Action target, no patient waits longer than 13 weeks to access treatment.

Nursing Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing vacancies there are in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 533/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Nursing Vacancies by Health and Social Care Trust as at 31st March 2008 is given in the tables below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CURRENT NURSING VACANCIES BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT 31ST MARCH 2008.

Health & Social Care Trust	Qualified Nursing Staff		Nurse Support Staff		All Nursing Staff	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	155	139.4	105	100.2	260	239.6
Northern	41	40.2	19	18.3	60	58.5
South Eastern	20	17.0	9	7.8	29	24.8
Southern	51	46.3	14	12.9	65	59.2
Western	28	27.5	5	5.0	33	32.5
Other Organisations	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	295	270.3	152	144.2	447	414.5

Source: NI Health and Social Care Organisations.

Notes:

1. A current vacancy is an unoccupied post, which at 31st March 2008 was vacant and which the organisation was actively trying to fill.
2. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF LONG-TERM NURSING VACANCIES BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT 31ST MARCH 2008.

Health & Social Care Trust	Qualified Nursing Staff		Nurse Support Staff		All Nursing Staff	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	48	46.9	46	42.8	94	89.7
Northern	1	0.7	0	0.0	1	0.7
South Eastern	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Southern	25	21.8	7	6.8	32	28.6
Western	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other Organisations	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	74	69.4	53	49.6	127	119.0

Source: NI Health and Social Care Organisations.

Notes:

1. A long-term vacancy is an unoccupied post, which at 31st March 2008 had been vacant for three months or more (was vacant prior to 31st December 2007) and which the organisation was actively trying to fill. Long-term vacancies are a sub-set of current vacancies.
2. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent

Doctor Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there currently are for doctors in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 534/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Medical Vacancies by Health and Social Care Trust as at 31st March 2008 is given in the following table.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF MEDICAL VACANCIES BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT 31ST MARCH 2008.

Health & Social Care Trust	Current Medical Staff Vacancies		Long-Term Medical Staff Vacancies	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	34	33.5	14	14.0
Northern	4	2.4	0	0.0
South Eastern	12	12.0	4	4.0

Health & Social Care Trust	Current Medical Staff Vacancies		Long-Term Medical Staff Vacancies	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Southern	22	22.0	5	5.0
Western	10	10.0	8	8.0
Other Organisations	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	82	79.9	31	31.0

Source: NI Health and Social Care Organisations.

Notes:

1. A current vacancy is an unoccupied post, which at 31st March 2008 was vacant and which the organisation was actively trying to fill.
2. A long-term vacancy is an unoccupied post, which at 31st March 2008 had been vacant for three months or more (was vacant prior to 31st December 2007) and which the organisation was actively trying to fill. Long-term vacancies are a sub-set of current vacancies.
3. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent
4. Figures include vacancies for medical staff at all grades including Consultant, Staff Grade, Specialist Registrar, Senior House Officer and Other grades.

Dental Practices

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of privately registered dental practices in each of the last 5 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 544/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available.

Emergency Response Times in Fermanagh and West Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's strategy for improving emergency ambulance response times in West Tyrone. (AQW 547/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I announced in August a range of proposals to improve emergency response times in Fermanagh and West Tyrone. These include a major £3 million investment over the next three years to provide additional ambulance cover in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas; the enhancement of ambulance cover in the Castlederg area; and the roll out of

paramedic led thrombolysis which can be life saving for people suffering heart attacks.

In the past two years I have also made available an additional £0.5 million to fund an additional A&E crew, an intermediate care vehicle and two rapid response vehicles as well as establishing a deployment point at Fintona.

This significant investment highlights my determination to continue to put patients first and represents my commitment to provide a modern high performance ambulance service fit for the 21st century whilst targeting the particular needs of rural areas.

Development of Primary and Community Care Infrastructure

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department will assign urgent priority status to the development of health and care centres in Carrickmore and Fintona. (AQW 549/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The development of primary and community care infrastructure, along with the all other Trust priorities across Northern Ireland, will be given due consideration in the context of funding constraints.

I received a total of £3.3bn over the 10 years of the Investment Strategy 2008, against a bid of £5.7bn, with just over £700m in the CSR. A major element of this investment has been contractually committed, reducing further the availability of capital resources needed to modernise our healthcare infrastructure after many years of under investment.

This funding is not enough to meet all of the demands within the Health and Social Care estate. As a result I commissioned a review of capital investment priorities over the remaining years of the Investment Strategy, in particular the years after the CSR period. This review will report to me at the end of September.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of registered Health Service dentists in each of the last 5 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 555/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The information requested is provided in the table below.

Health & Social Care Trust	October 2004	September 2005	September 2006	September 2007	September 2008
Belfast	201	205	210	213	225
Northern	188	191	191	192	201
South Eastern	126	135	142	145	152
Southern	137	152	158	160	170
Western	116	121	125	124	126

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

- Figures include Principal dentists only - excludes assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners. Dentist numbers are taken from the list of all dentists registered to provide Health Service dentistry.
- Should a dentist work in more than one practice within a Health and Social Care Trust then they have only been counted once within that Trust but if they work across Trusts then they have also been counted once in each relevant one.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many registered Health Service dental practices have left the register in each of the last 5 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 556/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The information requested is provided in the table below.

Health & Social Care Trust	1 October 2004 to 1 September 2005	1 October 2005 to 1 September 2006	1 October 2006 to 1 September 2007	1 October 2007 to 1 September 2008
Belfast	1	2	3	4
Northern	0	2	4	2
South Eastern	2	0	0	2
Southern	1	1	2	1
Western	3	3	6	1
Total	7	8	15	10

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

- The Central Services Agency does not hold data prior to October 2004.

- The above figures will include dental practices which have relocated, that is, closed but subsequently re-opened, either in the same Trust or a different Trust.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money his Department has spent on dentistry in each of the last 5 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 557/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HSC Trusts direct expenditure on dentistry since 2002-03 is set out below. Information is not yet available by Trust for 2007-08.

Trust	2002/2003 £	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £
SHSCT	2,447,965	2,324,032	2,092,216	2,222,542	2,342,124
SEHSCT	4,039,698	4,837,767	5,606,956	6,057,298	6,226,742
NHSCT	2,672,228	2,614,690	2,836,326	3,286,898	3,278,156
WHSCT	3,827,320	3,993,256	3,959,212	4,197,007	4,595,187
BHSCT	3,472,363	3,742,690	4,552,841	4,667,023	5,152,309
Total	16,459,574	17,512,435	19,047,550	20,430,769	21,594,519

Health Service Dentists

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently registered with a Health Service dental practice. (AQW 558/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not available by Dental Practice.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the nature of discussions between consultants and directors of the Western Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the status of the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 580/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are regular discussions between clinicians and managers in the Western Trust on a range of issues regarding the provision of services in the Urgent Care Treatment Centre.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether (i) shift hours; and (ii) travelling expenses, have been reduced or removed from medical staff who work in the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 581/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Trust has had difficulties recruiting medical staff to the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre (UCTC) at Tyrone County Hospital. It currently has four vacancies and is dependent on locum cover to provide the service. In order to maintain cover, and make the UCTC a more attractive working environment, the shift patterns have been altered, with 12 hour shifts being replaced by 8 hour shifts.

The eligibility criteria for travelling expenses for medical staff employed by the Trust has not changed.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an assurance that the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh, will not be downgraded to a nurse-led Minor Injuries Unit. (AQW 582/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to downgrade the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at the Tyrone County Hospital to a Minor Injuries Unit.

I can also assure you that the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre will continue to be a doctor-led service. It will remain under the leadership of medical personnel who will be responsible for the planning, management, and governance of the service.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action (i) his Department; and (ii) the Western Health and Social Care Trust, are taking to recruit and retain medical staff for the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 583/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The recruitment and retention of medical staff, including staff for the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre (UCTC), is a matter for the Western Health and Social Care Trust. Recruitment and retention of appropriately trained and skilled staff required to provide a safe, high quality service at the UCTC remains a priority for the Trust.

In the past year the Trust has undertaken 6 exercises to recruit staff grade doctors and 3 exercises to recruit emergency nurse practitioners, with a 4th currently underway.

Despite repeated efforts to recruit medical staff, a number of posts continue to remain unfilled and the Trust depends on locum medical cover to sustain services at the UCTC.

Treatment for Eating Disorders

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent in (i) 2005-06; (ii) 2006-07; and (iii) 2007-08, on direct patient care for children and young people transferred out of Northern Ireland to receive in-patient treatment for eating disorders, including the cost of travel and accommodation for the patients and their relatives. (AQW 620/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Year	Treatment Costs	Travel/ Accommodation
2005/06	£74,000.00	£169,500
2006/07	£260,000	£39,100
2007/08	£324,500	£81,490

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Traffic Calming

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if proposals for traffic calming and a new mini-roundabout in Rasharkin have been accepted; and if so, for a timetable for their introduction. (AQW 249/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised that officials from my Department's Roads Service discussed a number of possible traffic management and road safety initiatives, for the village of Rasharkin, with you previously. These included both traffic calming measures and a mini roundabout for the junction of Gortahar Road with Finvoy Road.

In relation to the provision of a mini roundabout, at the junction of Gortahar Road with Finvoy Road, new design guidance on the provision of such roundabouts means that this proposed scheme is no longer feasible.

However, a number of other options are being considered for this area of the village, to influence traffic speeds and improve conditions for pedestrians. These include the provision of new footway links, central hatched road markings and pedestrian refuge islands. When complete, these works will assist pedestrians to cross the road and also have a traffic calming effect on vehicles passing through the village. These works are programmed for this financial year.

In addition to the above measures, a scheme to improve road safety at the junction of Church Road with Craigs Road/Bann Road is currently being prepared, with work scheduled to commence towards the latter part of this financial year. The scheme will amend the current crossroads layout to a staggered junction and include the provision of dedicated right turn lanes, for those vehicles making right turns off the main road. This work will be carried out in conjunction with the completion of the resurfacing scheme at Craigs Road, and is viewed as being an important road safety initiative for the village.

Road Ramps

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development how many impact assessments have been carried out in relation to road ramps during each of the last three years; and to detail the outcomes. (AQW 286/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the construction of road ramps is carried out as part of their Traffic Calming Schemes. Monitoring of scheme impact is included in the overall assessment of Traffic Calming Scheme effectiveness. These impact assessments are carried out three years following scheme completion.

Monitoring reports are not yet available for the period you have requested. However, the table below shows the number of schemes implemented since 1999/2000 and reflects the positive reduction in collisions recorded, where monitoring reports have been completed.

Year	Number of Schemes Implemented	Reduction in Collisions Over Three Years
1999/00	34	111
2000/01	31	104
2001/02	50	122
2002/03	50	176
2003/04	65	Monitoring report not yet available

Year	Number of Schemes Implemented	Reduction in Collisions Over Three Years
2004/05	79	Monitoring report not yet available
2005/06	70	Monitoring report not yet available
2006/07	203 (streets)	Monitoring report not yet available
2007/08	218 (streets)	Monitoring report not yet available

The figures for 1999/00-2005/06 are the number of schemes completed, where a scheme could consist of a number of streets, while the figures for 2006/07 and 2007/08 are for the total number of streets completed.

Road Signs

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost incurred by his Department to replace road signs that have been defaced or stolen in each of the last 5 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 294/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised me that the cost of replacing road signs that have been vandalised or stolen is not recorded separately.

However, I can advise that on three occasions in the last five years, there have been spates of sign thefts in Roads Service's Western Division. On each occasion the cost has averaged around £3,000 and was reported to the PSNI.

Improving Road Access

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his Department is giving to improving road access to and from Carney Hill, Holywood, in the interests of public safety. (AQW 308/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) proposes a number of Route Management Strategies for implementation along sections of the trunk road network. These will comprise safety, traffic management and network control measures which will make better use of the existing highway infrastructure and provide a consistent standard of road.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that consultants are currently completing a Route Management Study of the A2 Belfast to Bangor road that includes the issues associated with the private access at Carney Hill. The study will consider a range

of potential junction improvements, from catering for right turning traffic at key junctions, to restricting right turning movements with the provision for u-turning at strategically located junctions.

Roads Service

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service plans to limit the number of under-road works such as laying gas pipes and water mains, to help alleviate congestion on the roads. (AQW 333/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, in relation to AQW 333/09, I would advise that Utility providers have a statutory right to open roads for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. While my Department's Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, there are powers to regulate them for the purpose of coordination and minimising disruption to road users.

With regard to AQW 337/09, Roads Service carries out regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements set out in the statutory reinstatement Code of Practice, "Specification for the reinstatement of openings in roads".

The Code of Practice prescribes the materials to be used and the standards of workmanship to be observed during road reinstatements. Roads Service records the results of inspections and where works are not carried out in accordance with the reinstatement specification, the appropriate utility is notified and instructed to arrange the necessary remedial works.

Sewage

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on Northern Ireland Water's investigation into the release of raw sewage into the Closet River. (AQW 336/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is liaising with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to determine the liabilities for residual pollution in the Closet River arising from the discharges of storm sewage through a combined sewer overflow in the vicinity of Ballynacor Wastewater Treatment Works. This will involve extensive sampling over a period of time. When this is completed, NIW, in conjunction with the NIEA and other responsible stakeholders, will undertake a clean-up of the affected areas.

An upgrade to Ballynacor Wastewater Treatment Works, which is scheduled for completion in early 2009, will significantly reduce discharges to the

Closet River. I have asked NIW to determine if, in the interim, screening could be provided to reduce the debris discharged into the river and this is currently being investigated. NIW's Director of Operations, Phil Barker will write to you direct when the outcome of this investigation is known.

Roads Service

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an assurance that Roads Service will assess the quality of road re-instatement to ensure that contractors complete work to an appropriate standard. (AQW 337/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, in relation to AQW 333/09, I would advise that Utility providers have a statutory right to open roads for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. While my Department's Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, there are powers to regulate them for the purpose of coordination and minimising disruption to road users.

With regard to AQW 337/09, Roads Service carries out regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements set out in the statutory reinstatement Code of Practice, "Specification for the reinstatement of openings in roads".

The Code of Practice prescribes the materials to be used and the standards of workmanship to be observed during road reinstatements. Roads Service records the results of inspections and where works are not carried out in accordance with the reinstatement specification, the appropriate utility is notified and instructed to arrange the necessary remedial works.

Investment Plans for Lurgan

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's investment plans for the Lurgan area for the next five years; and to provide details of projects to be delivered, including their due dates for completion. (AQW 373/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has developed proposals and obtained Planning Approval for a road link scheme from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road Link, an extension of Millennium Way, in Lurgan.

While plans detailing the land necessary to construct the scheme are being prepared, Roads Service's priority for road improvements is focused on the Strategic Road Network. The link road does not form part of the Strategic Road Network.

However, in the recently published Investment Delivery Plan for Roads over the next 10 years, funds totalling £109 million have been identified "... to complete the Non Strategic Major Improvements incorporating the schemes identified in the Sub-Regional Transport Plan". While there are many competing demands for these substantial, but limited resources, and priorities have still to be determined, I can confirm that the Malcolm Road to Gilford Road extension of Millennium Way will be included among the schemes considered for inclusion in this particular programme of work. At this time Roads Service cannot be certain that the scheme will be delivered within the next five years.

An upgrade of the Knockmore to Lurgan section of the Belfast to Dublin railway line, is due to commence in 2009 and is expected to be completed by 2011. Similarly, these dates are subject to the availability and approval of sufficient funding. Early estimates of the cost of the project are £40 million, although this may increase following the preparation of the economic appraisal when more robust figures are established.

I have been advised by NI Water that over the next five years they plan to invest approximately £34 million in the Lurgan area, including Craigavon and Portadown. The projects, along with their completion dates are listed below:-

Project	Completion Date
Kiln Road, Lurgan Foul Sewer Extension	Early 2009
Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	Early 2009
Castor Bay/Craigavon South Watermain Rehabilitation	Early 2009
Stanmore Road, Gilford Sewerage Scheme	Early 2009
Moyallen Sewage Pumping Station	Early 2009
Carrick Drive, Banbridge Road, Lurgan Storm Sewer	Late 2009
Ballydougan Service Reservoir Extension	2010/11
Portadown Drainage Area Plan	2011/12
Magheralin Drainage Area Plan	2012/13
Waringstown Drainage Area Plan	2012/13
Lurgan Drainage Area Plan	2013/14
Craigavon Drainage Area Plan	2013/14

Storm Drainage and Foul Water Systems

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to upgrade the storm drainage and foul water systems in Lurgan to meet legal standards. (AQW 374/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that a recently completed Drainage Area Study for the Lurgan district recommended structural and hydraulic capacity upgrading works, together with enhancements of the system, to meet environmental regulatory requirements agreed and approved by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. The upgrading works will provide foul sewage capacity for future zoned development lands identified in the study. Implementation of the Drainage Area Study recommendations is included in NIW's Capital Investment Programme for 2010 to 2013, subject to the availability of funding and competing priorities.

Proposed New Bus Station

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development when a decision will be made on the proposed new bus station in Banbridge. (AQW 380/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The proposal to build a new station in Banbridge is still under consideration as there are complexities surrounding the identification of a suitable site for the station. Discussions about these issues are on-going.

Potential Flooding Risks

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has undertaken a study, along with the Minister of the Environment, to ascertain the potential flooding risks should large scale developments proceed at the Maze site. (AQW 396/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not undertaken any study to ascertain potential flooding risks at the Maze/Long Kesh site. OFMDFM has responsibility for the overall development of the Maze/Long Kesh site and are therefore responsible for ascertaining any potential flooding risks.

My Department's Roads Service will provide comment (through the Department of the Environment's Planning Service) on roads related issues in respect of any planning application for the site and offer advice on various factors that need to be considered.

Traffic Wardens

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm what discussions have taken place with NCP about an incentive bonus programme for traffic wardens. (AQW 406/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Traffic Attendants are employed by NCP Services Ltd (NSL), which is the private company contracted to provide parking enforcement services. Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised that they have not been involved in any discussions with NSL about an incentive bonus programme for Traffic Attendants. There are no ticket targets within my Department's contract with NSL.

Bus Service Operators Grant

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware of the provisions of the Bus Service Operators Grant for community transport in Great Britain; and what plans he has to extend this to Northern Ireland. (AQW 439/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware of the provisions of the Bus Services Operators Grant. This grant is not available to bus operators here and I have no plans to introduce these provisions. The community transport sector here already receives substantial support from my Department.

Roads Schemes and Improvements

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what expenditure there has been on (i)

new roads schemes and improvements; (ii) repairs to the roads network, since 2001, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 464/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its spending on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, Roads Service does undertake an analysis of its actual spend during the preceding financial year in each Council area.

With regard to new roads schemes and improvements, Roads service's Capital Spend includes Major Capital, Minor Capital, Street Lighting, Car Parks, Transportation Policy, Land and Other Capital.

I should explain that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for Capital Expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact, accessibility and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located.

The table below details Capital spend in each Council area during the last seven years, for which figures are available.

District Council	Capital Spend						
	01-02 £k	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k	07-08 £k
Antrim	1,321	9,825	10,066	4,952	1,901	2,801	1,970
Coleraine	1,909	933	1,143	2,555	2,152	1,380	2,090
Limavady	1,997	9,553	3,490	2,615	1,390	1,145	1,450
Moyle	164	213	151	333	383	177	287
Ballymoney	614	354	264	948	3,753	1,223	510
L'derry	2,465	3,009	4,081	9,325	9,165	3,754	8,492
Ballymena	2,076	959	724	1,259	2,343	1,910	6,170
Larne	265	612	1,956	650	1,825	346	1,216
Belfast	12,422	9,875	8,443	20,160	7,246	26,628	6,116
Castlereagh	1,220	506	664	1,551	8,440	835	1,316
Newtownabbey	1,597	2,380	4,572	5,694	3,476	1,578	1,965
Carrickfergus	275	392	441	721	1,712	2,566	4,849
North Down	832	947	568	1,310	1,892	1,916	1,770
Lisburn	1,238	1,308	2,209	3,097	3,855	3,673	2,686
Ards	690	2,879	3,685	1,859	1,790	1,725	1,960

District Council	Capital Spend						
	01-02 £k	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k	07-08 £k
Armagh	1,069	681	947	2,561	2,270	1,677	3005
Newry & Mourne	1,652	1,185	7,780	19,922	17,692	62,010	14,863
Banbridge	1,110	1,251	3,845	4,018	2,262	2,221	887
Craigavon	3,798	1,410	1,944	3,973	4,879	1,803	1,658
Down	1,626	528	719	1,721	2,679	1,539	986
Magherafelt	832	661	637	1,964	1,344	966	2,651
Omagh	1,194	1,670	1,366	6,201	7,869	3,455	4,387
Strabane	4,916	7,828	2,056	2,274	3,006	2,067	1,296
Cookstown	619	537	673	948	975	1,078	865
Fermanagh	1,298	895	1,163	3,675	4,137	2,121	4,017
Dungannon	960	419	746	3,556	5,401	15,361	14,235
Totals	48,159	60,810	64,333	107,842	103,837	145,955	91,697

In relation to repairs to the roads network, 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 Resource spend in each Council area during the last seven years, for which figures are available.

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend						
	01-02 £k	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k	07-08 £k
Antrim	3,571	3,863	4,976	3,913	4,218	3,251	3,494
Coleraine	3,723	3,740	5,167	3,960	3,960	4,139	4,449
Limavady	2,331	2,636	3,555	3,156	3,327	2,737	3,573
Moyle	1,114	1,448	1,808	1,835	2,111	1,860	2,093
Ballymoney	1,986	2,590	2,768	2,442	2,410	2,283	2,430
L'derry	5,745	7,290	6,067	5,655	5,324	5,281	5,828
Ballymena	4,350	4,011	5,354	5,020	5,493	4,432	4,537
Larne	1,907	2,205	2,432	2,316	2,632	2,754	2,546
Belfast	13,496	14,517	14,895	15,123	15,576	13,730	16,990
Castlereagh	2,519	2,183	2,327	2,179	3,149	3,029	3,552
Newtownabbey	3,011	3,607	3,513	3,676	2,418	3,189	4,576
Carrickfergus	1,846	1,646	1,536	1,325	1,296	1,764	1,971
North Down	2,695	4,068	4,002	2,409	4,160	3,640	3,974
Lisburn	5,141	6,225	7,081	7,369	6,245	5,695	4,948
Ards	3,087	3,216	3,547	3,661	3,706	3,468	5,014
Armagh	4,359	4,542	5,482	5,863	6,011	5,477	7,539
Newry & Mourne	5,456	5,256	7,069	7,567	6,839	5,843	6,212
Banbridge	2,813	3,586	4,008	3,690	4,008	3,841	3,996

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend						
	01-02 £k	02-03 £k	03-04 £k	04-05 £k	05-06 £k	06-07 £k	07-08 £k
Craigavon	4,050	4,991	5,258	5,380	5,241	5,217	5,478
Down	4,366	4,641	5,089	5,042	4,914	4,503	4,262
Magherafelt	2,107	2,668	3,449	3,029	3,242	2,612	3,834
Omagh	5,291	5,779	7,048	6,173	6,004	5,587	6,487
Strabane	4,044	4,357	4,829	5,312	4,758	4,746	5,258
Cookstown	2,328	2,600	3,282	3,026	2,605	2,857	2,759
Fermanagh	4,911	5,822	7,461	6,809	6,142	6,737	6,598
Dungannon	4,384	4,985	7,038	5,397	5,395	5,477	5,781
Totals	100,631	112,472	129,041	121,327	121,184	114,149	128,179

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress his Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments.

(AQW 472/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department for Regional Development is making good progress in delivering its Programme for Government (PfG) and Public Service Agreement (PSA) commitments.

To date in Year 1 of the PfG construction of the following Strategic Road Improvement schemes is in progress:

- M1/Westlink and M2 Upgrades
- A4 Annaghilla single carriageway realignment with eastbound 2+1 lane
- A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley dualling
- A5 Tullyvar single carriageway realignment with climbing lanes
- A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dualling
- Four additional grade separated junctions on the A1 between Sprucefield and Loughbrickland
- A4 Henry Street/Sligo Road, Enniskillen

In addition development work on a significant range of projects, which include the following, is progressing well:

- A26/M2 Ballee Road East Link
- A32 Cherry Mount Link, Enniskillen
- A32 Dromore – Irvinestown – Enniskillen realignments
- A29 Carland Bridge realignment
- A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor

- A20 Newtownards Frederick Street Link
- A6 Randalstown/M22 – Castledawson
- A2 Maydown to City of Derry Airport
- A2 Widening at Greenisland
- A5 Derry to Aughnacloy
- A6 Derry to Dungiven
- A8 Belfast to Larne
- The Department is maintaining the road infrastructure and is on track to achieving its target of ensuring that at least 70% of the motorway and trunk road network is in satisfactory structural condition at the end of March 2009.
- Other roads in the network are being maintained to receive resurfacing treatment of 20% of that recommended in best practice guidelines by the end of March 2009. This figure is based on the budget allocation for 2008-09. The 30% target to March 2011 reflects the higher allocations in 2009-10 and 2010-11.
- Progress is being made towards ensuring that the target of 77 million passenger journeys per annum across all bus and rail public transport, which was achieved at the end of March 2008, is maintained through to 2011.
- The average age of the Metro and Ulsterbus fleets meets the target of 8 years. No Metro bus is over 18 years old. Some 167 Ulsterbus buses are over 18 years old and 4 coaches are over 4 years old.
- The tender process to procure 20 additional new trains commenced in September. It is envisaged that the first of these trains will be introduced into service in 2011.
- The Department is also supporting Translink to:
 - construct a new railway station at Newry, which is due to be completed by September 2009;

- complete £40m of track improvements between Knockmore and Lurgan by March 2011. The feasibility study is complete and the economic appraisal is being prepared;
 - complete £12m of track extension works between Ballymena and Coleraine by March 2011. The tender process for main works is underway and work on site expected to start in November 2008; and
 - progress work on a major track relay project from Coleraine to Derry by March 2011. The Project Initiation Document has been completed and this target is on track for achievement.
- The Department published a Strategic Outline Case for the Development of a pilot Rapid Transit network for the Greater Belfast Area in April 2008. Since its publication the Department has been undertaking a focused engagement exercise on the outcomes of the study with key stakeholders. This has involved undertaking presentations and discussions with various community, business and political representatives and undertaking briefing for the Regional Development Committee. The Assembly also discussed the study outcomes during a take note debate on 3 June 2008.
 - We are also aiming to implement effective governance structures (currently those required by the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006) and comply with timescales resulting from the Executive Review of water charging. While some progress has been made on governance arrangements, progress in relation to water charging is dependent on an Executive decision.

The Department has also taken forward cross-cutting issues in conjunction with DETI and DOE in the delivery of our commitments under PSA 1: Productivity Growth and PSA 14: Promoting Safer Roads.

Progress against 2 of the targets allocated to DRD in the PfG will take a little longer than planned:

- PSA 13 includes a target that all Metro and Ulsterbus buses and coaches are to be 100% accessible by 2012. By 2012 Ulsterbus will still have 106 buses for school service use. These vehicles, while DDA compliant, would not be wheelchair accessible. These vehicles are not due to be replaced until approximately 2015-16.
- PSA 13 also includes a target to have new primary legislation in place for the Harbours by January 2009. The Harbours (Northern Ireland) Bill has now been drafted but confirmation is needed from Department of Finance and Personnel / Treasury / Office of National Statistics (ONS) on the "classification of trust ports" before Executive clearance for consultation on the draft legislation can be sought. The length of any delay (and the criticality of it) is dependent on the advice from ONS.

Trust Ports

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how many employees are employed full-time in each Trust Port. (AQW 492/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The number of people employed full time by trust ports on 22 September 2008 are as follows:

Belfast	-	128
Coleraine	-	4
Derry	-	45
Warrenpoint	-	45

Craigantlet Hills

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will start on the new roundabouts in the Craigantlet Hills area. (AQW 497/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has recently commissioned work to assess a number of options to improve safety and the flow of traffic in the Craigantlet Hills area. After an optimum layout has been identified, detailed design will be undertaken to allow the statutory processes to commence. These processes take time to complete and a scheme is unlikely to be considered for programming before 2011.

I can advise that recent estimates indicate that this scheme is likely to cost approximately £2 million. The inclusion of a potential scheme for the Craigantlet area on a future works programme would be subject to the various competing priorities, as well as the availability of the necessary land and finance.

Traffic Accident History for the M5 Motorway

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the crash barrier on the Belfast bound carriageway of the M5, to ensure that pedestrians and cyclists using the sustrans path adjacent to the motorway and Belfast Lough, have a greater degree of protection in the event of a road traffic accident. (AQW 502/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service completed an analysis of the traffic accident history for the M5 motorway for the period 2003-2006, in November 2007. After consideration of the recorded injury collision history on this section of the M5 they have advised that, there are currently no plans to extend the safety barrier at this location.

Roads Service will continue to review accident records for the M5 on a regular basis and implement remedial action, as necessary.

Lighting in Communities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact proper lighting has on community safety. (AQW 519/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the safety of all road users is their main focus when providing and maintaining street lighting. It is recognised that street lighting has a wider social role, contributing to night-time social and economic activities, while also making a positive impact on community safety by helping to reduce crime.

Subsidence of the Drumnakilly Road

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department will immediately engage in remedial works to prevent further subsidence of the Drumnakilly Road into private property between its junction with the Farmhill Road and the entrance to Gaelscoil na gCrann. (AQW 551/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are unaware of any subsidence problems along this stretch of road and therefore have no plans to carry out any works at this location.

As regards AQW 552/09, Roads Service has plans to realign a 200 metre length of the Farmhill Road in the vicinity of its junction with the Ballynamullan Road. The work will include the replacement of Ballynamullan Bridge, and the provision of visibility sight splays at the Farmhill Road / Ballynamullan Road junction. There are also plans to replace a culvert adjacent to house number 17 at the Cookstown Road end of Farmhill Road, and provide a short 20 metre length of link footway.

The completion of these schemes was proposed for this financial year. However, a difficulty has been encountered during land negotiations and this has delayed the issuing of the works order to the contractor.

Roads Service is therefore unable to provide a definite completion date for these schemes at the present time.

Realignment Scheme on the Farmhill Road

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development for the completion date of the road

widening and realignment scheme on the Farmhill Road, Killyclogher, Co. Tyrone. (AQW 552/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are unaware of any subsidence problems along this stretch of road and therefore have no plans to carry out any works at this location.

As regards AQW 552/09, Roads Service has plans to realign a 200 metre length of the Farmhill Road in the vicinity of its junction with the Ballynamullan Road. The work will include the replacement of Ballynamullan Bridge, and the provision of visibility sight splays at the Farmhill Road / Ballynamullan Road junction. There are also plans to replace a culvert adjacent to house number 17 at the Cookstown Road end of Farmhill Road, and provide a short 20 metre length of link footway.

The completion of these schemes was proposed for this financial year. However, a difficulty has been encountered during land negotiations and this has delayed the issuing of the works order to the contractor.

Roads Service is therefore unable to provide a definite completion date for these schemes at the present time.

Works at the Bush Manor Bushforde Area of Antrim

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the outstanding works to be completed by the developer in the Bush Manor Bushforde area of Antrim; and (ii) any road building or water infrastructure bonds that have been defaulted upon; to confirm if Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water intend to appoint independent contractors to complete this work; and for an estimate of the cost of completing the work. (AQW 617/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Bush Manor, Bushforde is a large residential development containing a number of different housing phases, which has not been adopted by my Department's Road Service. The roads within the development are well progressed, but there are outstanding works including street lighting, drainage and kerbing repairs, along with the full wearing course surface.

The developer has not defaulted on any roads bonds and Roads Service has no plans to appoint an external contractor to finish the works, in what remains, an active site. At this point, an estimate of the costs for the completion of the road works by Roads Service is not considered necessary. Sufficient finance is held within the roads bonds to complete any road works that may be necessary at a future date.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised that the sewers in phase 1 of the development have already been adopted. The sewers in the remaining phases have been inspected and, apart from some minor defects which will need to be rectified by the developer, the sewers have been constructed to an acceptable standard for future adoption by NIW.

Speed Limits Approaching the Sandyknowes Roundabout

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the speed limits on all routes approaching the Sandyknowes Roundabout; and what plans she has to review these limits, particularly on the Antrim Road near housing developments.
(AQW 618/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have confirmed that a 30 miles per hour (mph) speed limit applies on the Sandyknowes Roundabout, and on sections of all the approach roads, immediately before the roundabout. The table below details the speed limit on the approach roads to Sandyknowes Roundabout beyond the immediate 30 mph section.

Road	Speed Limit
M2	National Speed Limit
B95 Scullions Road	40 mph
A6 Antrim Road (towards Templepatrick)	National Speed Limit
A8(M)	National Speed Limit
B90 Ballyhenry Road	30 mph
A6 Antrim Road (towards Glengormley)	30 mph

With regard to a review of the speed limits, I am advised that the current limits are considered appropriate, but will be reviewed if circumstances change on any of the approach roads. I understand that Roads Service, in conjunction with the PSNI, recently reviewed the speed limits on the Antrim Road and concluded that the current limits are appropriate.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Heating Costs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure people in social housing can afford to heat their homes, in light of increasing heating costs.
(AQW 267/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): In response to the ever increasing cost of fuel I established a Fuel Poverty Task Force in May. The aim of the Task Force was to produce short term recommendations to assist those in greatest need this winter. The Task Force has submitted its findings to me and I have circulated recommendations to Executive colleagues seeking their endorsement of a number of recommendations emanating from work undertaken by the Fuel Poverty Task Force.

As part of the New Housing Agenda I announced that all new Social Houses built from April this year would have to conform to new standards that will in effect make them more energy efficient than before. This will help reduce energy bills for tenants.

Social Housing Schemes

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing schemes have (i) commenced; and (ii) been completed, between May 2007 and July 2008.
(AQW 279/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of social housing schemes started and completed between May 2007 and July 2008 are as follows:-

Starts	202 schemes
Completions	190 schemes

Social Housing

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been allocated social housing between May 2007 and July 2008.
(AQW 280/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There were 8,136 social housing allocations made between the 1st May 2007 and the 31st July 2008.

Social Housing Development Programme

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing schemes are planned for the period September 2008 to August 2009.
(AQW 281/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Housing Development Programme has some 90 schemes planned to go on site in the period 1 September 2008 to 31 March 2009. It is not possible to detail the number of social housing schemes planned for the period April 2009 to August 2009 as full

information regarding the planned schemes will not be available until the new financial year.

Financial Difficulties

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to help address the financial difficulties being faced by community organisations in the South Belfast constituency. (AQW 287/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department provides support to community organisations through a variety of different programmes. Under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, Belfast Regeneration Office is appraising the funding needs of a number of projects in the South Belfast area at present.

Social Housing Units in Upper Bann

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the location of, new social housing units that have been built in the Upper Bann constituency since 2005. (AQW 293/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There have been 82 new social housing units built in the Upper Bann constituency since 2005. They are located as follows:-

Castle Lane, Lurgan	20 units
Hospital Site Phase 1, Banbridge	25 units
Hospital Site Phase 2, Banbridge	6 units
5 Lilburn Hall, Lurgan	4 units
Gilpin Mews, Lurgan	20 units
Lilburn Hall & Bowen's Close, Lurgan	6 units
Hillside Park, Gilford	1 unit

Social Housing Development Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the progress made on sites in Monkstown that have been identified for social housing; and when construction work will start at these sites. (AQW 303/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Housing Development Programme contains two schemes for a total of 40 units of social housing for Monkstown. These schemes are programmed for years 2010/11 and 2012/13.

The Monkstown Area Appraisal has been completed and sites have been identified. The sites

are with Planning Service for agreement to build in principle, as part of an estate appraisal.

Following agreement with Planning Service a Housing Association will be appointed to take the schemes forward. These schemes may be brought forward in the Programme subject to appropriate approvals and the availability of finance.

Proposed Development in Holywood Town Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what progress her Department has made on the proposed development in Holywood town centre. (AQW 312/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Negotiations on this development had reached an advanced stage and due diligence work had been substantially completed with the proposed developer when legal problems thwarted further progress. DSD and DRD have worked with solicitors from DFP to resolve these difficulties and officials are now re-engaging with the developer to finalise agreements. I met with the developer for the Holywood scheme in August to explain the actions that all parties needed to take in order to progress the scheme.

Smartwater Service in the Crumlin Area

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for an update on the Smartwater project in Crumlin; (ii) to list the streets that are covered by the project; and (iii) what plans she has to expand the project further. (AQW 326/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Approximately 1000 properties have been offered the Smartwater service in the Crumlin area, with 520 households accepting, including more than 90% of those originally invited to participate in the scheme. The Housing Executive, in partnership with the PSNI and the local Neighbourhood Watch, is currently approaching the remaining households where requests have yet to be actioned. Street signage advertising the use of Smartwater in the area has been produced and will be erected by the local Council.

Below is a list of those streets included within the scheme.

Cairn Gardens	Glenoak Gardens
Cairn Terrace	Glenoak Grange
Cairn Walk	Hunter Lea * (2 properties)
Camlin Gardens	Lakeview

Camlin Park	Landgarve Manor
Canning Grove	Laurelvale
Cidercourt Drive	Main Street * (1 property)
Cidercourt Park	Orchard Grove
Cidercourt Road	Orchard Hill
Glendarragh Drive *(1 property)	Parkley
Glendarragh Park	The Beeches
Glenfield Close	

* These areas were identified through the use of crime statistics and in co-operation with the local Crime Prevention Officer.

The Crumlin Smartwater project was a one off partnership initiative and I have no plans to extend the service to other areas.

Economic Development in Craigavon

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what plans her Department has to provide community and economic development in the Brownlow area of Craigavon. (AQW 334/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Primary responsibility for provision of community and economic development in the Brownlow area of Craigavon lies with Craigavon Borough Council and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment respectively. However my Department has been directly involved in promoting community development, in partnership with the Council, through the Community Support Programme under which £317,000 has been allocated to projects in the Craigavon Borough Council area. In addition over £100,000 has been allocated specifically to the Brownlow area through other programmes funded by the Voluntary and Community Unit and the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. As regards economic development, funding of £1m has recently been allocated from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund to support economic development in the part of the Brownlow area within the Neighbourhood Renewal Boundary.

Provision of Traveller Sites

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on (i) current; and (ii) proposed, provision of traveller sites in the Craigavon area. (AQW 335/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There is currently a requirement for two serviced sites and one transit site in the Craigavon Area to accommodate the needs of both resident and nomadic Travellers. There is currently one six pitch serviced site at Monbrief

Road, Craigavon and an emergency halting site at Legahory Green.

A planning application has also been made by the Housing Executive to develop serviced sites on council owned land at Lake Road adjacent to Burnside.

Allocated Housing in Belfast

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what number of points are required to be allocated housing in (i) West Belfast; and (ii) North Belfast. (AQW 352/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There is no set number of points required before a property will be allocated

Social and Affordable Housing

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the land earmarked for the development of social and affordable housing; and (ii) the number and type of units proposed for each development, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 354/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested relates to the five year Social Housing Development Programme (2008/2009 to 2012/2013) which is a lengthy document and is up dated on a weekly basis. However, it can be accessed at <http://www.nihe.gov.uk/socialhousingdevelopmentprogramme19thsept08.xls>

High-Rise Developments

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of high-rise developments planned by her Department; and (ii) the parliamentary constituencies in which these will be located. (AQW 356/09)

The Minister for Social Development: For the purposes of the Social Housing Development Programme, five storeys or higher are defined as high rise. Within the current programme year 2008/09 two such schemes are programmed to start;

- BIH, Great Georges Street , North Belfast Constituency
- Clanmill, Pottingers Quay , East Belfast Constituency
- From the Urban Regeneration perspective;
- Obel Development, Donegal Quay, North Belfast Constituency.

- York Street Development, North Belfast Constituency.
- St Anne's Square Development, North Belfast Constituency.
- Lanyon Towers Development, South Belfast Constituency.
- The 'Boat' Development, Custom House Square, North Belfast Constituency.
- Pottinger's Quay Development, East Belfast Constituency.
- Soloist Development, Lanyon Place, South Belfast Constituency.
- The Ramparts Development, Coleraine, East Derry/Londonderry constituency.

Houses in the Private Rented Sector

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses in the private rented sector have been inspected in the last three years; and of those inspected (i) how many were found to be overcrowded; (ii) how many were substandard and required necessary repairs; (iii) how many proprietors were taken to court; and (iv) what was the outcome of these court cases. (AQW 358/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department does not hold this information. District Councils undertake inspections in the private rented sector and there is no requirement to inform the Department of the number of properties inspected.

Social Security System

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the effects of the 'credit crunch' and the downturn in both the local and global economy on the social security system. (AQW 379/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency anticipates an increase in demand on its service particularly from individuals who find themselves out of work or experiencing financial hardship. The full range of social security benefits will continue to be available to provide support depending on individual circumstances.

Co-Ownership Housing Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans for the future development of the co-ownership housing scheme. (AQW 381/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Earlier this year I set out the New Housing Agenda, which proposes a number of initiatives designed to assist future development of the co-ownership housing scheme.

It is my intention to amend the co-ownership scheme to make it possible for people to enter it more easily by buying 25% of the value of a property as opposed to the current minimum of 50%. It is also my intention to make it easier for people to purchase additional shares in their home by reducing the minimum increment from its current 12.5% to just 5%. These proposed changes will be dependent on to satisfactory consultation.

Affordable Housing

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her Department's plans to deliver more affordable housing for first-time buyers. (AQW 382/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Earlier this year I set out my New Housing Agenda, which proposes a number of initiatives designed to assist first-time buyers.

These include, amending the House Sales Scheme to allow social housing tenants to buy part of their home, on an equity sharing basis, if they cannot afford to buy it all. Consultation on this proposal is on-going. It is also my intention to amend the co-ownership scheme to make it possible for allow people to enter it more easily. I also intend to introduce developer contributions to make available more affordable housing.

I have also supported the development of shared equity schemes here. These industry-led, privately financed schemes have the potential to make a contribution towards meeting housing need while also providing a much needed boost to the housing market. I would like to see this initiative rolled out where appropriate.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the Warm Home scheme; and what reductions to the scheme have been approved by her Department in the current financial year. (AQW 413/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme will have a budget in excess of £20 million this year. The scheme has been very successful and no reductions have been approved by DSD in the current financial year.

Housing Executive Estates in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development what programmes are planned to upgrade the Housing Executive estates in the East Belfast constituency; and to detail the estates that will be included over the next 5 years. (AQW 419/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below indicate the programmes that are planned to upgrade the Housing Executive estates in the East Belfast constituency over the next five years.

2008/2009 - REVENUE REPLACEMENT (KITCHENS)

Estate	Dwellings
Lord Street/Trillick (on site)	112
Short Strand, Phase 3 (on site)	101
Vicarage/Glenallen	80
Ashmount	90

2009/2010 - EXTERNAL CYCLICAL MAINTENANCE:

Estate	Dwellings
Albertbridge Rd/Tower St	189
Avoniel/Bloomfield	266
Hollywood Road	213
Summerhill/Ardcarn	160

REVENUE REPLACEMENT:

Estate	Dwellings
Holland Dr/Wandsworth	58
Clarawood	155
Edenvale/Sydenham	158
Erskine St/Chamberlain St	68

MULTI ELEMENT IMPROVEMENT SCHEME:

Estate	Dwellings
Clarawood (Economic appraisal to be completed)	28

2010/2011 - EXTERNAL CYCLICAL MAINTENANCE:

Estate	Dwellings
Ashmount	90
Ladas Way	102

REVENUE REPLACEMENT:

Estate	Dwellings
Willowfield / Upper Castlereagh	56
St Leonards Crescent	68

2011/2012 EXTERNAL CYCLICAL MAINTENANCE:

Estate	Dwellings
Lower Newtownards Road	201
Inverary	154

REVENUE REPLACEMENT:

Estate	Dwellings
Island Street	37
Templemore/Avoniel	176
Ravensdale/Clara	29

MULTI ELEMENT IMPROVEMENTS:

Estate	Dwellings
Lendrick/Parker	63
Claraway	27
Ardgowan Drive	6
Inverary Bungalows	11
Dehra Grove	16

2012/2013 EXTERNAL CYCLICAL MAINTENANCE:

Estate	Dwellings
Carnet/Clarawood	155
Short Strand/Bridge End/Cluan	279

REVENUE REPLACEMENT:

Estate	Dwellings
Constance/Edith	59
Frank/Stormont Street	25
Lower Beersbridge/The Mount	115
Bloomfield	94
Mourne/Hornby	125
Newcastle	15
Major	59

All schemes are subject to the availability of finance.

Vandalism and Graffiti in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the work of her Department to tackle (i) vandalism; and (ii) graffiti, in each of the estates in (a) District 2 East Belfast; (b) the East Belfast constituency; (c) the Housing Executive District of Castlereagh. (AQW 420/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The work carried out to tackle vandalism and graffiti in the areas in question is as follows:-

East Belfast: The Housing Executive has two Estate Wardens in East Belfast, one of whose primary role is to undertake regular inspections of their estates with a particular objective of ensuring that any vandalism is identified and repaired speedily. Both Estate Wardens also deal with graffiti issues.

The Housing Executive, in conjunction with Belfast City Council, has a jointly funded neighbourhood warden for the Short Strand area who covers vandalism, illegal dumping issues and graffiti.

The Housing Executive is also part of an Anti-social behaviour Forum with Belfast City Council and PSNI. This forum can identify anti-social behaviour hotspots and formulate a strategy to deal with these. In practice, all of the hotspots have been in Belfast City Centre public parks.

Castlereagh: Castlereagh also has a dedicated Neighbourhood Warden who liaises with Council officials, PSNI and other stakeholders, in respect of local issues identified while she is out on site.

The Housing Executive District Manager also sits on the local Community Police Liaison Committees which meet bi-monthly with senior PSNI officers, community representatives and elected representatives dealing with local crime, vandalism, graffiti and community cohesion issues.

However, the NIHE's biggest contribution in tackling vandalism has been their investment in the physical renewal programme where long-term voids, which are often a focus for anti-social behaviour, vandalism and graffiti, have either been demolished, refurbished, redesigned or sold.

2006 House Condition Survey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many more people will fall into the fuel poverty bracket due to the increasing cost of fuel; and what action she is taking to address fuel poverty. (AQW 449/09)

The Minister for Social Development: According to the 2006 House Condition Survey 34% of households

in Northern Ireland are in fuel poverty. The ever increasing cost of fuel means that this figure will have risen, however, the House Condition Survey is the most up to date information available.

In response to the ever increasing cost of fuel I established a Fuel Poverty Task Force in May. The aim of the Task Force was to produce short term recommendations to assist those in greatest need this winter. The Task Force has submitted its findings to me and I now intend to take a paper to the Executive at the earliest opportunity seeking their endorsement of a number of recommendations emanating from the work of the Fuel Poverty Task Force.

Strategic Business Review

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1908/08, for an update on the current status of the Strategic Business Review. (AQW 456/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Agency is carrying out a Strategic Business Review (SBR) to determine how best to deliver services via its network of local offices in the future. We intend subjecting our proposals to a public consultation exercise which will include a full Equality Impact Assessment. We will await the outcomes of public consultation before making final decisions on the way forward. The impact of SBR on individual offices, including Cookstown, will not be known until public consultation has been completed. However, I continue to remain committed to the retention of a strong network of public offices and the frontline services they provide.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total funding for the Warm Homes Scheme in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 476/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Funding for the Warm Homes Scheme was as follows: in 2005/06 £16 million, in 2006/07 £22 million and in 2007/08 £22 million.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the recent energy crisis, what plans she has to increase funding for the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 478/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have already increased my department's Warm Homes Scheme budget to £20 million this year.

Increases to Benefits

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to help pensioners suffering from the credit crunch. (AQW 494/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There is a statutory requirement to review all social security benefits including the State Pension each year and to increase certain benefits from April of the following year. The new rates are calculated for most benefits using the increase in the Retail Prices Index for the 12 months ending in the preceding September. This measure is based on a year-on-year comparison of prices. Fluctuations in the costs of a wide range of goods and services, including food and fuel, will be taken into account in the benefit increases that will take effect from April 2009.

The standard minimum guarantee in Pension Credit is required to be reviewed and increased at least in line with earnings. However from this April the increase was higher than the increase in average earnings – 4.2% in line with the Budget 2007 announcement. This more than keeps pace with earnings and prices.

Other sources of help include:

The Social Fund which provides help by way of lump sum payments, grants and loans for those on low income who find it difficult to budget for emergency expenses, funeral costs, or one-off payments for large items such as furnishing a home.

The Warm Homes Scheme - a grant scheme which provides a package of energy efficiency and heating measures, up to the value of £850. Assistance is available to people aged over 60 in receipt of Pension Credit.

Winter Fuel Payments which provide assistance specifically to help older people with their winter fuel bills. The Social Security Agency recently commenced an advertising campaign to increase awareness of the Winter Fuel Payment for newly eligible customers.

Cold Weather Payments which provide financial assistance with extra heating costs during spells when the average temperature is, or is forecast to be 0 degrees centigrade over seven consecutive days. Those in receipt of certain income related benefits may be eligible to receive these payments. For this year only the payment will be increased from £8.50 to £25 per cold weather period.

In May 2008, I launched the 2008/09 Benefit Uptake Programme to increase awareness of social security benefits. In this year's programme 108,000 older people across Northern Ireland will be contacted to make sure they are not missing out on benefits.

Complementing this targeted approach, Social Security Agency staff as part of day to day business, provide a range of services to ensure that pensioners are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits including outreach services.

Previous Benefit Uptake programmes have resulted in £15 million of additional benefit paid to the most vulnerable in our society, £11 million of which was paid to older people.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been (i) received; and (ii) successful, for grants under the Warm Homes scheme in (a) East Antrim; and (b) South Antrim, in each year since 2001. (AQW 503/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is only available from 2002 and is detailed in the table below. Due to the success of the Warm Homes Scheme, a waiting list has developed and some of the successful applications in 2007 are waiting to have work completed.

East Antrim	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Referrals Received	313	496	286	339	750	635	2819
Successful	273	426	252	299	606	452	2308
Cancelled/ Not Eligible	40	70	34	40	144	183	511

South Antrim	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Referrals Received	353	575	420	609	896	935	3788
Successful	312	512	374	535	736	749	3218
Cancelled/ Not Eligible	41	63	46	74	160	186	570

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage, of Housing Executive stock in the (a) East

Antrim; and (b) South Antrim constituencies, that hold Energy Performance Certificates. (AQW 504/09)

The Minister for Social Development:

Information regarding house sales is collated by Housing Executive District Office areas, not by Parliamentary Constituency. East Antrim and South Antrim Parliamentary Constituencies broadly covers Larne, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Antrim.

Energy Performance Certificates became necessary for all houses for sale from 1 July 2008 onwards and, since then, the Housing Executive has sold 2 properties in Newtownabbey, both of which had an Energy Performance Certificate.

There have been no other house sales in any of the other areas above since 1 July 2008.

Complex Needs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) housing applicants in the South Down constituency have been assessed as having complex needs; and (ii) new builds in the constituency are designed to accommodate people with complex needs. (AQW 527/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since January 2006 there have been 246 housing applicants in the South Down constituency who have been awarded complex needs status.

There are 49 units designed to accommodate complex needs applicants in the South Down constituency currently programmed although this is expected to change.

Disabled Adaptation Grants

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in the South Down constituency have applied for disabled adaptation grants; and of those, how many have been inspected and scheduled for work, in the last year. (AQW 528/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not readily available for the South Down Parliamentary constituency. The Housing Executive holds information based on the current local government District Council model which, for South Down, takes in parts of the District Council areas of Newry and Mourne, Banbridge and Down.

During the 12 months from 1 September 2007 to 31 August 2008, there were 608 applications for disabled adaptation grants in these areas. All 608 properties have been inspected following receipt of an Occupational Therapist recommendation and 524 schedules of work have issued.

Delivery of PfG and PSA Commitments

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what progress her Department is making in delivering its Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement commitments. (AQW 530/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development is making good progress in delivering its Programme for Government (PfG) and Public Service Agreement (PSA) commitments.

Copies of the full report on first quarter progress to 30 June 2008 have been placed in the Members' Library.

Town Centre Regeneration Schemes

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many town centre regeneration schemes her Department is currently funding; and (ii) where these schemes are situated. (AQW 540/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not routinely fund regeneration schemes in towns as this is primarily a matter for private sector investment complemented by public sector investment in areas such as public realm. However a pilot scheme for Urban Development Grants aimed at allowing the private sector to address market failure is currently running in 5 towns - Ballymoney, Lurgan, Larne, Dungannon and Strabane. A budget of £450,600 is currently set aside in 2008/09 for this scheme.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what equality proofing her Department used when grading posts that are funded through Neighbourhood Renewal. (AQW 541/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer the member to the response provided to her in relation to the question AQW 8544/08 answered on the 4th July (Official Report Written Answer Booklet of 4 July 2008, Volume 32).

Housing Executive

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development what budget she has allocated to the Housing Executive to enable it to meet its decent homes target by 2010. (AQW 568/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has been allocated £52m for decent homes for the financial year 2008/09.

Budget allocations for 2009/10 and 2010/11 have not yet been decided.

Home Repossessions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to assist people whose homes are being re-possessed. (AQW 573/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Earlier this year I set out the New Housing Agenda. As part of this, I set out my intention to introduce a Mortgage Rescue Scheme, aimed at saving as many homeowners as possible from having their homes repossessed. It is proposed that the scheme will do this through both preventative measures as well as direct intervention.

The preventative measures will allow more emergency advice to be provided. This will help people who are struggling financially explore the options open to them. The direct intervention will be considered only where no other option is available. The Mortgage to Rent element of the scheme would be available to people who have no equity and cannot afford a mortgage payment. Under Flexible Tenure element of the Scheme, the applicant will be offered an equity sharing option based on the amount that they can afford to retain.

Detailed proposals have just been issued for consultation.

Winter Fuel Payments Scheme

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to increase the winter fuel payment, in light of the increasing cost of living. (AQW 602/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Westminster Government introduced the Winter Fuel Payments Scheme in January 1998 as part of its commitment to alleviate fuel poverty by providing help specifically to older people towards their winter fuel bills.

The Winter Fuel Payment is not intended to cover the total cost of a household's fuel bills, but to provide a significant contribution. The payment was £20 when it was first made in 1998. This increased to £100 in 1999/2000 and further increased to £200 in 2000/2001.

An additional £100 for households with someone aged 80 or over was introduced in 2003/2004.

For 2008/2009 there is to be a one-off increased payment of £200 to £250 for those aged 60 or over and of £300 to £400 for those aged 80 and over.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been received for the Warmer Homes Scheme this year. (AQW 603/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 1 April 2008 a total of 4,746 applications have been received for the Warm Homes Scheme. There were 4,146 applications for Warm Homes which assists applicants with insulation measures to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and 600 applications for Warm Homes Plus which assists applicants with insulation and heating measures.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many households fall into the fuel poverty category; and what measures has the Minister taken, as chair of the Inter Departmental Group on Fuel Poverty, to address this issue. (AQW 604/09)

The Minister for Social Development: According to the 2006 House Condition Survey, 34% of households in Northern Ireland are in fuel poverty. It is estimated that the figure is substantially higher at present. A comprehensive set of proposals to alleviate fuel poverty has been developed and circulated to Ministers.

This will be discussed when the Executive next meets.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total cost of (i) benefit fraud; (ii) housing benefit fraud; and (iii) the total percentage of monies paid out in benefits that this represented, in each of the last three years. (AQW 608/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The most recently published information is set out in the tables below. Substantial progress has been made in reducing the proportion of monies lost to fraud.

TABLE 1
SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS (SSA): – ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD.

2004/05			2005			2006		
Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost
£28.8	£3320	0.87	£28.6	£3406	0.84	£18.1	£3501	0.5

TABLE 2
HOUSING BENEFIT: - ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD

2004/05			2005			2006		
Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expend (m)	% lost
£2.3	£392.2	0.6	£4.0	£403	1.0	£3.3	£438.9	0.8

Women's Centre Childcare Fund

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the funding for each women's centre that has been granted through her Department's Women's Centre Childcare Fund, for this financial year. (AQW 619/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Funding has been provided by my Department through the Women's Centres Childcare Fund this financial year as follows:

Atlas Women's Centre	£47,651.18
Ballybeen Women's Centre	£175,270.20
Chrysalis Women's Centre	£21,306.98
Falls Women's Centre	£52,383.65
First Steps Women's Centre	£39,765.48
Footprints Women's Centre	£77,285.05
Greenway Women's Centre	£65,016.10
Magherafelt Women's Group	£121,678.42
Shankill Women's Centre	£49,670.35
Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group	£13,512.88
The Women's Centre	£30,487.96
Waterside Women's Centre	£35,743.92
Windsor Women's Centre	£109,371.48

Environmental Improvement Schemes

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of; and (ii) location, of planned Environmental Improvement

schemes to start in the Colin area of West Belfast in the next 2 years. (AQW 705/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are 3 environmental improvement schemes planned for the Colin area of West Belfast in the next 2 years. These are located at Stewartstown Road, Laurel Glen adjacent to Glenside and Woodside Housing Estates and Sally Gardens Community Centre, Bell Steele Road, Poleglass.

A number of other schemes are under consideration. The delivery of all schemes is subject to agreement on scheme design, satisfactory economic appraisals and the necessary funding being available.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Prime Minister's Visit to Parliament Buildings

Mr W Clarke asked the Assembly Commission to give the total cost it incurred in organising the visit of the Prime Minister to Parliament Buildings on Tuesday 16 September 2008. (AQW 577/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): The total estimated cost incurred by the Assembly Commission in organising the Prime Minister's visit to Parliament Buildings on Tuesday 16 September 2008 was £9,113.11. These costs include additional broadcasting, hospitality, photography, and security resources. The costs are at this stage only estimated because final bills have not yet been presented in a number of areas.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 03 October 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the number of appeals, including appeals against enforcement notices, received by the Planning Appeals Commission from 1 April 2008 to date, compared with the same period in 2007. (AQW 652/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): During the period 1 April 2008 to 31 August 2008 the Planning Appeals Commission received a total of 201 Appeals, of which 29 were Enforcement Appeals. In the same period in 2007 the Commission received 869 Appeals, of which 48 were Enforcement Appeals. The figures show a 77 % reduction in the overall appeals intake in the five months to the end of August 2008 compared to the intake in the same period last year, and a 40 % reduction in the intake of Enforcement Appeals. It is too early to ascertain whether the recent downturn in the appeals intake will continue.

Given the significant backlog of planning appeals, we have committed additional resources which have funded the appointment of additional commissioners to address the backlog. We anticipate that our intervention will have a positive effect on the backlog of appeals and consequently on the time taken to determine an appeal.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to monitor the impact of both the appeals intake and the additional commissioners on the backlog of planning appeals.

Child Poverty

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of how it has delivered on its targets to alleviate child poverty. (AQO 249/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The rate of absolute income poverty in 1998/99 of 29% compares with a rate in 2002/03 of 23% and 16% in 2005/06. Therefore, there has been a significant fall in the rate of absolute income poverty for children. In other words, children living in the poorest households have seen their household income rise in real terms. However, the incomes of the poorest households relative to the rest have not improved enough and levels of child poverty are unacceptably high. The Executive is determined to tackle this issue as a priority. It is, however, a huge challenge and one where we must work together across government to see long-term sustainable progress.

Our Programme for Government states our commitment 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.

Considerable progress has already been made with the biggest contributors being the introduction of the National Minimum Wage and reform of tax and benefits policies by the UK government. This reform is set to continue with the goal of supporting more people into employment.

In addition, however, there are factors which we can continue to influence at local level such as improving the quality of public services and, in particular, the support that helps parents overcome the barriers to securing employment with a decent income.

The delivery of a range of departmental programmes and initiatives in other areas such as Sure Start and the expansion of Pre-school education, health, benefit up-take and work on deprived areas through Neighbourhood Renewal will also play an important part.

The comprehensive report and recommendations produced by the OFMDFM Committee will provide a useful platform for further work as will the establishment of a cross departmental sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People, which will ensure a comprehensive and cohesive focus on the issue of Child Poverty here.

West Belfast and Shankill Task Force Report

Mr Adams asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it is taking forward the recommendations of the West Belfast and Shankill Task Force Report as envisaged in the Programme for Government. (AQO 373/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government at PSA 11, Objective 2 sets a target to “Deliver the agreed overall objectives of the West Belfast Greater Shankill taskforce.” In January 2007 local community representatives published a report outlining their views on the key outstanding development needs of the area. Departments subsequently held a lengthy series of bilateral meetings with local community representatives to try to reach an agreed way forward which took account of both the communities’ specific expectations, and the extent to which Departments could deliver on the key issues raised in that report. A draft Action Plan was sent to community representatives for comment in March 2008. The communities responded to this in June. This response and the views of the various Departments involved in the action plan are being reviewed and co-ordinated by officials within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Subject to the agreement of all relevant Ministers on the suggested way forward, it is proposed that the DETI Minister bring forward a paper for approval by late 2008.

Compensation Arrangements for Victims

Mr McCartney asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the compensation arrangements for victims. (AQO 361/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM has committed some £36 million over the current three year cycle to support work with victims and survivors.

However, compensation arrangements for victims are operated by the Compensation Agency on behalf of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Economic Downturn

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it has held meetings with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the current economic downturn. (AQO 248/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The breadth of the impact of the global economic downturn on the local economy and the well-being of people here is such that it needs to be addressed across

the full width of Government. This is a challenge that can only be effectively managed at Executive level.

We have been meeting with local interest groups to listen to their concerns and gather their ideas for mitigating measures that we might put in place to offset the worst effects of the economic downturn. In preparation for these we have drawn on advice and information across Ministerial portfolios.

It is increasingly apparent that the current world economic turmoil and its local effects are not going to be transitory or amenable to quick simple remedies. Therefore, we are resolved that this item will be a standing item of Executive business.

We have not had bilateral meetings with other Ministers to date, including the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We will keep under review the effectiveness of our response to the prevailing economic and social challenges. If this suggests that bilateral Ministerial engagement would be useful, we will, of course do so.

Common Travel Agreement

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations it has made to the Prime Minister on the possible dissolution of the Common Travel Agreement and the implications for people travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. (AQO 272/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We wrote to Liam Byrne, Minister of State, Home Office in July, stressing the importance of comprehensive public consultation on the proposals to strengthen the Common Travel Area (CTA) border and indicating our desire to ensure that any changes have a minimal impact on legitimate travel within the CTA. We understand that the current consultation does not have implications for people travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain.

Strategic Review of the Parades Commission

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its initial response to the interim consultative report by the Strategic Review of the Parades Commission. (AQO 384/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We received a copy of the Interim Consultative Report on the Strategic Review of Parading from the Chairman of the Strategic Review of Parading Body.

We anticipate a meeting with Lord Ashdown to discuss the recommendations.

Household Burden

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the progress of the proposals to tackle the household burden outlined by the deputy First Minister on September 14. (AQO 358/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: While the current world economic turmoil is driven by global forces we are resolved to mitigate, where we can, the worst social welfare effects of this crisis. Our clear view is that the range of issues emerging from the prevailing economic conditions requires a response from across the full ambit of government. The package of measures suggested by the deputy First Minister, and indeed those put forward by others from within the Executive and beyond will be given careful consideration.

Child Poverty

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to introduce an inter-departmental policy on tackling child poverty; and what targets have been set by the junior Ministers in relation to tackling child poverty. (AQO 245/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Through the workings of the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People, which is chaired by the Junior Ministers, a cross departmental sub-group has recently been established with the aim of ensuring a comprehensive and cohesive focus on the issue of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland.

The sub-group is chaired by a senior official from OFMDFM and an initial meeting has already been held with representatives from the other NI Departments. Officials will report back to the Ministerial Sub-Committee.

Child poverty targets will remain those that were outlined in the Programme for Government document (PSA 7) where the Executive committed 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.

Victims Groups

Mr Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how it will meet the needs of victims groups during the current transition in funding. (AQO 365/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

On the 22 July 2008 we announced arrangements for Interim Capacity funding. This funding is intended to ensure that there is a smooth transition between the Peace II and Peace III programmes for groups providing support for victims and survivors of the conflict. It is aimed at those groups who -

- are in receipt of EU funding under the Peace II Programme Extended,
- have applied for funding under the Peace III Programme, Priority 1, Theme 1.2 and are awaiting the outcome of that application, and
- are providing support specifically for victims and survivors of the conflict.

An award under the Interim Capacity Funding arrangements will be for a maximum period of 6 months and will end when a decision is made on an application under the Peace III Programme.

In addition, we are continuing to provide both Core Funding and funding under Development Grant Schemes, the resources for which have been increased to £2.75m and £1.5m respectively during this current financial year.

Single Equality Bill

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a timetable for the introduction of the Single Equality Bill. (AQO 250/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Policy proposals on equality legislation will be considered in consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive. It would not be appropriate to comment on timescales until policy decisions have been taken.

Pending Business

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the pending business on which it has yet to sign off. (AQO 354/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers, including draft papers, is confidential.

West Belfast and Shankill Task Force Report

Mr P Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the

implementation of the recommendations of the West Belfast and Shankill Task Force Report. (AQO 374/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In January 2007, local community representatives published a report outlining their views on the key outstanding development needs of the west Belfast/greater Shankill area. A draft Action Plan was compiled by departments and sent to community representatives for comment in March 2008. The communities responded to this in June. This response and the views of the various departments involved in the action plan are being reviewed and co-ordinated by officials within the Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment. Subject to the agreement of all relevant Ministers on the suggested way forward, it is proposed that the DETI Minister bring forward a paper for Executive approval by late 2008.

Responsiveness of Departments and Agencies

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made in improving the responsiveness of Departments and agencies under their civil contingencies remit. (AQO 276/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister promotes effective civil contingencies policy and development in the context of the well-established “lead department principle” which means that individual NI Civil Service departments and their associated organisations are responsible for civil contingencies planning and response within their policy sectors.

In developing and maintaining their own preparedness, departments and organisations consult, communicate and co-ordinate with each other and participate as appropriate in regional, sub-regional and local co-ordination forums. At regional level the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) led by OFMDFM officials maintains liaison among government departments, the emergency services, other key public service bodies and District Councils and provides strategic guidance and overview on civil contingency matters. The Department also liaises with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in Cabinet Office and the devolved administrations to ensure that Northern Ireland preparedness fits with national arrangements.

Individual departments and their organisations develop and maintain civil contingencies plans and other preparations in relation to their functions for the purpose of preventing an emergency, reducing, controlling or mitigating its effects or taking any other action necessary in relation to it. The resulting improvements in preparedness and response were

evidenced most recently in the context of the widespread flooding during August.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Ms J McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on the proposed consultation on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy. (AQO 376/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The development of the detailed proposals for a Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration for a shared and better future are at an advanced stage. The planned Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration will respond to issues of sectarianism and racism – previously they were separate but associated policies (A Shared Future and the Racial Equality Strategy).

We have repeatedly stated our commitment and that of the Executive through the Programme for Government to working towards building a society at ease with itself – a society that is integrated, cohesive and where everyone who lives here is regarded as of equal status and is treated as such – the new Programme will work towards this.

The emphasis of the Programme will be support for local people to deal with local issues through their local solutions. The refreshed policy will not compromise what is being achieved already but rather support, facilitate and better resource this good practice. The draft strategy will be submitted to the Committee before Halloween Recess and will be subject to a full consultation and equality impact assessment.

Older People's Advocate

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the appointment of an Older People's Advocate. (AQO 279/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our departmental officials are currently interviewing potential candidates who will act as an Older People's Advocate pending the appointment of an Older People's Commissioner.

The Executive's Programme for Government includes a commitment under PSA 7 (2) “Making People's Lives Better” to deliver a strong independent voice for older people and we are currently working towards the establishment of an Older People's Commissioner.

Also, in recognising the importance of older people in our society, on Monday 29 September in the Long Gallery, Junior Minister Kelly hosted an event to acknowledge the beginning of Age Awareness Week

2008 and later this week both Junior Ministers will host an event in Cultra Manor at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum to mark International Day for Older People as designated by the United Nations.

We want to maintain the momentum in creating a Commissioner for Older People, and in order to do so we have asked officials to appoint an Interim Advocate for Older People. This process is well under way and subject to a satisfactory outcome and the required checks, it is expected that an announcement will be made soon.

The Older People's Advocate will be responsible for providing independent advice to Ministers on issues of importance to Older People. The post will be part-time and the recruitment process has been monitored by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland.

The Advocate will help us identify and address issues affecting Older People and will remain in post until the appointment of a Commissioner is made.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Animals in Circuses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to ban the use of animals in circuses. (AQW 475/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms M Gildernew): As I indicated in a previous written answer on this issue on 14 March 2008, the Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, including on the need for regulation of circuses. As this exercise was carried out under a different administration, I wanted to take time to fully consider the responses received.

Following my initial consideration of the comments, I have been meeting a number of key stakeholders who provided comments, including those who have a specific interest in the welfare of circus animals. This has enabled me to hear their concerns at first hand. Arrangements are also in hand for my officials to meet other relevant stakeholders.

In my previous answer, I advised that I would take note of the position in the South as many of the circuses that operate here are based there. It is important that animal welfare legislation across the island of Ireland is broadly compatible. I therefore will be looking closely at the outline animal welfare legislative proposals which were published by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in Dublin in May 2008. I have

asked my officials to discuss these proposals in detail when they meet their counterparts in DAFF in October.

The animal welfare proposals being brought forward in the South and the primary animal welfare legislation already in place in Britain will inform my policy review and enable robust animal welfare legislation to be brought forward here. The specific provisions of any new legislation will depend on my consideration of all the relevant issues. However, I do not want to pre-empt its outcome at this stage.

Animals in Circuses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what veterinary checks are carried out by her Department on animals appearing in circuses. (AQW 477/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department's role in circuses is currently very limited. Part III of the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972 protects all animals from unnecessary cruelty or suffering. There are, however, no specific provisions on the welfare of animals in circuses. My Department therefore has no powers to regulate circuses, nor powers of entry to circuses. No official veterinary checks have therefore been carried out.

However, if a welfare complaint is received regarding a circus animal, the PSNI does have the legal power of entry under the Act.

Appointment of a Children's Champion

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of (i) the recent appointment of a children's champion; and (ii) any targets or programmes her Department has in place to promote children's rights. (AQW 481/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) The Champion for Children and Young People in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is Rodney Scott, Director of Corporate Policy and European Issues and the chair of the group is Eddie Rooney, Director of Equality in OFMDFM.
- (ii) A Rural Childcare programme with the aim of addressing rural specific need and circumstance is currently being developed. This programme will most likely be targeted at the not for profit sector and will call for applications for pilot / demonstration projects in December 2008.

For the purposes of the Rural Childcare Programme, childcare is defined as any activity that is designed to

provide care for children in the 0 to 12 year old age group that allows their parents/guardians to participate in the workplace or participate in training to enhance their employment prospects.

Applications to this Programme will be accepted for pilot projects that address/tackle the following priorities in a peculiar rural context:

- Access to Childcare Services;
- Early Years Integration;
- Quality and Safety of Provision;
- Sustainability and Affordability

- (iii) Under the Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013, my Department has a target of funding 10 projects benefiting children and young people in the rural community. These projects may be based around recreational, childcare, community/social interaction or educational activities. Additionally, local rural development strategies for Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme must, as a key criterion, address the needs of children and young people and must be informed by the 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People. It is expected that at least 5% of any funding awarded will be devoted to projects focussed on children and young people.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what schemes are available to bring the level of funding under the Farm Modernisation scheme up to £10,000. (AQW 515/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Farm Modernisation Programme will provide financial support to eligible farm businesses towards the purchase of plant, machinery and equipment from a predefined list of eligible items. The maximum financial support available per business will be £5,000.

A separate Manure Efficiency Technology Scheme (METS) will provide financial support to eligible farm businesses towards the purchase of advanced slurry spreading equipment. Under this scheme the maximum financial support available will be £10,000 per business.

Comber Potatoes

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress is being made by her Department to assist in the achievement of EU protected status for Comber potatoes. (AQW 531/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I would like to say how pleased I

am that the Comber Potato, with its reputation as a unique local product, is undergoing an application for Protected Geographical Indication. If attained, the EU Protected Food Names Scheme should give the growers the opportunity to market Comber Potatoes as a speciality product protected by the EC.

In July 2008, my Department received agreement from the NI Potato Stakeholder Forum that they would take forward the application on behalf of the growers. My officials are now working alongside Ards Borough Council in assisting the Comber potato growers to develop the application.

The application is at draft stage and an initial consultation with growers has been completed to ensure that the details of the application are accurate. Once the details of the specification have been finalised, the application will undergo a formal consultation period with interested parties here and in Britain before being submitted to the EC for consideration.

Impounded Dogs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many stray dogs were impounded in each of the last 3 years, broken down by local council; and to detail the total amount of money generated from fines levied to the owners of the impounded dogs. (AQW 532/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of stray dogs impounded in each of the last three years is set out in Table 1. These figures are provided to my Department by local Councils.

The information provided to DARD does not detail the amount of money generated from fines imposed on owners of stray dogs.

TABLE 1. STRAY DOGS IMPOUNDED BY LOCAL COUNCILS FOR CALENDAR YEARS 2005-2007 (FIGURES PROVIDED TO DARD BY LOCAL COUNCILS).

Year	2005	2006	2007
Antrim	295	320	244
Ards	246	276	315
Armagh	607	704	670
Ballymena	278	206	199
Ballymoney	117	112	127
Banbridge	142	179	188
Belfast	885	1026	1037
Carrickfergus	183	195	163
Castlereagh	176	208	214

Year	2005	2006	2007
Coleraine	290	232	209
Cookstown	148	163	136
Craigavon	852	881	756
Derry	376	450	444
Down	751	837	726
Dungannon	301	292	447
Fermanagh	234	205	183
Larne	160	141	176
Limavady	115	112	101
Lisburn	470	419	466
Magherafelt	125	139	143
Moyle	109	74	71
Newry	786	703	724
Newtownabbey	328	393	374
North Down	119	113	101
Omagh	604	243	379
Strabane	221	219	174
Total	8918	8842	8767

High Risk Flood Areas

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessments are taking place to identify areas that have the potential to be high risk flood areas; and what areas have already been identified as being at risk of flooding.
(AQO 264/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD Rivers Agency has been working in partnership with DOE Planning Service in producing a Strategic Flood Map for the north of Ireland. This predictive map depicts areas at risk of flooding from rivers and/or the sea supporting Planning Policy Statement 15 (PPS15): Planning and Flood Risk. It is important to note that there are other sources of flooding which will not be included within the map. Rivers Agency is making the Strategic Flood Map available this autumn on the internet via a web viewer.

As the competent authority for implementation of the EU Floods Directive, DARD Rivers Agency is currently undertaking a preliminary flood risk assessment for

the north of Ireland to identify the areas at potential significant risk from other sources of flooding. On the basis of the areas identified at potential significant risk detailed mapping and planning will be undertaken as required by the Floods Directive.

The Strategic Flood Map due to be released contains multiple layers including a historical flood outline based on Rivers Agency records. Of course there is information held by other organisations and the Agency is working with its partners in assessing how this information may be captured and made available.

Rivers Agency

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail those areas in West Tyrone which are at greatest risk of flooding and to detail the role of Rivers Agency in helping to alleviate flooding in the Beragh and Carrickmore areas.
(AQO 364/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency is preparing a strategic map for the North that will identify areas likely to be at risk of flooding, which will be published in Autumn 2008. That map will be followed by more detailed mapping and planning assessments, where necessary. Flooding that affected Riverdale and The Meadows area in Beragh has been surveyed and recorded. An extended survey of the Cloghfin River that flows through Beragh is currently underway.

When complete the information provided will be used to help identify any possible improvements to reduce flooding risk. Rivers Agency has an ongoing programme of inspection and maintenance of designated watercourses in the Carrickmore and Beragh area to reduce the flood risk.

Number of Farmers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers (i) in total; (ii) broken down by district council area; and (iii) broken down by parliamentary constituency, for each of the last three years.
(AQW 563/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The numbers of farmers, 2005 to 2007, are detailed in Table 1 (by District Council) and Table 2 (by Parliamentary Constituency) below.

District Council	2005			2006			2007		
	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers
Antrim	502	376	878	511	367	878	514	354	868

District Council	2005			2006			2007		
	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers
Ards	543	307	850	495	300	795	485	293	778
Armagh	1,229	1,151	2,380	1,207	1,110	2,317	1,149	1,104	2,253
Ballymena	940	621	1,561	924	604	1,528	916	559	1,475
Ballymoney	570	337	907	581	344	925	557	346	903
Banbridge	840	579	1,419	826	574	1,400	769	591	1,360
Belfast	21	14	35	22	14	36	18	19	37
Carrickfergus	68	53	121	70	48	118	70	47	117
Castlereagh	82	59	141	89	62	151	84	62	146
Coleraine	600	323	923	551	304	855	537	302	839
Cookstown	923	741	1,664	840	736	1,576	800	733	1,533
Craigavon	421	378	799	399	378	777	379	363	742
Derry	346	272	618	339	246	585	324	248	572
Down	834	648	1,482	827	651	1,478	802	645	1,447
Dungannon	1,154	1,131	2,285	1,217	1,091	2,308	1,150	1,090	2,240
Fermanagh	2,024	1,726	3,750	2,122	1,722	3,844	1,998	1,746	3,744
Larne	432	246	678	423	247	670	408	253	661
Limavady	494	320	814	480	310	790	464	309	773
Lisburn	618	445	1,063	611	461	1,072	559	458	1,017
Magherafelt	854	780	1,634	879	746	1,625	850	734	1,584
Moyle	488	262	750	478	253	731	472	265	737
Newry & Mourne	1,460	1,733	3,193	1,578	1,641	3,219	1,485	1,647	3,132
Newtownabbey	185	103	288	171	114	285	165	101	266
North Down	55	34	89	59	34	93	59	35	94
Omagh	1,509	1,124	2,633	1,510	1,107	2,617	1,453	1,123	2,576
Strabane	967	604	1,571	772	549	1,321	718	595	1,313
Total	18,159	14,367	32,526	17,981	14,013	31,994	17,185	14,022	3,1207

Source: June Agricultural and Horticultural survey

Parliamentary Constituency	2005			2006			2007		
	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers
Belfast (North/South/East/West)	33	20	53	34	17	51	28	25	53
East Antrim	504	305	809	496	302	798	479	300	779
East Londonderry	1,094	643	1,737	1,031	614	1,645	1,001	611	1,612
Fermanagh & S. Tyrone	2,930	2,549	5,483	3,063	2,533	5,596	2,878	2,566	5,454
Foyle	346	272	618	339	246	585	324	248	572
Lagan Valley	828	613	1,441	834	612	1,446	765	618	1,383

	2005			2006			2007		
Parliamentary Constituency	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers	Full time farmer	Part time farmer	Total farmers
Mid Ulster	2,015	1,827	3,842	1,992	1,760	3,752	1,917	1,736	3,653
Newry & Armagh	1,933	2,137	4,070	1,969	2,058	4,027	1,867	2,030	3,879
North Antrim	1,998	1,220	3,218	1,983	1,201	3,184	1,945	1,170	3,115
North Down	100	61	161	109	57	166	108	61	169
South Antrim	692	473	1,165	684	479	1,163	678	454	1,132
South Down	1,957	1,586	3,543	1,973	1,546	3,519	1,882	1,581	3,463
Strangford	677	422	1,099	630	416	1,046	608	404	1,012
Upper Bann	576	511	1,087	562	516	1,078	534	500	1,034
West Tyrone	2,476	1,728	4,204	2,282	1,656	3,938	2,171	1,718	3,889
Total	18,159	14,367	32,526	17,981	14,013	31,994	17,185	14,022	31,207

Source: June Agricultural and Horticultural survey

Note: The four Belfast constituencies have been merged for disclosure purposes

Departmental Projects: Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the successful projects her Department completed in the last 12 months in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 590/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table lists successful projects for the period of 18 September 2007 to 18 September 2008.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Successful Projects completed under Rural Development Programme	
Sixmilewater Development	Continuation of development programme to enhance the Sixmilewater River for the benefit of the local community and tourist anglers, by installing a fish pass (to ease the passage of fish) and a fish counter to enable the fishery to be managed on a sustainable basis.
Clementsmtout Fun Farm	Fun Farm with outdoor and indoor play activities.
Funding to the firm Duffin Harvest Machinery, which sub-contracts manufacturing to small and large engineering companies in NI.	Purchase of a specialist machine for cutting steel and aluminium plate to a higher spec thus improving the quality of work and appealing to a wider range of customers who demand higher tolerances.
Funding for the Manufacture of Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP) Structures	To assist GRP Systems to provide complete units manufactured in GRP, including platforms, walkways, ladders and handrail systems, which will help the business expand and reduce the risk from outside competition.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Funding to promote Holistic jewellery, gifts and handmade cards	A business idea in response to the growing interest in a holistic approach to life. Production of jewellery, gifts and handmade cards incorporating semi-precious stones, elements and colour combinations used in complimentary therapies.
John Gribbin Pharmacy	Creation of a consultation area for a "Wellness Clinic". Purchase and installation of ICT equipment and CCTV.
Funding to Mark Wilson for his forage press business	The "Forage Press" compresses large bales of haylage, hay or straw in manageable, conventional sized bales for feed and bedding purposes. The machine compresses each bale into individual layers allowing for easy use and less wastage of the bale.
Small Firms Development Programme	Programme offering one-to-one business mentoring to approximately 30 eligible businesses in the REAP (South Antrim Rural Economic Action Partnership) area.
Reducing Risks / Cutting Costs - Programme Implementation	Provision of training to small rural businesses on all aspects of risk management within the workplace and development of risk assessment procedure for reducing identified risks.
Rams Island Project	Introduction of a long-term management structure on Rams Island to care for the wildlife on the Island and a carefully monitored access programme for the public.
Interpretive Centre	Provision of interpretative material for Rams Island, highlighting the unique environment of the Island.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Purchase a Stone Cutting Machine for the company Tile Unlimited, Moneyglass, Toomebridge	Assistance for the company to buy natural stone in slab form and then manufacture natural stone tiles for custom designed contracts for industry.
Emerald Turkeys	Emerald Turkeys are carefully reared by traditional farming methods. Dry plucking is an essential part of the processing method, enabling birds to be matured in a temperature controlled chiller for at least 10 days developing even more flavour and texture.
Round 2 Maximising Community Space - Langford Education and Cultural Society (project complete, but final claim in respect of project expenditure yet to be submitted)	Assistance to help large community facility to meets health, safety, and hygiene standards through restoration.
NL Rubber Ltd	Purchase of spray booth and laminator to enable continued supply to existing customers with a wider range of products at more competitive prices.
Round 2 Maximising Community Space - Randalstown Ulster Scots Cultural Society	Assistance to help large community facility to comply with fire and disabled access regulations by improving disabled access to the building and re-wiring the hall to improve fire safety.
W A Patterson Business Expansion	Grant to finance W A Patterson's (steel bending company) move to a larger, better equipped premises and to purchase additional machinery for curving larger steel sections, and developing new 3-dimensional bending techniques.
Successful Projects completed by Forest Service	
Bird Hide at Randalstown	A replacement Bird Hide on the lough shore at Randalstown forest in conjunction with the Environmental Heritage Service.
Tree thinning in Tardree forest	1,000 tonnes of timber thinned from 23 hectares in Tardree forest.
Supply of Christmas trees	74 town Christmas trees supplied from Randalstown forest.
Successful Projects completed by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	
Further and Higher Education Programmes	Further Education and Higher Education programmes provided for those wishing to pursue a career in the agri-food industry and delivered at the CAFRE Campuses of Greenmount, Loughry and Enniskillen. Courses are open to application to those who meet the required entry criteria from across the North. CAFRE's Greenmount Campus is based in this constituency

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Industry training programme	Training courses for those working in the agri-food industry, which are delivered locally across the North or at the CAFRE Campuses of Greenmount, Enniskillen and Loughry. Training programmes delivered within the South Antrim constituency in the last year include: - Diversification Challenge; Agriculture and horticulture short courses; and Agri-environment training courses.
Knowledge and Technology Transfer programme	This programme aims to equip those in the agri-food industry with the knowledge, skills and experience to adopt appropriate technologies and systems within their businesses. CAFRE Technologists and Development Advisers work with the industry to encourage the adoption of the technology or system within their businesses. This is achieved through training courses, normally delivered throughout the North, Demonstration events on the College Farm/local farms or Food Processing Units and through mentoring.
Benchmarking programme	This programme involves the collection of physical and financial data from farmers and growers, the analysis of this data by CAFRE Business Technologists and comparison with similar farm businesses. Through this programme the strengths and weaknesses of farm business performance can be identified and actions to improve performance implemented. This programme is available to farmers and growers across the North.

Women in Fishing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to fund 'Women in Fishing', as there are active groups in Portavogie and Kilkeel working with similar groups in Donegal and Cork. (AQW 601/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has previously funded 2 "Women in Fishing" projects with grant from the South Down Fishing Villages Taskforce Programme. The European Fisheries Fund which will come on stream shortly provides the Department with a further opportunity to support such initiatives. In the draft EFF Investment Plan which was published on 2nd May the Department said that would promote European Women in Fisheries Initiatives and would welcome such applications.

Organic Action Plan Group

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the farming make up of the Organic Action Plan Group; and if it includes hill farmers and members from the organic sheep sector. (AQW 836/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Organic Action Plan Group for NI (OAPGNI) membership reflects a wide range of interests, including dairy, poultry, beef, horticulture, Ulster Farmers Union, independent retailers, Certification Bodies and the Rural Development Council. Although not organic hill/sheep farmers themselves, some OAPGNI members have an interest in hill farms or in sheep production. North West Organics, which has a significant hill sheep farming membership, is represented on OAPGNI.

OAPGNI is currently reviewing its progress to date, and will soon make proposals to the Department for further development of the organic sector. The current Group's remit ends on 31 December 2008.

Spreading Slurry

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she will give to extending the period for spreading slurry until the end of November, in light of the poor weather conditions this summer. (AQW 952/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I appreciate that there are practical difficulties in spreading slurry before the start of the closed period. The prolonged spell of wet weather means that conditions have been unsuitable for spreading slurry. More slurry has been collected as more animals have been housed and the harvest and silage making has been delayed.

My Department has joint responsibility with the Department of Environment (DOE) for the legislation which governs the period for spreading slurry. My officials are in dialogue with the NI Environment Agency which is responsible for inspection and enforcement of the legislation. Advice will be issued before the closed spreading period is due to start on 15 October.

Littleacre Open Farm

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if officials from her Department have inspected the Littleacre Open Farm in Loughbrickland in the last 2 years. (AQW 968/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's veterinary staff have

visited the Little Acre Open Farm in Loughbrickland on 9 occasions over the last 2 years.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Children's Champion

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details of (i) the recent appointment of a children's champion; and (ii) any targets or programmes his Department has in place to promote children's rights. (AQW 482/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell):

- (i) The recent appointment of a children's champion;
 - The suggestion by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to have a dedicated Champion for Children at senior level in each Department was discussed at the first meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People on 13 March 2008 and subsequently agreed by all Ministers. The first meeting of the Champions for Children and Young People took place on 5th August.
 - The Champion for Children and Young People in the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure is Deborah Brown, Director of Finance and Corporate Services.
- ii) Any targets or programmes the Department has undertaken to promote children's rights.

Museums

- In 2008/9 NMNI has a target of attracting 110,000 visitors, primarily children, to their organised educational programme and to hold 425 outreach events and exhibitions.
- Armagh Observatory undertakes important outreach work under its Science in the Community programme to target children and young people.
- W5's educational events are used to promote the child's right to play and to be educated through play.
- W5 has developed an educational programme from nursery age pupils through to 'A' level.

Sport

- Sport NI (SNI) makes significant investments through a range of organisations (including governing bodies of sport, education and library boards, district councils, community/voluntary groups) in projects which seek to improve and extend the range and quality of opportunities for

children to participate in sport at a level of their choice.

Arts

- Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) have in place a dedicated Children and Youth Arts Policy.
- Creative Youth Partnerships Programme.
- The Extended Schools Programme.
- NI Screen has the Cinemagic Children's Film Festival and After Schools Film Clubs targeted at children and young people.
- NI Screen production funding pursues a policy which supports film and television productions that represent Northern Irish children on screen.
- NI Screen, within the Irish Language Broadcast Fund prioritise children's programming.

Language

- Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster Scots Agency provide funding for a programme of summer camps to promote linguistic and cultural activity among children.

Tobermore United Football Club

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment has been made of the damage and hardship sustained by Tobermore United Football Club, as a result of the flooding on 16 August 2008; and what steps his Department is taking to assist the club. (AQW 629/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for assessing the damage sustained by Tobermore United Football Club rests in the first instance with the club itself. Whilst I sympathise with their situation, DCAL has no means of compensating clubs in such circumstances outside of their normal insurance arrangements.

Neighbourhood Renewal Posts

Ms Ni Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what Neighbourhood Renewal posts and services his Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 712/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department does not currently fund any Neighbourhood Renewal posts or services and does not anticipate funding any from March 2009 onwards.

Sport NI invests in sports development posts and services in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas through the Sport in our Community Investment Programme. A total investment of £3.6m was approved from the

Sport NI Lottery Fund in 34 awards to deliver the programme from 1 April 2006 – 31 March 2010. 15 of the 34 awards focus directly on programme delivery within 26 of the 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas.

Inter-Departmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of meetings of the Inter-Departmental Charter Implementation Group that have taken place; (ii) what action the group has taken in relation to the implementation of the charter; and (iii) what plans he has to ensure that this group meets regularly and develops guidance for public servants to ensure they fulfil their obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 770/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: To date there have been 20 meetings of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG).

The Group have co-ordinated input to two reports to the Council of Europe on the UK's implementation of the Charter. It has hosted field visits from a European Committee of Experts which follow the submission of these reports. The group has also undertaken some work on a third report which is currently under scrutiny by Ministers. In addition, the ICIG has considered a range of relevant Irish and Ulster-Scots language related issues.

The Group will continue to meet regularly on a three to four month basis or more frequently if business requires.

The ICIG has already presented guidance for public servants on the Charter, which was approved by the Secretary of State in 2005. This guidance is kept under review and is likely to be adapted as part of a strategy for the protection, enhancement and development of the Irish language and Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture. This guidance can be found at :http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/european_charter_guidance.doc

Irish-Language Events

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Irish language events he has (i) been invited to; and (ii) attended, since becoming Minister; and of the invitations he has declined, to detail the reasons why. (AQW 771/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: To date I have received one invitation to an Irish language event in October 2008 but I am unable to attend due to diary commitments.

EDUCATION

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of the number of job losses in her Department, following the implementation of the Review of Public Administration, broken down by grade. (AQW 418/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Mar chuid d'fhorfheidhmiú an Athbhreithnithe ar Riarachán Poiblí (RPA), aistrefar réimse feidhmeanna oibríochtúla, mar aon leis na baill foirne a chomhlíonann na feidhmeanna seo, ón Roinn Oideachais chuig an Údarás Oideachais agus Scileanna.

As part of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), a range of operational functions together with the staff undertaking these functions will transfer from the Department of Education to the Education and Skills Authority. The RPA will be implemented, by Legislation, following the principles of Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) TUPE regulations and every effort will be made to ensure that no staff lose their jobs. Approximately 180 full time equivalent posts in the Department of Education will transfer to ESA. It is too early to give a breakdown, by grade, of these staff

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education if a cost benefit analysis has been carried out by her Department in relation to the abolition of Education and Library Boards and the creation of an Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 507/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá anailís ar chostais agus ar thairbhí déanta i gcomhthéacs Chás Imlíneach Gnó do bhunú an Údaráis Oideachais agus Scileanna. Léiríonn an measúnú seo coigiltí féideartha de thart ar £20 milliún in aghaidh na bliana faoi 2012.

An analysis of costs and benefits has been undertaken in the context of an Outline Business Case for the creation of the Education and Skills Authority. This assessment points to potential savings of approx £20 million a year by 2012. In setting the education budget account has already been taken of anticipated savings of just over £21 million over the current Budget period (2008/9 to 2010/11). It follows that any failure to achieve the projected savings will constitute a cost pressure on the education budget and require corresponding reductions in the resources available to maintain services.

Post-Primary Schools in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to detail the post-primary schools in the East Belfast constituency that are over-subscribed for the current academic year. (AQW 521/09)

The Minister of Education:

The Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised the Department that the post-primary schools and primary schools in the East Belfast constituency that are over-subscribed for the current academic year are as follows:

Post-Primary

- Knockbreda High School
- Our Lady and St Patrick's College
- Ashfield Girls' High School
- Ashfield Boys' High School
- Grosvenor GS
- Bloomfield Collegiate
- Campbell College
- Strathearn School

Primary

- Belmont Primary School

Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt dúinn nach gcuinníonn siad sonraí ar iontrálacha ar ranna ullmhúcháin.

The Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised that they do not collect data on admissions to preparatory departments.

Primary Schools in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary schools in the East Belfast constituency that are over-subscribed for the current academic year. (AQW 522/09)

The Minister of Education:

The Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised the Department that the post-primary schools and primary schools in the East Belfast constituency that are over-subscribed for the current academic year are as follows:

Post-Primary

- Knockbreda High School
- Our Lady and St Patrick's College
- Ashfield Girls' High School
- Ashfield Boys' High School

- Grosvenor GS
- Bloomfield Collegiate
- Campbell College
- Strathearn School

Primary

- Belmont Primary School

Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt dúinn nach geruinníonn siad sonraí ar iontrálacha ar ranna ullmhúcháin.

The Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised that they do not collect data on admissions to preparatory departments.

Coláiste na Spéiríní

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in relation to Coláiste na Spéiríní. (AQW 597/09)

The Minister of Education: Ar 17 Aibreán 2008 d'fhoilsigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt (SELB), ar iarratas ó Bhord Gobharnóirí Choláiste Speirín, togra forbartha go mbeadh an scoil ina scoil dheontaschúnta, agus Coláiste Feirste ag feidhmiú mar chainéal maoinithe di.

On 17 April 2008 the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB), at the request of the Board of Governors of Coláiste Speirín, published a development proposal that the school be grant-aided, with Coláiste Feirste acting as a conduit for funding.

On 23 September 2008, I announced my decision to turn this proposal down. I was not convinced that this proposal would achieve sustainable intakes – 6 pupils were enrolled in 2007/08 and 3 new pupils intending to enrol for 2008/09. I recognise a demand for post-primary provision in the area and there needs to be a full exploration of options which could deliver sustainable provision.

Educational Facilities for Autistic Young People

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what provision there is for cross-border residential educational facilities for autistic young people; and what financial assistance is available to the parents of these young people. (AQW 656/09)

The Minister of Education: At present there is no provision for cross-border residential educational facilities for children and young people with autism. The ongoing establishment of the Middletown Centre

for Autism in County Armagh, where services began in 2007, will make some residential facilities available in the future.

One of the services to be provided by the Centre is a Learning Support Service, which will use classroom and other situations to enable educational assessments to be undertaken. This will include up to 5 weeks residential placement for children and young people with autism. The Centre's Learning Support Service is expected to begin at the end of 2009.

Ní ghearrfaidh an tIonad aon táille ar thuismitheoirí as an tseirbhís seo.

There will be no charge to parents by the Centre for this service.

Threshold Payment Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to extend access to the Threshold Payment scheme to include musical instrument tutors. (AQW 659/09)

The Minister of Education: The threshold payment process was introduced following agreement between the teacher employers and the teacher unions at the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools), and applies only to those employed on teachers' terms and conditions of employment, whether in grant-aided schools or in non-standard settings (e.g. advisory teachers employed by Education and Library Boards). Instrumental music tutors employed on teachers' terms and conditions are eligible to apply for threshold progression. Any change to the pay and conditions of employment of instrumental music tutors not currently employed as teachers is a matter for the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) which deals with collective bargaining for staff who are not employed on teachers' terms and conditions.

The Department is currently considering a business case from the employers' side of the JNC in relation to the pay arrangements for instrumental music tutors employed under JNC terms and conditions. As soon as the Department is satisfied that the business case is robust, consistent and evidence based, it will use its best endeavours to ensure that the business case is processed within Government as quickly as possible.

Any changes to the terms and conditions of these staff are ultimately a matter for the Education and Library Boards to consider, as employers, subject to government pay policy and within the constraints of available resources.

Ba mhian liom go dtiocfar ar réiteach ar an cheist seo chomh luath agus is féidir ionas nach mbíonn aon dochar d'oideachas na bpáistí.

I will wish to see this issue resolved as soon as possible in order to avoid any detriment to children's education.

School Crossing Patrols

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education why the lollipop man/woman was withdrawn from Coagh Primary School. (AQW 697/09)

The Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne patróil tráchtá scoile ag áiteanna éagsúla, ar bhonn lánroghnach.

The Education and Library Boards provide school crossing patrols at various locations, on a discretionary basis. The provision and/or retention of a school crossing patrol is based on an assessment using the LARSOA (Local Authority Road Safety Officers' Association) school crossing patrol service guidelines. Following the retirement of the incumbent school crossing patrol officer in early 2007, the SELB undertook an assessment to establish if the location required a replacement officer. The location failed to meet the necessary criteria and a new officer was not appointed by the SEELB.

Time Spent in Departmental Office

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many days she has spent at her Department's offices in the North Down constituency since taking up office. (AQW 727/09)

The Minister of Education: Bainim úsáid as m'oifig Aireachta ag Foirgneamh na Parlaiminte faoi choinne thromlach mór mo dhualgas Roinne. Dá dheasca sin, tá 7 lá caite agam in oifigí mo Roinne i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh.

I use my Ministerial office in Parliament Buildings for the great majority of my Departmental duties. In consequence I have spent 7 days at my Department's offices in the North Down constituency.

Proposed Closure of Donaghadee High School

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that pupils affected by the proposed closure of Donaghadee High School in August 2009 will be able to transfer to local schools, particularly year 8 pupils. (AQW 754/09)

The Minister of Education: Nuair a dhruifear Donaghadee High School ag deireadh mhí Lúnasa 2009 táthar ag dréim leis nach mbeidh ach 85 dalta a mbeidh áit de dhíth orthu don scoilbhliain 2009/10 i mBlianta 9-12 ag scoileanna eile. Tá 10 ndalta i mbliain 8 ag Donaghadee HS faoi láthair.

When Donaghadee High School closes at the end of August 2009 it is anticipated that there will be only 85 pupils requiring places in Years 9-12 at alternative schools for the 2009/10 school year. There are currently 10 pupils in year 8 at Donaghadee HS.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has advised that the Board will arrange for the appropriate placement of all statemented children in discussion with parents and schools. Parents of other pupils will have to apply for places at alternative schools and the Board of Governors of each school will admit pupils in accordance with their admissions procedures. There are currently sufficient places available in alternative schools.

Clanmorris Campus of Bangor Academy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to authorise and fund the early demolition of the vacant Clanmorris Campus of Bangor Academy, in order to secure the site to eliminate the inherent risk and potential liability of the current approach to managing the site. (AQW 755/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt iarratas ar chistiú isteach chuig an Roinn Oideachais le déanaí chun na foirgnimh atá ann anois ag Campas Clanmorris a scartáil.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has recently submitted a request to the Department of Education for funding to demolish the existing buildings on the Clanmorris Campus. The SEELB will be submitting a business case to the department to support their request for funding.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education when she intends to consult in relation to the proposed amendment to primary legislation and the proposed changes in regulations needed for changes to post-primary transfer in 2010. (AQW 757/09)

The Minister of Education: Rachaidh mé i ndáil chomhairle maidir leis an reachtaíocht atá de dhíth, ag an áiméar is luaithe is féidir. Tá uainiú an aiméir sin ag brath go mór ar cé chomh toilteanach is atá an Feidhmeannas chun dul i ngleic leis na moltaí a thug mé ar 15 Bealtaine 2008 ar bhealach cuiditheach.

I will consult upon the required legislation at the earliest possible opportunity. The exact timing will depend very much on the willingness of the Executive to engage constructively with the proposals I brought forward on 15 May 2008. I look forward to that

engagement taking place as soon as possible so that my officials can proceed with the drafting of legislation.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made towards establishing a legislative base for the changes to post-primary in 2010. (AQW 758/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug mé moltaí ar 15 Bealtaine 2008 maidir le haistriú iarbhunskoile san am atá le teacht.

I brought forward proposals for the future of post-primary transfer on 15 May 2008. Since then I have

submitted a legislative bid to support my proposals and have been developing them in greater detail so that they can be the subject of thorough engagement on behalf of the Executive.

Free School Meal Entitlement

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the 11 plus test results for each primary school with 30% or more pupils with Free School Meal entitlement, for the (i) 2006-07; and (ii) 2007-08, academic years. (AQW 760/09)

The Minister of Education: Féach an tábla seo thíos
Please see the table below

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS FOR SCHOOLS WITH A FREE SCHOOL MEAL ENTITLEMENT (FSME) OF 30% OR MORE IN 2007/08

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
1010063	Currie Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	8	67.5
1010146	Euston Street Ps	*	*	*	*	*	12	13	44.6
1010221	Springfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	44.8
1010255	Elmgrove Ps	7	*	*	6	6	*	30	37.9
1010267	Nettlefield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	20	24	53.9
1010269	Avoniel Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	9	58.0
1010271	Beechfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	73.0
1010283	Grove Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	46.8
1010296	Ballygolan Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	47.2
1010301	Taughmonagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	39.8
1010307	Springhill Ps	*	*	*	*	6	10	22	30.6
1010323	Edenbrooke Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	11	60.6
1010863	Suffolk Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	37.0
1013018	Knocknagoney Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	15	43.5
1016059	Blackmountain Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	61.3
1016060	Donegall Road Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	50.3
1016076	Ballysillan Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	8	42.2
1016205	Fane Street Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	9	31.8
1016207	Blythefield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	14	14	67.2
1016483	Cliftonville Ps	*	*	*	*	*	13	18	35.1
1016485	Glenwood Ps	7	*	*	*	*	11	24	53.0
1016498	Malvern Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	65.5
1016499	Botanic Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	13	42.4
1016532	Wheatfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	12	44.1
1016537	Lowwood Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	16	33.5
1016604	Harmony Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	53.1

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
1016647	Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	53.5
1030194	Holy Cross Boys' Ps	16	*	*	*	*	6	30	50.9
1030316	St Aidan's Christian Brothers Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	67.6
1030317	St Bernadette's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	10	65.1
1030326	Our Lady's Girls' Ps	10	*	*	*	7	9	31	45.0
1030329	Edmund Rice (Cb) Ps	*	*	*	*	*	15	28	48.3
1030331	Holy Cross Girls' Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	63.1
1036041	Mercy Ps	6	5	*	*	7	10	33	40.4
1036042	St Vincent De Paul Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	14	55.7
1036048	St Mary's Star Of The Sea Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	15	34.4
1036464	Star Of The Sea Girls' Ps	*	*	*	*	*	15	23	49.7
1036466	St Malachy's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	46.4
1036471	Sacred Heart Ps	5	*	*	*	*	5	18	46.4
1036505	St Matthew's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	15	18	54.9
1036565	St Kevin's Ps	6	*	*	*	*	10	27	33.0
1036566	Holy Family Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	26	41.4
1036602	St Oliver Plunkett Ps	*	*	*	*	7	21	40	37.8
1036620	St Peter's Ps	5	*	*	*	5	9	27	54.5
1036621	St Joseph's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	11	45.2
1036623	Holy Trinity Ps	17	*	10	*	8	19	59	48.1
1036624	St Paul's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	13	41.7
1036630	St Clare's Primary School	*	*	*	5	*	8	24	36.6
1046571	Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	*	*	*	*	*	*	6	36.5
1046593	Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh	*	*	*	*	*	5	7	33.9
1046596	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	*	*	*	*	*	5	10	31.1
1046641	Scoil An Droichid	*	*	*	*	*	5	7	35.9
1046671	Gaelscoil Na Mona	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	43.1
2012617	Erganagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	6	30.5
2012711	Donemana Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	35.9
2016071	Greenhaw Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	15	39.9
2016124	Ashlea Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	40.0
2016262	Newtownstewart Model Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	30.9
2016564	Fountain Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	52.2
2030373	Nazareth House Ps	16	*	*	*	*	*	24	35.0
2030381	Holy Child Ps	6	5	*	*	*	*	17	64.2

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
2032510	Barrack Street Boys' Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	15	51.9
2032664	St Davog's Scraghey Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	36.8
2032716	St Patrick's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	41.2
2033707	Mullabuoy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	12	32.6
2036008	St Patrick's Ps	5	*	*	*	*	6	18	36.9
2036032	St John's Ps	18	11	*	#	7	13	58	42.6
2036084	Steelstown Vol Maintained Ps	7	*	8	5	#	24	52	44.4
2036094	St Patrick's Ps	7	*	*	*	*	8	23	35.4
2036142	St Brigid's Ps	8	*	*	*	*	10	29	51.3
2036143	St Oliver Plunkett Ps	6	*	*	*	*	10	21	43.6
2036227	St Pauls Ps, Slievemore	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	74.7
2036259	Trench Road Ps	12	*	*	*	*	8	31	32.6
2036389	St Anne's Ps	19	*	5	*	*	5	37	35.3
2036449	Christ The King Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	52.0
2036459	St Theresa's Ps	6	*	*	*	*	5	18	32.2
2036461	St Theresa's Ps, Lenamore	17	*	*	*	*	6	31	55.9
2036465	Chapel Road Ps	5	*	*	*	*	*	6	38.6
2036472	Holy Family Ps	11	*	*	5	*	6	25	51.0
2036473	St Eithne's Ps	22	8	6	6	5	11	58	34.3
2036475	Longtower Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	13	50.0
2036555	St Eugene's Ps	5	*	*	*	*	*	13	35.1
2036574	Bunscoil Cholmcille	*	*	*	*	*	*	9	40.9
2046646	Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	46.7
2046677	Gaelscoil Na Gerann	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	33.3
3010781	Harryville Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	12	45.7
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	41.1
3010860	Sunnylands Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	15	42.1
3010873	Bushmills Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	33.6
3010895	Rathcoole Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	11	39.9
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	7	*	*	*	5	7	25	37.9
3013331	Ballycraig Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	34.7
3016005	Silverstream Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	43.8
3016038	Hollybank Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	14	34.5
3016040	Armoy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	36.0
3016052	Harpurs Hill Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	9	38.1
3016058	Parkhall Ps	*	*	*	*	*	14	23	35.2
3016063	Dunclug Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	15	45.8

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
3016171	Ballee Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	6	53.4
3016249	Earlview Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	8	43.3
3016252	Ballysally Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	55.6
3056231	Rathenraw Integrated Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	41.2
4010743	Largymore Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	14	34.5
4010885	Tonagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	32.2
4011632	Cregagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	14	34.5
4013023	Bloomfield Road Ps	7	*	*	*	*	*	18	36.8
4013038	Tullycarnet Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	8	51.1
4013309	Derriaghy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	60.5
4013334	Knockmore Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	9	32.5
4016002	Kilcooley Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	11	66.1
4016083	West Winds Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	37.1
4016144	Old Warren Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	8	61.5
4036081	St Luke's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	14	20	73.4
4036134	St Mark's Ps	5	*	*	6	*	20	37	50.6
4036182	St Colmcille's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	54.6
4036285	The Good Shepherd Ps	7	*	*	*	*	12	30	60.1
4036480	St Kieran's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	13	73.4
4036618	Christ The Redeemer Ps	7	6	5	*	*	11	35	35.0
4046600	Scoil Na Fuisseige	*	*	*	*	*	*	9	50.4
5012643	Stewartstown Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	37.1
5016117	Ballyoran Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	41.3
5031070	St Michael's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	47.1
5031135	St Oliver's Ps (Carrickrovaddy)	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	31.1
5031146	Anamar Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	44.1
5031148	St Patrick's Ps	9	*	*	*	*	7	20	30.8
5031158	St Patrick's Ps	15	*	*	*	*	*	23	39.2
5036099	St Patrick's Ps	7	*	*	6	*	*	21	40.8
5036433	St Malachy's Ps	6	*	*	*	*	11	26	43.0
5036590	Primate Dixon Ps	17	*	5	7	#	26	60	39.5
5036610	St Francis Of Assisi Primary School	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	30.0
5046637	Gaelscoil Ui Neill	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	36.3

* Fewer than five cases

Figure has not been given under rules of statistical disclosure

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS FOR SCHOOLS WITH A FREE SCHOOL MEAL ENTITLEMENT (FSME) OF 30% OR MORE IN 2006/07

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
1010063	Currie Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	6	73.1
1010146	Euston Street Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	11	53.5
1010205	Forth River Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	11	35.9
1010221	Springfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	56.2
1010231	Strand Primary School	*	*	*	*	*	13	29	31.0
1010255	Elmgrove Ps	17	7	*	*	*	11	43	36.2
1010267	Nettlefield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	#	12	58.2
1010269	Avoniel Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	56.6
1010271	Beechfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	5	76.4
1010283	Grove Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	58.8
1010296	Ballygolan Ps	*	*	*	*	*	#	#	51.0
1010301	Taughmonagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	47.0
1010321	Vere Foster Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	76.5
1010323	Edenbrooke Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	12	64.1
1010863	Suffolk Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	5	45.1
1013018	Knocknagoney Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	#	47.1
1016059	Blackmountain Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	62.5
1016060	Donegall Road Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	#	43.3
1016076	Ballysillan Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	#	49.1
1016205	Fane Street Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	#	36.8
1016207	Blythefield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	7	74.1
1016483	Cliftonville Ps	*	*	*	*	*	18	19	39.3
1016485	Glenwood Ps	*	*	*	*	*	20	23	53.4
1016498	Malvern Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	66.7
1016499	Botanic Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	#	47.2
1016532	Wheatfield Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	13	44.0
1016537	Lowwood Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	12	39.4
1016604	Harmony Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	#	58.2
1016647	Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	47.7
1030194	Holy Cross Boys' Ps	9	*	5	*	*	9	31	52.0
1030316	St Aidan's Christian Brothers Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	72.1
1030317	St Bernadette's Ps	*	*	*	*	#	11	12	69.3
1030326	Our Lady's Girls' Ps	11	*	*	*	6	16	39	46.4
1030329	Edmund Rice (Cb) Ps	*	*	*	*	*	16	28	52.0
1030331	Holy Cross Girls' Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	11	63.8
1036041	Mercy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	18	30	37.5

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
1036042	St Vincent De Paul Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	8	56.8
1036048	St Mary's Star Of The Sea Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	11	33.9
1036464	Star Of The Sea Girls' Ps	*	*	*	*	5	26	37	58.0
1036466	St Malachy's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	13	58.9
1036471	Sacred Heart Ps	*	*	*	*	5	10	22	45.8
1036505	St Matthew's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	15	60.0
1036565	St Kevin's Ps	6	*	*	*	*	13	30	38.7
1036566	Holy Family Ps	9	*	*	*	*	6	26	46.9
1036602	St Oliver Plunkett Ps	7	*	*	*	*	17	29	40.4
1036620	St Peter's Ps	7	*	*	5	*	5	23	61.4
1036621	St Joseph's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	11	51.6
1036623	Holy Trinity Ps	19	*	*	5	*	20	52	48.2
1036624	St Paul's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	12	39.3
1036630	St Clare's Primary School	5	*	*	*	5	11	30	38.6
1046571	Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	34.2
1046593	Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	39.2
1046596	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	*	*	*	*	*	6	9	33.6
1046641	Scoil An Droichid	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	32.6
1046671	Gaelscoil Na Mona	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	47.0
1046672	Gaelscoil An Lonnain	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	56.8
2012276	Burnfoot Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	31.9
2012711	Donemana Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	34.6
2016071	Greenhaw Ps	7	*	*	*	*	*	19	40.8
2016124	Ashlea Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	7	53.9
2016564	Fountain Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	#	51.2
2030364	Rosemount Ps	5	*	*	*	*	5	17	31.0
2030373	Nazareth House Ps	10	5	*	*	6	10	35	37.7
2030381	Holy Child Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	16	71.1
2031868	St Tierney's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	34.7
2031869	St Mary's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	17	36.8
2032212	Glendermott Ps	6	*	*	*	*	*	12	34.3
2032510	Barrack Street Boys' Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	15	50.8
2032639	Drumduff Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	37.7
2032664	St Davog's Scraghey Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	33.3
2033707	Mullabuoy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	37.0
2036008	St Patrick's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	11	36.6

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
2036032	St John's Ps	18	6	#	7	*	17	56	44.9
2036084	Steelstown Vol Maintained Ps	9	*	7	5	5	29	56	45.6
2036094	St Patrick's Ps	8	*	*	*	*	6	23	44.2
2036096	St Mary's Girls' Ps	9	6	*	*	*	8	31	30.3
2036142	St Brigid's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	17	24	51.1
2036143	St Oliver Plunkett Ps	10	*	*	*	*	6	22	46.7
2036227	St Pauls Ps, Slievemore	*	*	*	*	*	12	18	76.4
2036259	Trench Road Ps	9	*	7	5	*	15	43	34.9
2036389	St Anne's Ps	5	*	*	*	*	9	25	39.5
2036449	Christ The King Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	14	62.2
2036459	St Theresa's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	11	36.6
2036461	St Theresa's Ps, Lenamore	7	8	*	*	7	12	36	56.3
2036465	Chapel Road Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	15	38.1
2036472	Holy Family Ps	12	*	*	*	*	9	29	53.5
2036473	St Eithne's Ps	22	6	*	*	7	12	53	34.5
2036475	Longtower Ps	7	*	*	*	7	*	20	53.5
2036555	St Eugene's Ps	7	*	*	*	*	7	17	35.8
2036557	All Saints Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	30.0
2036574	Bunscoil Cholmcille	10	*	*	*	*	*	18	38.0
2046646	Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir	*	*	*	*	*	*	6	52.6
3010781	Harryville Ps	*	*	*	*	*	#	13	47.5
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	6	45.2
3010860	Sunnylands Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	41.0
3010870	Moyle Ps	5	*	*	*	*	11	27	30.6
3010873	Bushmills Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	36.2
3010895	Rathcoole Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	40.3
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	13	43.0
3013331	Ballycraigy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	14	33.0
3013333	Ballycastle Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	34.0
3016005	Silverstream Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	50.0
3016038	Hollybank Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	12	36.6
3016040	Armoy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	31.6
3016052	Harpurs Hill Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	43.6
3016058	Parkhall Ps	*	*	*	*	*	11	21	34.0
3016063	Dunclug Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	10	40.9
3016171	Ballee Ps	*	*	*	*	*	7	7	52.1
3016249	Earlview Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	39.1

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
3016252	Ballysally Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	8	58.6
3033303	St Oliver Plunkett's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	17	32.6
3036050	St Joseph's Ps	*	*	*	5	*	10	24	31.0
3036250	St Joseph's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	8	56.2
3052071	Carhill Integrated Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	31.8
3056231	Rathenraw Integrated Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	39.6
4010743	Largymore Ps	6	*	*	*	*	11	21	33.6
4010885	Tonagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	9	34.4
4011632	Cregagh Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	30.9
4013023	Bloomfield Road Ps	*	*	*	*	*	9	18	37.0
4013038	Tullycarnet Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	9	47.7
4013309	Derriaghy Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	42.0
4013334	Knockmore Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	34.4
4016002	Kilcooley Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	7	60.7
4016083	West Winds Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	5	43.9
4016144	Old Warren Ps	*	*	*	*	*	10	15	63.4
4036081	St Luke's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	13	13	76.1
4036134	St Mark's Ps	*	5	*	5	*	12	31	50.9
4036182	St Colmcille's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	8	56.4
4036285	The Good Shepherd Ps	8	*	*	6	*	30	50	60.9
4036480	St Kieran's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	8	21	72.8
4036618	Christ The Redeemer Ps	12	*	*	*	*	7	28	38.3
4046600	Scoil Na Fuisseoige	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	52.2
4051601	Portaferry Integrated Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	9	37.5
5011190	Tullygally Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	66.1
5016117	Ballyoran Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	45.1
5030975	St Malachy's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	6	8	30.7
5031070	St Michael's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	54.8
5031086	Clonalig Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	36.0
5031107	St Teresa's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	30.0
5031146	Anamar Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	60.0
5031148	St Patrick's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	12	18	36.4
5031158	St Patrick's Ps	9	*	5	*	*	9	29	41.4
5031166	St Michael's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	35.2
5031176	St Peter's Ps	15	*	*	*	*	11	34	30.2
5031340	St Joseph's Convent Ps	27	11	7	*	*	20	71	30.4
5032692	St Mary's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	34.9
5036001	St Mary's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	31.9
5036047	St Patrick's Ps	9	*	*	*	*	10	24	33.9

School Ref.	School Name	A	B1	B2	C1	C2	D	Total Sitting	FSME %
5036057	St Malachy's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	30.6
5036099	St Patrick's Ps	8	*	*	*	*	5	21	40.9
5036110	St Joseph's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	5	15	30.7
5036363	St Mary's Ps, Aughnacloy	*	*	*	*	*	*	5	32.9
5036433	St Malachy's Ps	*	*	*	*	*	13	27	51.9
5036545	St Colman's Ps	5	*	*	*	*	13	24	30.4
5036590	Primate Dixon Ps	12	*	*	*	*	13	35	44.4
5046597	Bunscoil An Iuir	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	38.1
5046637	Gaelscoil Ui Neill	5	*	*	*	*	*	#	41.4

* Fewer than five cases

Figure has not been given under rules of statistical disclosure

Safer Routes to Schools Programme

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools that have availed of the Safer Routes to Schools programme. (AQW 762/09)

The Minister of Education: Ghlac na scoileanna seo a leanas leis an chlár, 'Bealaí Sábháilte chuig an Scoil'.

The following schools have availed of the Safer Routes to School programme.

Ashfield Girl's High School, Belfast
Cavehill Primary School, Belfast
Holy Trinity primary School, Belfast
Carrickfergus College, Carrickfergus
Carrickfergus Grammar School, Carrickfergus,
Braniel Primary School, Belfast
Redburn Primary School, Holywood,
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor
St Joseph's Primary School Crumlin,
Moorfields Primary School Ballymena
Groarty Primary School Derry
St Peter's High Derry
St Paul's Secondary School Kilrea
Limavady Central Primary Limavady
St Coleman's Primary School, Lawrencetown
St Coleman's Primary School, Banbridge
Mullavilly Primary School,Tandragee
St Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan
St Francis Primary School, Lurgan

St Marys High School, Downpatrick
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch
St Marys Primary School, Mullaghbane
St Michaels Primary School, Newtownhamilton
Ampertaine Upperlands PS Upperlands,
Coagh Primary School Cookstown
St. Patricks Primary School, Moneymore
St. Patricks Primary School, Annaghmore
St. Patricks Primary School, Ardboe
The Royal School, Dungannon
St Josephs P S Drumquin
St Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge
Loanends PS, Crumlin
Carnalridge PS, Portrush
St Patrick's PS, Pennyburn
Glenndermott PS, Derry
Roan PS, Eglish
Spires Int PS, Magherafelt
Altayeskey PS, Draperstown
Ballylifford PS, Cookstown
Glengormley High School
Mallusk PS
Ben Madigan PS, Belfast
Derriaghy PS, Lisburn
Ballinderry PS, Lisburn
Ballymacward PS, Lisburn
Sullivan Upper, Holywood

Glenola College, Bangor
Newtonbreda HS, Castlereagh
Sacred Heart PS, Dundrum
Castle Gardens PS Newtownards
Larne Grammar
Groggan PS, Randalstown
Culcrow PS, Coleraine
Lisnagelvin PS, Derry
Culmore PS, Derry
St Treas PS, Magherafelt
St Mary's PS, Fivemiletown
St John's High, Dromore
St Dymphna's PS, Dromore
Artigarvan PS, Strabane
St Columban's PS, Belcoo
Primate Dixon PS, Coalisland
St Paul's PS, Ivinestown
Dungannon PS
St Macartan's PS, Clogher
Lead Hill PS, Belfast
Moneyrea PS
Moir PS
Gilnahirk PS, Belfast
La Salle Boys Jr School, Belfast
St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar
Christian Brother's Secondary School
St Teresa's PS
Currie PS
Holy Rosary PS
Stranmillis PS
Lough View Int PS
Richmount PS, Portadown
Bridge Int PS, Banbridge
Kings Park PS, Lurgan
Bocombra PS, Portadown
St Macartans PS, Loughinisland
Moneynick PS, Randalstown
Garryduff PS, Ballymoney
Kilmoye PS, Ballymoney
Ballytober PS, Bushmills

St Columba's PS, Kilrea
St John's PS, Derry
Crossroads PS Drumagarnier
Tobermore PS, Magherafelt
Derrychrin PS, Cookstown
St Patrick's PS, Donaghmore
Aughnacloy PS
Churchill PS, Caledon
Parklodge PS, Belfast
Whitehead PS
St Louise's College, Belfast
Saintfield HS
Carrick PS
Dromintee PS, Killeavey
Andrews Memorial PS, Comber
Bridge Int PS Banbridge
Kings Park PS, Lurgan
Bocombra PS, Portadown
Irish Society PS, Coleraine
Ballougry PS
Fivemiletown High
Clogher Regional PS
St Joseph's PS, Galbally
Lagan College
Ballynahinch PS
Clonalig PS, Crossmaglen
Abbey PS, Newtownards
St Peter's PS, Moy
Moyallen PS, Portadown
Carrickmannon PS
St Joseph's PS Ballymartin

Area-Based Planning Exercise

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education when the consultation on the post-primary area based planning exercise for schools will be completed; and whether the process is currently behind schedule.

(AQW 773/09)

The Minister of Education: Following my statement of 4 March 2008, I established a Central Area Based Planning Group and 5 Local Area Based Planning groups to consider the most efficient and effective

arrangements for the post-primary phase of education to deliver the Entitlement Framework to young people, from 2013 onwards, on a regional basis. These groups are independently chaired and are representative of all the owners and promoters of schools.

Much work has already been done by the Central Group and the 5 Local Area Group Chairpersons to agree on a consultation process which will invite all interested parties to make a submission on how best to deliver the Entitlement Framework. The guidance for the Local Area Groups ensures that the exercise will be taken forward in an open and inclusive manner, based on real consultation and engagement with stakeholders. The details of the consultation process will be available in the very near future.

Bím i dteagmháil le Cathaoirleach an Lárghrúpa go rialta agus tá mé iontach sásta leis an dul chun cinn go dtí seo. Tá mé cinnte go gcuirfidh an Lárghrúpa tuarascáil eatramhach amach faoi dheireadh mhí Dheireadh Fómhair, de réir mar atá iarrtha agam, agus go gcuirfear dréachtphean réigiúnach amach ina dhiaidh sin faoi dheireadh mhí Feabhra 2009. Glacfaidh mé comhairle ón Chathaoirleach agus ón Leaschathaoirleach maidir le dáta eisiúna na tuarascála deiridh.

I am in regular contact with the Chairperson of the Central Group and I am very pleased with the progress to date. I am confident that the Central Group will provide an interim report by the end of October, as I have requested, with a draft regional plan to follow by the end of February 2009. I will take advice from the Chair and Vice Chair as to timing of the final report.

Maine Integrated Primary in Randalstown

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to indicate a timescale for the new build for Maine Integrated Primary in Randalstown. (AQW 832/09)

The Minister of Education: Osclaíodh Maine Integrated Primary School i mí Mheán Fómhair 2003. Níl critéir na Roinne um dheontas caipitil comhlíonta ag an scoil go fóill agus níl aon phleananna ann faoi láthair chun foirgneamh nua a thógáil.

Maine Integrated Primary School opened in September 2003. The school has not yet met the Department's criteria for capital grant and there are no current plans to provide a new build.

I understand however that an additional mobile classroom has been added on site this year.

Young People Playing Musical Instruments

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken to encourage young people to play musical instruments in school. (AQW 848/09)

The Minister of Education: Participation in musical activities can help to build confidence and self-esteem and have a positive impact across other subject areas. Music is part of the statutory curriculum in schools from Foundation to Key Stage 3. Pupils may also choose to study it at Key Stage 4 and beyond. It is a matter for each individual school to determine how much time to devote to Music in order to meet the requirements of the curriculum and the needs of their pupils.

Bionn tacaíocht bhreise ar fáil do scoileanna fosta maidir le daltaí ar mhian leo gléas áirithe ceoil a fhoghlaim. Is é an tSeirbhís Ceoil do Scoileanna i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a thugann an tacaíocht seo, agus cuimsíonn an tseirbhís teagasc ceoil do dhaoine aonair agus do ghrúpaí, iasacht an ghléis cheoil agus scéimeanna cuidithe um cheannach.

Schools also have access to additional support for pupils wishing to learn a particular instrument. This is provided by the Schools' Music Service of each Education and Library Board, and includes group and individual instrumental tuition, instrumental loan and assisted purchase schemes. It is a matter for each ELB to determine how much funding it makes available, from within its overall block grant allocation, for its Curriculum and Advisory Support Service and, within this, for its Music Service.

Special Needs Pupils

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many pupils with special needs transferred to each post-primary school in the (i) Newry and Mourne District Council; and (ii) Armagh City and District Council areas. (AQW 881/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

YEAR 8 PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) BY DISTRICT COUNCIL OF SCHOOL LOCATION 2007/08

School Name	SEN stages 1-5	District Council of School
Markethill High School	*	Armagh
City Armagh High School	8	Armagh
Tandragee Junior High School	12	Armagh
St Brigid's High School	*	Armagh

School Name	SEN stages 1-5	District Council of School
St Patrick's High School	29	Armagh
St Catherine's College	19	Armagh
Armagh Integrated College	7	Armagh
The Royal School Armagh	*	Armagh
St Patrick's Grammar School	*	Armagh
Kilkeel High School	8	Newry and Mourne
Newtownhamilton High School	6	Newry and Mourne
Newry High School	15	Newry and Mourne
St Joseph's Boys' High School	36	Newry and Mourne
St Columban's College	6	Newry and Mourne
St Mary's High School	23	Newry and Mourne
St Mark's High School	35	Newry and Mourne
St Paul's High School	36	Newry and Mourne
St Joseph's High School	20	Newry and Mourne
St Louis Grammar School	*	Newry and Mourne
Abbey Christian Brothers Grammar School	6	Newry and Mourne
Our Lady's Grammar School	*	Newry and Mourne
St Colman's College	*	Newry and Mourne
Sacred Heart Grammar School	0	Newry and Mourne

Source: Annual School Census 2007/08

* Denotes fewer than five cases

Meanscoil Feirste

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to outline the provision of transport for the pupils of Meanscoil Feirste who reside outside of the 3 mile radius of the school. (AQW 904/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá na socruithe um sholáthar chúnamh iompair do dhaltai atá ag freastal ar Choláiste Feirste, Meánscoil Feirste roimhe seo, díreach mar atá na socruithe atá ann do gach scoil eile.

The arrangements for the provision of transport assistance for pupils attending Coláiste Feirste, formerly Meánscoil Feirste, are the same as those arrangements that are in place for all other schools.

The approved home to school transport arrangements require Education and Library Boards to make such arrangements as they consider necessary to facilitate the attendance of pupils at grant-aided schools. The current arrangements restrict transport provision to pupils who have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of

their home (3 miles for post-primary school age pupils). For the purposes of the transport arrangements the term 'suitable school' has a precise definition. It relates solely to the established educational categories of controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium, and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

Once eligibility has been established the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) must then determine the most appropriate mode of transport for individual pupils. ELBs have a responsibility to identify the most economical form of transport assistance, using the shortest possible route from home to school. As such, the majority of pupils receive a sessional ticket and travel on public transport services.

In some cases public transport may not be available and in that event ELBs will fulfil their obligations by providing alternative transport assistance using Board-owned vehicles, contracting services, hiring taxis or paying allowances. If no public transport route exists and a parent opts to accept reimbursement for providing their own transport, the ELB will pay up to twice the sessional ticket rate based on the distances involved. Whatever mode of transport the ELB chooses they are required to obtain the best value for money.

Meanscoil Feirste

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils currently attending Meanscoil Feirste who reside along the County Down/South Belfast corridor. (AQW 905/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh á chur ar fáil de réir thoghcheantar parlaiminte áit chónaithe an dalta. Féach an tábla thíos.

The information requested has been provided by parliamentary constituency of pupil residence. Please see the table below.

NUMBER OF PUPILS ATTENDING MEÁNSCOIL FEIRSTE BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE 2007/08

Parliamentary Constituency	Number	Percentage
Belfast East	20	4.0
Belfast North	86	17.0
Belfast South	12	2.4
Belfast West	324	64.0
Lagan Valley	36	7.1
South Antrim	12	2.4
South Down	7	1.4
Invalid Postcodes	9	1.8

Parliamentary Constituency	Number	Percentage
Total Enrolment	506	100.0

Source: Annual School Census 2007/08

Bangor Academy

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education in light of the increased demand for places for Bangor Academy and the proposed closure of Donaghadee High School, what plans the Department has to raise the level of the cap on the intake figures for Bangor Academy. (AQW 935/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl ganntanas áiteanna scoile ann do pháistí i gceantar Dhún Thuaidh taobh istigh d'achar réasúnach taistil óna mbailte. Níor tháinig aon athrú air seo de bharr dhruidim Donaghadee High School.

There is no shortage of school places for children in the North Down area within a reasonable travelling distance of their homes. The closure of Donaghadee High School does not alter this. The admissions and enrolment numbers of Bangor Academy are set in accordance with the accommodation available at the new school. There are no plans to increase the admissions and enrolment numbers of Bangor Academy.

The Department is always willing to consider requests from schools for temporary variations to their admissions and enrolment numbers. However when considering such requests, the Department must take account of the availability of alternative school places in order to maintain a viable schools' estate.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Economic Downturn

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department has a responsive approach to the current economic downturn; and what form his Department's response will take. (AQW 569/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers to help the unemployed find work including those affected by the recent economic changes. The services include mandatory work-focused interviews; action planning for certain clients and measures designed to improve the job prospects for those who have become unemployed.

Local office Managers have necessarily had to respond to the increase in the unemployment over the summer by ensuring that resources were provided to meet the initial needs of those clients.

The Department is conducting a review of Success through Skills, the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy. The review will include research on short term skills needs, as affected by any economic downturn.

The Department will continue to work with DETI and Invest NI in assessing the likely impact of an economic downturn and in the development of any interventions required.

The Department has also taken steps to adjust its current programmes in light of changing economic circumstances. For example, should an apprentice lose his/her employment, the Department has developed a Pre-Apprenticeship component under Training for Success. This component will allow eligible participants, who are no longer able to continue with Apprenticeship training due to redundancy, to continue working towards the achievement of an occupationally specific qualification.

My Department continually monitors labour market information to ensure that we are aware of changes in labour market conditions at the earliest possible opportunity. My Department believes that having good labour market information leads to better labour market decisions - in more difficult times just as much as when the economy is buoyant - and as part of the "Success through Skills" strategy a review of labour market information was carried out and published last year. Following on from that review, measures are being put in place to further improve labour market information - for example at a local level in conjunction with the Workforce Development Forums.

St Mary's University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the courses offered by St Mary's University College. (AQW 815/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: St Mary's University College provides a four year Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme in primary and secondary teacher education. The College also provides a one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Irish Medium Education and a part-time Masters programme in teacher education.

The College also delivers a three year Bachelor of Arts (BA) Honours degree in Liberal Arts.

Conversion Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning the number of colleges that receive conversion funding. (AQW 826/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: On the introduction of a new fit for purpose funding model, based on actual student enrolments, I agreed that both St Mary's and Stranmillis University Colleges should receive conversion funding in academic year 2008/09.

Childcare Learning and Development

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for clarification on the future funding arrangements for level two and level three NVQ on Childcare Learning and Development. (AQW 830/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department funds participation on courses leading to these qualifications through a number of its programmes.

For example, the Department will continue to fund Further Education Colleges to deliver these qualifications while they remain on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). NQF qualifications meet quality criteria devised and agreed by the regulatory authorities for qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and have been endorsed by their respective devolved administrations. In addition, under ApprenticeshipsNI the Department will continue to fund Level 2 and Level 3 NVQ qualifications in Early Years Care and Education as a part of an Apprenticeship Framework, provided that these qualifications remain requirements of the Sector Skills Council that has developed and agreed the Apprenticeship Frameworks in this occupational area. Finally, within the Steps to Work initiative, participants may undertake, where appropriate, an NVQ level 2 in Childcare Learning and Development.

Metropolitan International Schools Ltd

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to state if the company Metropolitan International Schools Ltd, trading as "Skillstrain" and "Scheidegger", is an approved provider of computer training. (AQW 927/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has no role in the award of approved provider status for any organisation, rather this is the responsibility of the Awarding Body whose qualifications a provider would be offering.

Whilst a training organisation may choose to claim Awarding Body status in its own right to promote its own qualifications and run its own courses, it cannot state that its qualifications are nationally recognised if they have not been placed on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This, in turn, cannot happen unless the organisation has been appropriately recognised as an Awarding Body by the regulators.

The regulators which recognise an organisation applying for Awarding Body status are the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (England), the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Wales) and the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland).

Metropolitan International Schools Ltd

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what involvement his Department has with the Metropolitan International Schools Ltd to ensure that its service delivery complies with required standards in quality, including advice and support provided to its customers. (AQW 930/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department holds no contracts with Metropolitan International Schools Limited and has no role in assuring its service delivery.

Service delivery standards are a matter for a training organisation to agree with the relevant Awarding Body for the qualification in question. Awarding Bodies are regulated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (England), the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Wales) and the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland).

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Economic Downturn

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to help the private sector in light of the economic downturn. (AQW 364/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): I am aware that the current economic conditions present local businesses with very immediate challenges. That is why my Department is working with private sector companies to help them address the short-term pressures that they currently face. Invest NI is implementing new initiatives and tailoring existing

programmes to ensure there is a robust support-package for local companies. Invest NI is also delivering a series of seminars to alert client companies to the opportunities and challenges that may arise during the downturn. Specialist assistance will be offered across a range of areas to help businesses at this time.

However, it is also important to recognise that the Executive has a longer term objective of growing a dynamic, innovative economy, as stated in the Programme for Government. DETI, and other Departments and key stakeholders, need to remain focused on achieving this. From a DETI perspective, we will continue to target investment to increase innovation and exports, boost tourism, improve our telecoms infrastructure and promote sources of renewable energy. DETI will also seek to promote enterprise and attract Foreign Direct Investment, which will provide further business opportunities for the private sector.

These measures will help place local businesses in a stronger competitive position to deal with the current slowdown.

Potential Investors

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many potential investors have visited the Craigavon and Banbridge council areas in the last two years; and what imminent visits are planned by potential investors to these areas. (AQW 372/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Ten potential investors (including one repeat visit) visited the Craigavon and Banbridge council areas between 1st April 2006 and 31st March 2008.

To date the number of inward visits by potential investors to Northern Ireland is significantly higher than this time last year, however, in order not to prejudice commercial interests and to protect the confidentiality of potential investors, Invest Northern Ireland is unable to release details of future visits.

Economic Downturn

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the effects the 'credit crunch' and downturn in the global economy is having on local businesses. (AQW 378/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Current global economic conditions, and developments in the financial markets in particular, clearly present local businesses with significant challenges.

In particular, the economic slowdown will have an impact on the demand for goods and services, both in

Northern Ireland and further afield. Key markets, such as the UK and Republic of Ireland, are also feeling the effects of the slowdown and this will reduce the demand for our exports. Furthermore, rising inflation, most notably increases in energy prices, have increased input costs for local businesses which is also impacting on competitiveness at this time.

In the first quarter of 2008/09 Invest NI has not experienced a significant change in offer activity, both in number and in value, when compared to the same period over the last three years. However, there is emerging evidence that its clients are increasingly encountering tightening cash flow difficulties and that it is seeing a reduction in planned development and expansion activity. Combined, this is likely to result in reduced offer activity, particularly in 2009/10 and beyond.

My Department is aware of the difficulties being experienced by local businesses and, where possible, will continue to work with them to help address the short-term pressures they are currently facing. With that in mind, Invest NI is implementing new initiatives and tailoring existing programmes to ensure there is a robust support-package for local companies at this time.

Energy Supplies

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to safeguard future energy supplies. (AQW 463/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland is almost totally dependent at present on imported fossil fuels for the production of electricity, and for supplies of natural gas.

Recent geological studies to investigate the possibility of gas storage in salt caverns in the East Antrim area have been encouraging. The seismic survey by Portland Gas NI Limited is the furthest advanced geological research, and the company is currently planning to drill a directional borehole from a surface location close to Ballylumford.

In addition, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland is working in conjunction with the British Geological Survey to access the extent of the salt beds both onshore and offshore Northern Ireland. These studies will all assist in developing the possibility of a gas storage facility for Northern Ireland which would help to reduce our vulnerability to international fuel price pressures.

In line with EU recommendations, my Department is also supportive of increased interconnection to enhance reliability and stability of energy supply to Northern Ireland. It supports proposals to construct an additional electricity interconnector, between Tyrone and Cavan. The new interconnector will double the interconnection

capacity with the Irish Republic. It will also complement existing gas interconnection with the Irish Republic, and the existing electricity and gas interconnection between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

In addition, my Department continues to encourage the growth of the renewables industry by encouraging the development of wind, tidal, bio-energy and geothermal technologies and to seek to diversify, lessen our dependence on fossil fuels, and increase security of supply.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her Department's prioritisation of agenda items to be discussed at the next sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQW 584/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The draft agenda for the next NSMC meeting in Trade and Business Development Sectoral format is under discussion between my officials and officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and in that context I will consider the prioritisation of agenda items. Once the agenda is agreed it will be issued to the Executive and the Assembly.

Sports Tourism

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the working relationship between (i) the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; and (ii) Tourism Ireland, and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA); and if these bodies have worked with the GAA to maximise its tourism potential. (AQW 624/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) works very closely with Tourism Ireland (TI) in all aspects of marketing and promotion primarily through publications, advertising and website.

The sporting traditions of Northern Ireland, are represented prominently in Tourism Ireland's global marketing communications - through their suite of 41 websites in 19 languages, in market literature and in promotional and publicity campaigns in key markets. It is recognised that their portrayal can play an increasingly important role in helping potential visitors to envisage some of the unique and compelling aspects of a holiday here.

Responsibility for promoting Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) events rests with the GAA. NITB features festivals and events within certain marketing materials (e.g. its consumer website) when it is notified

of such events and when these are relevant to tourists. Specific reference is made to Casement Park as a venue for hurling, football and camogie.

Sports Tourism

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland have been in contact with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) to explore the extent to which the GAA could feature as a tourism product. (AQW 625/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has not actively contacted the representative bodies of any sporting organisations in Northern Ireland, including the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).

Sports tourism features alongside activities within the draft corporate plan and therefore exploration of how sporting events can assist NITB to meet their corporate objectives will be considered.

Currently, the NITB promotes on its website those sporting events of which it is notified, and which are of national or international prominence. Specific reference is made to Casement Park as a venue for hurling, football and camogie.

Tourism Ireland recognises the promotional potential of the sporting traditions and sporting traditions are represented prominently in its global marketing communications - through its suite of 41 websites in 19 languages, in market literature and in promotional and publicity campaigns in key markets. It is recognised that their portrayal can play an increasingly important role in helping potential visitors to envisage some of the unique and compelling aspects of a holiday here.

Independent Retailers

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many independent retailers currently operate in town centres; and how this compares with 20 years ago. (AQW 687/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not collect the information required to answer this question.

Merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to ensure that there will be no job losses as a result of the recent merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB. (AQW 752/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here continues to be of significant strategic importance to our economy. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to the Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

I plan to write to the Chief Executive of HBOS Plc, again stressing the importance of the HBOS investment here and requesting a meeting to discuss any implications this proposed acquisition may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had with Lloyds TSB in relation to potential job losses arising from its recent takeover of HBOS. (AQW 753/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here continues to be of significant strategic importance to our economy.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to the Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

I plan to write to the Chief Executive of HBOS Plc, again stressing the importance of the HBOS investment here and requesting a meeting to discuss any implication this proposed acquisition may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts

within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to secure HBOS jobs, including those at its Belfast call centre, following the takeover by Lloyds TSB. (AQW 797/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here continues to be of significant strategic importance to our economy.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to the Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

I have also written to the Chief Executive of HBOS Plc, again stressing the importance of the HBOS investment here and requesting a meeting to discuss any implication this proposed acquisition may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has requested a meeting with management of HBOS following its takeover by Lloyds TSB to seek assurances on the security of jobs at its branches and call centre. (AQW 829/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I have requested a meeting with the Chief Executive of HBOS Plc, to discuss any implication the proposed acquisition by Lloyds TSB of HBOS may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to the Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Perfecseal

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what meetings and correspondence he has had with management of Perfecseal in the last year; and to outline the key areas raised in these engagements. (AQW 838/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I can confirm that, since taking up my position as Minister for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in June of this year, I have had the opportunity to meet with senior management of Perfecseal on two occasions. I have also corresponded with Perfecseal on three occasions. My first meeting was on the 12th September 2008 and on the 19th of September I then attended a further joint meeting with the company and the Minister for the Environment.

The key areas raised in both the meetings and in correspondence have related to Perfecseal's concerns in respect of potential barriers to business growth, in particular planning issues and the estate management for Campsie Industrial Estate.

As a high value business with strong growth potential, Perfecseal is obviously very important to Northern Ireland. I, and senior officials from Invest Northern Ireland have therefore recently offered to meet with Perfecseal's senior management and that of its parent company in order to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location. Having also discussed the issue of the Campsie site with Invest Northern Ireland, I am

fully satisfied that Invest Northern Ireland has met and exceeded its commitment to maintain its land within Campsie to a good standard.

Perfecseal

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Industry if she is aware of concerns regarding a planning application which could negatively impact on the integrity of the Perfecseal plant in Derry; and to detail what steps she is taking to allay those concerns and safeguard the future of the plant. (AQW 844/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I am fully aware of Perfecseal's concerns regarding a planning application. In response to these concerns, which have been raised by the Perfecseal senior management team, I met with Perfecseal, at short notice, on 12th September 2008. At the meeting I agreed to arrange a joint meeting with Minister Wilson, in order to facilitate discussions in respect of planning issues. This joint meeting took place on 19th September 2008.

Planning applications are assessed by Planning Service in line with prevailing legislation. The application procedure and any forthcoming decisions are a matter for the Department of the Environment. I am confident that Planning Service gives careful consideration to the information submitted in relation to all planning applications.

I recognise Perfecseal as a high value business with strong potential for growth and I, and senior officials from Invest NI, recently offered to meet with the senior management of Perfecseal and its parent company in order to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location. Invest NI offered £5.3 million of assistance in 2005, to secure the current investment made by Perfecseal in its new premises at Campsie Industrial Estate. Invest NI remains in close contact with Perfecseal and is working to secure any further potential Perfecseal investment at Campsie Industrial Estate.

NACCO Job Losses

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 401/09, if the Minister is aware that NACCO announced to its workers on the morning of Thursday 25 September 2008 that there will be 93 job losses. (AQW 859/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I have been briefed on the current situation at NACCO by Invest NI.

On Thursday 25 September 2008, NACCO announced potential redundancies of up to 93 employees at the Craigavon plant due to a slowdown in demand for forklift trucks, particularly in the European market. The

company will now enter a period of consultation with the employees and their representatives.

Invest NI remains in close contact with the company and will continue to work with management at the Craigavon plant to maintain its competitiveness within the wider NACCO group.

NACCO Job Losses

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 401/09, why her Department was given contradictory information on 12 September 2008 in relation to NACCO's intention and timeframe for possible announcements. (AQW 860/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NACCO contacted Invest NI on Friday 12 September 2008, in response to a speculative article on job losses in the local press.

This was to inform Invest NI that no decisions on redundancies had been made and that Invest NI would be kept informed.

A misunderstanding arose in the communication of the detail and Invest NI understood that the announcement would be made in December 2008.

When I became aware that the company was planning to make an announcement in September, I wrote to the member providing the most up to date information available to me.

A revised written answer to AQW 401/09 was also provided.

NACCO Job Losses

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 401/09, if Invest NI will review its assistance to NACCO in light of the announcement of job losses, to ensure all necessary assistance is given to the NACCO plant in Craigavon and all public money invested in the plant is protected. (AQW 861/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI is in regular contact with NACCO management at the Craigavon plant.

Selective financial assistance was awarded to NACCO in 2003 and 2004 to help secure two internationally mobile projects. These projects are still active at Craigavon and they have sustained skilled employment at the factory.

Invest NI continues to monitor the progress of these projects and is working closely with management to maintain the plant's position as a competitive manufacturing unit, and to encourage new investment in Craigavon by the NACCO group.

ENVIRONMENT

Non-Farming Rural Dwellers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department will meet the requirements of non-farming rural dwellers in relation to new rural planning laws. (AQW 550/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Revised draft PPS14 offers considerable benefits for non-farming rural dwellers, but these benefits cannot be realised until the policy is brought into effect. I hope the Executive will consider the revised draft at the earliest opportunity. If there is no agreement, I will shelve the revised draft and we will live with the existing policy. This would mean residential development in rural areas continuing to be hampered by restrictive planning policy, and planning policy on farm diversification continuing to lag behind rural development policies.

Otter Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to increase the numbers of otters, through retention of habitat and prevention of pesticides in rivers. (AQW 574/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department published the Northern Ireland Species Action Plan for Otters in March 2007. The Plan identifies issues such as development, poor water quality, and habitat fragmentation as having a negative impact on the Northern Ireland otter population.

Otters can be found in a wide range of aquatic habitats including ditches, streams, ponds, lakes, rivers and coastal areas. To ensure the quality is maintained of areas that otters frequent my Department has published action plans which address the conservation concerns of various relevant habitats.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has also produced the 'River Conservation Strategy for Northern Ireland' which outlines its role in protecting, conserving and enhancing the natural value of rivers in Northern

Ireland. Additionally, NIEA is a statutory consultee to Planning Service and provides advice on site specific impacts within designated and non-designated rivers, when requested to do so.

Under the terms of the 'Habitats Directive' member states are required to designate and manage Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) for selected species such as otter. The otter is present as a qualifying feature of five Northern Ireland river and freshwater lake SACs.

Consumption of Alcohol on Coaches

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if he will consider reviewing the legislation on the consumption of alcohol on coaches, as currently there is no requirement either in the legislation itself or in the license issued by the Driver and Licensing Agency, for coach operators to notify passengers that consumption of alcohol on board is an offence.

(AQW 585/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is working with Translink to update the legislation dealing with consumption of alcohol on buses and coaches used as public service vehicles (as contained in the Public Service Vehicles Regulations (NI) 1985). It is planned to issue a public consultation on proposals by early 2009.

Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the results of the pollution risk assessments recently undertaken at all business premises in Mallusk; (ii) the total number of serious pollution risks identified; and (iii) the nature of these serious risks.

(AQW 589/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) undertakes Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments at any site that is causing or has the potential to cause pollution e.g. construction sites and various industrial and commercial sites. This includes an investigation of the catchments and water bodies that are at risk, or potentially at risk, from pollution or have a history of bad water quality. Through direct interaction with site managers and owners NIEA can, through education or enforcement, reduce the risk of these sites causing pollution or downgrading the water quality in the catchment.

On the 5 July 2008, NIEA sent out information letters to over 300 businesses in the Mallusk Industrial Estate. NIEA has assigned an initial Risk Category to all these businesses based on its knowledge of the site and the nature of the operating business.

NIEA is currently carrying out an individual Pollution Risk Assessment on all of the sites in the Mallusk Industrial Estate. The results of the 82 Pollution Risk Assessments which have already been completed are detailed in the table below.

Risk Assessment	High	Medium	Low
Number of sites	18	15	49

The potential pollutants identified on the 18 High Risk sites include oil, chemicals, cleaning materials and concrete.

Reduction of Lead in Wetlands

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what meetings he has had with (i) the British Association for Shooting and Conservation; and (ii) Country Alliance Northern Ireland, to discuss the reduction of lead in wetlands and its impact on the shooting seasons.

(AQW 598/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not met with either of these organisations to discuss this matter.

Climate Change

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what policy advice he has been given by officials in relation to the causes of climate change. (AQW 643/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Officials have advised that there is a scientific view that one of the causes of recent climate change has been man through greenhouse gas emissions.

Pomeroy Forest

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has investigated the depositing of materials, including soil and tree roots, from the development at Pomeroy Forest by Pomeroy Developments Ltd; and to detail the results of any investigations.

(AQW 650/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) provides scientific and technical advice to Planning Service on issues relating to the sewerage infrastructure to which a proposed development would connect.

This advice is based on the ability of the sewerage system and the receiving waste water treatment works to cope with the additional load and the extent of the environmental impact.

Connection to a public sewer is not a matter for NIEA nor Planning Service; it falls under Northern Ireland Water's legislation, specifically, the Water and Sewerage Service (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to instruct Planning Service staff to inspect all completed replacement dwellings to ensure that the dwelling being replaced has been demolished.

(AQW 651/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At present I have no plans to instruct Planning Service staff to

visit all sites where conditions require the demolition of dwellings to be replaced. Any condition requiring that a dwelling be demolished will be placed on the Statutory Charges Register which is maintained by the Land Registers and will be identified by a solicitor if ownership of the land is exchanged. Planning Service staff will however investigate any cases brought to our attention by the public or identified by development control staff in the course of their normal duties. Enforcement action will be taken to ensure the condition is complied with. A Breach of Condition Notice may only be served within 10 years of the breach of planning control to which it relates having occurred. I would stress there is also an onus on any landowner / developer to ensure that they demolish the dwelling to be replaced.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the role of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in determining planning applications that require a connection to a public sewer; and whether the consultation response from the NIEA takes precedence over views expressed by Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 653/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) provides scientific and technical advice to Planning Service on issues relating to the sewerage infrastructure to which a proposed development would connect.

This advice is based on the ability of the sewerage system and the receiving waste water treatment works to cope with the additional load and the extent of the environmental impact.

Connection to a public sewer is not a matter for NIEA nor Planning Service; it falls under Northern Ireland Water's legislation, specifically, the Water and Sewerage Service (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Bonfire Clean-Up Cost

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment for the total expenditure incurred by each district council in cleaning up and repairing bonfire sites in the summer of 2008. (AQW 666/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The total expenditure incurred by each district council in cleaning up and repairing bonfire sites in the summer of 2008 is set out in the attached table.

Council	£
Antrim	1,995

Council	£
Ards	7,885
Armagh	4,761
Ballymena	1,320
Ballymoney	7,548
Banbridge	400
Belfast	21,738
Carrickfergus	500
Castlereagh	2,593
Coleraine	400
Cookstown	700
Craigavon	4,585
Derry	9,000
Down	3,000
Dungannon & S Tyrone	0
Fermanagh	450
Larne	6,372
Limavady	0
Lisburn	9,270
Magherafelt	3,000
Moyle	1,658
Newry & Mourne	5,500
Newtownabbey	1,577
North Down	2,200
Omagh	2,000
Strabane	0
Total	98,452

River Damage

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the costs incurred by his Department (i) investigating; and (ii) repairing, damage done to rivers during recorded pollution incidents in (a) Northern Ireland; and (b) the South Antrim constituency, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 669/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Table 1 below sets out the number of incidents and the approximate costs per year for the investigation of all reported water pollution incidents throughout Northern Ireland over the past five years. For cost purposes, calculations are based on the average number of hours per incident (7.35) multiplied by the average cost per hour (£27.72).

TABLE 1

Year	Number of incidents	Total cost
2003	2499	£509,151
2004	2207	£449,659
2005	2183	£444,769
2006	2081	£423,987
2007	2295	£467,588

Table 2 below sets out the number of incidents and the approximate costs per year for the investigation of all reported water pollution incidents for the catchments in the South Antrim area over the past five years. Again, for cost purposes, calculations are based on the average number of hours per incident (7.35) multiplied by the average cost per hour (£27.72).

TABLE 2

Year	Number of incidents	Total cost
2003	161	£32,802
2004	221	£45,027
2005	217	£44,212
2006	204	£41,563
2007	203	£41,360

With regard to repairing damage to rivers, NIEA spends approximately £30,000 each year on pollution clean up, generally for oil pollution incidents. However, the costs of reinstatement of fisheries and habitat are matters for DCAL and Rivers Agency respectively.

Claims for Assistance During Flooding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment how many claims for assistance (i) were made; and (ii) were successful, during the recent flooding in the Craigavon Borough Council area. (AQW 672/09)

The Minister of the Environment: 152 applications have been received by Craigavon Borough Council, under the current "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils". 119 of those were successful; 31 were ineligible; and 2 are still under consideration.

Sion Mills Stable Block

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Sion Mills stable block; and what

plans his Department has for this site in the future.

(AQW 682/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Stable Block at Sion Mills was vested in the Department's ownership on 19 July 2008. It has been screened from the public footpath to ensure compliance with a letter from Strabane District Council's Building Control to the owner, requesting that he make safe all existing loose timbers, roof tiles and cladding. In addition, extensive works to stabilise the building, including propping the roof have now been carried out.

It is hoped that ownership of the building will soon transfer to HEARTH, subject to satisfactory completion of the necessary formalities. HEARTH is a long established and well respected building preservation trust, with experience in rescuing listed buildings considered to have no viable future - for example, Portrush Town Hall. HEARTH will carry out a scheme of repair and regeneration works to the Stable Block in order that its future will be secure. The Department has already approached HEARTH to see if it would be a willing partner, and HEARTH has agreed.

Arrangements are being made to finalise the transfer agreement with HEARTH, so that ownership of the building will be with a caring owner to take forward its restoration and conservation.

Antiquated Street Infrastructure and Street Furniture

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation exists in relation to the listing of antiquated street infrastructure and street furniture.

(AQW 749/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under Article 42(1) of the Planning Order (1991) the Department of the Environment is charged with the statutory authority to list 'buildings of special architectural or historic interest'. The interpretation of a 'building' within this Order is that it 'includes any structure or erection, and any part of a building, as so defined, but does not include plant or machinery comprised in a building;'. On this basis some antiquated street furniture such as fountains; water pumps; telephone boxes; mile stones; post boxes; railings and horse troughs are currently listed.

The key test of the legislation is that such structures possess the special architectural or historic interest defined in Article 42.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQO 335/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Following a series of Pre Inquiry meetings, the Public Inquiry commenced in April 2007 and concluded in May 2008.

The PAC is currently considering all the information before it prior to completing its report and making its recommendations to the Department. The PAC has indicated a preliminary timescale for delivery of the report to Planning Service as early summer 2010. However, the Commission would hope to be in a position to announce a firmer timescale later this year.

Environmental Issues

Mr Brady asked the Minister of the Environment what direct contact he has had with his counterpart in the Dublin Government in relation to environmental issues. (AQO 367/09)

The Minister of the Environment: No direct contact has been made with my counterpart in the Irish Government in relation to environmental issues.

Environmental Issues

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that environmental problems such as air pollution, marine pollution and road safety are issues that extend beyond the borders of Northern Ireland. (AQO 395/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The issues the Member raises in his question do, of course, extend beyond the borders of Northern Ireland and indeed, are common to most countries of the world as they are not constrained by political borders. However, as Minister of the Environment for Northern Ireland, I am working to address these issues in Northern Ireland within the framework of wider EU policy.

Environment and Heritage Service

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the investment and activity by the Environment and Heritage Service in Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, in the last 12 months. (AQO 355/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Of the funding provided by the then Environment and Heritage Service in 2007/08 to the Ulster Wildlife Trust for Nature Reserve Management, about £8,000 was allocated to the management of the Bog Meadows.

This has contributed to the employment of a Warden, conservation works and activities to enable the public to enjoy and learn about the Bog Meadows Local Nature Reserve.

In addition, staff of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), work closely with the Warden, Rivers Agency and Belfast City Council staff to tackle a range of issues affecting the Bog Meadows. During the spring and early summer an extensive exercise was carried out in an attempt to source the point where pollution was entering the Ballymurphy River and finding its way into the Bog Meadows. A number of problems were identified and resolved.

NIEA staff will continue to work with key stakeholders to preserve and protect the Bog Meadows for the enjoyment and pleasure of future generations.

Planning Policy

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what measures he will propose to ensure a planning policy that meets the essential needs of rural communities. (AQO 393/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The measures I propose are set out in revised draft PPS14. It could bring real benefits for rural communities, but these benefits cannot be realised until the policy is brought into effect. I hope the Executive will consider the revised draft at the earliest opportunity. If there is no agreement, I will shelve the revised draft and we will live with the existing policy. This would mean residential development in rural areas continuing to be hampered by restrictive planning policy, and planning policy on farm diversification continuing to lag behind rural development policies.

Road Safety Issues

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what direct contact he has had with his counterpart in the Dublin Government in relation to road safety issues. (AQO 375/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have met with my counterpart in the Dublin government on one occasion to consider road safety issues.

Planning Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he has taken, or intends to take in the next few months, to improve the performance of the Planning Service. (AQO 299/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am committed to the reform of the planning system to ensure that it helps deliver the Executive's Programme for Government commitments by supporting the future economic and social development needs of Northern Ireland.

In respect of the medium to longer term, Professor Greg Lloyd was appointed in November 2007 as an Independent Expert to work with officials to provide advice on how the planning system might be reformed. I am currently liaising with Executive colleagues and the Environment Committee on my emerging proposals. I then intend to issue a public consultation paper, outlining proposals for reform that will impact on almost every aspect of the planning system, from the production of development plans through to the development control system, before the end of the year.

In the meantime several short to medium term process improvements measures have been completed or are underway, including streamlined consultation process; the introduction of PADs; revised procedures for dealing with reserved matters applications; and enhanced customer handling and accessibility to the planning system through better use of technology, which is being rolled out in conjunction with NI Direct.

The streamlined council consultation process, which has already been successfully piloted in the Derry Divisional Planning Office, will be rolled out across all Council areas by the end of March 2009.

The Planning Service is also currently working alongside the Performance Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) on a short term project with the aim of improving performance against the Executive's Programme for Government targets.

European Heritage Open Days

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total number of visitors to buildings made open to the public during the European Heritage Open Days in September 2008. (AQO 389/09)

The Minister of the Environment: We do not yet know the total number of visitors to the 232 'buildings' open for this event. The owners and volunteers are still reporting back to my Department.

However, I can inform you that 48,000 visits were recorded in 2007 and that initial reports suggest a similar or greater number this year.

I will arrange for you to be provided with the final number, in writing, as soon as possible after all the volunteers have reported back.

River Ways in Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how his department is helping to curb the flooding from the river ways in Belfast. (AQO 352/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The main planning policy guidance on flooding is provided by Planning Policy Statement 15 (PPS 15) – Planning and Flood Risk and, in particular, Policy FLD 1 which seeks to control new development within flood plains. To inform the consideration of proposals within a flood plain planning applications should normally be accompanied by a flood risk assessment which may include details of measures to mitigate any increase in flood risk. Planning Service will also seek the views of Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Rivers Agency before a decision is taken on an application.

Planning Service

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the current crisis, particularly in the construction industry, if he will instruct the Planning Service to prioritise and expedite applications for job creation projects. (AQO 338/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department already gives priority to certain planning applications such as those on which grant-aid may depend and certain commercial, industrial and social infrastructure proposals with a clear strategic, employment, community or public interest dimension. An instruction to this effect was issued to Planning Service staff in July 2006. There is however also an onus on applicants to submit planning applications in a timely manner and include all necessary information required to determine the proposal.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Servants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the externally provided business and management training provided to civil servants at grade 7 and above. (AQW 428/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dods): The externally provided business and management training which is provided to civil servants at Grade 7 and above is detailed in the tables attached. The central provision of training is based on

the current identified corporate needs of the NICS and is subject to annual change based on business need. In addition to corporate provision, Departments also provide training in line with their specific business requirements.

The training listed does not include the professional and technical training which is provided to staff in these grades.

BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROVIDED AT G7 & ABOVE

CORPORATE TRAINING FOR THE SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE (GRADE 5 AND ABOVE)

Top Management Programme
Leadership in a Changing World
Leadership for a Democratic Society
SCS Mentoring Programme
Criteria Based Interviewing

CORPORATE TRAINING FOR GRADE 7

An Introduction to Corporate Governance in the Public Sector
An Introduction to Risk Management
Benefits Management
Coaching Skills
Conducting an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)
CIPD Certificate in Training Practice - Module 4
CIPD Certificate in Training Practice Project Preparation
Data Protection Act
Developing a Business Case
Developing Policy
Evaluating Policy
Financial Management - Overview
Fraud Awareness
G6/7 Programme
International Financial Reporting Standards
Implementing European Directives
Intro to Business Cases & Economic Appraisal
Introduction to Legislation
Leading / Managing Change
Practical Skills for Budgeting
Preparing For Judicial Review
Quicker Reading
Leaders for Tomorrow
Speech Writing

Strategic Planning
Subordinate Legislation
Subordinate Legislation Template
The Consultation Process in Northern Ireland
Working with Ministers
Criteria Based Interviewing
Running Small Projects
Performance Management
Institute of Leadership & Management Diploma in Management
Corporate Governance
Diversity
Effective Sponsorship of Non Departmental Public Bodies
ITIL (IT Service Management)
Screening Policies
Coaching the Team at Work

DEPARTMENTAL TRAINING FOR GRADES 7 AND ABOVE

Leading & Managing Change
Senior Civil Service Group – Management Development Programme
Become the Leader You Want to Be
Innovation Management in the Public Service
Assembly Questions
Achieving Excellence
Briefing Skills
Competitive Dialogue Procedure Seminar
Sustainability of Public Service – Policy Practice
Thought Leadership
Rethinking Leadership & Management
Writing a Business Plan
Assessment Centre Demystified
Leading Change and Organisational Development in the Public Sector
Sustainability for Decision Makers
Good Management Practice
Senior Professional Administrative Training Scheme
Women's Leadership Initiative
Rethinking Leadership
Provision of Islamic Cultural Awareness
PRINCE 2 (Project Management)
Influencing and Negotiating
Improvement Through Change
Fair, Inclusive and Prosperous Society

Corporate Leadership First
North/South Cross Border Training
Customer Service
People Management
Change Management
Partnership Working & Stakeholder Management
Introducing Sustainability

Civil Servants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil servants at grade 7 and above have availed of externally provided business and management training, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 429/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A total of 1671 places on externally provided business and management training have been utilised by civil servants at Grade 7 and above in the last 3 financial years.

The figures include business and management training identified and arranged by individual departments or business areas in addition to that provided in response to the identified corporate NICS needs.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many Energy Performance Certificates were issued up to 1 September 2008, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 683/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can advise that up to 1 September 2008, a total of 5552 Energy Performance Certificates had been lodged on the Official Register.

The information is not held by the Department in the format requested and may only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Civil Service Human Resources

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the report in Private Eye on 22 August 2008, which stated that the cost of outsourcing Civil Service Human Resources had risen from £328 million to £465 million. (AQW 728/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The change in the estimated cost can be attributed to an increase in the services provided under the contract and an increase in the contract period from 10 to 15 years.

The net effect was an increase in the total estimated cost of the contract from £328 million in the Outline Business Case to £465 million in the Full Business Case. However, the average cost per year of the Full Business Case is £1.8m less than the average cost per year of the Outline Business Case.

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to account for the delays in providing payments for Lone Pensioner Allowance and Rate Relief for Pensioner schemes. (AQO 340/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Lone Pensioner Allowance was introduced on 1st April 2008 and is administered jointly by Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Land and Property Services had a challenging timeframe in which to develop the necessary IT functionality for this new rate relief, and initial plans for this to 'go live' in May were postponed until June after testing revealed difficulties with the new functionality. Since June, Land and Property Services has processed some 10,963 of the 16,583 applications received to date.

Unfortunately, there are still some IT issues outstanding for those cases in which applicants are claiming Housing Benefit/Rate Relief, and also with regard to the electronic transfer of data from the Housing Executive. This means that some people are still waiting for their applications to be completed and their rate bills to be adjusted. I have asked officials to ensure that these matters are resolved as quickly as possible.

Price Rises in Fuel and Cost of Living

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any discussions he has had with Ministerial colleagues to redirect departmental spending efficiencies and any money unused by Departments into a hardship fund for those facing financial difficulties due to the recent price rises in fuel and the cost of living. (AQO 328/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I met with the Minister for Social Development and other Executive Ministers on 18 September to discuss this important issue. I also met with the Minister for Social Development and the Minister for Health on 25 September and it has been agreed to develop an Action Plan for consideration at a future Monitoring Round.

While this work is on-going, it is nevertheless important to note that any funds allocated in last year's Budget process, which are no longer required, must be surrendered by Departments as part of the

In-Year Monitoring process for reallocation by the Executive in light of emerging pressures and the overall financial environment.

Growth in Population

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has met with other Ministers to discuss the provision of essential services in light of the growth in population. (AQO 297/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since the spending allocations to Northern Ireland Departments for the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 were agreed earlier this year, no Executive Minister has requested a meeting with me to specifically discuss the impact of the growth in population in terms of the funding of public services.

Civil Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he will take to reduce the levels of sick absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQO 265/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I consider the level of sickness absence in the NICS to be unacceptable and I fully intend to maintain the pressure on Departments to improve their performance in this area.

Over recent months the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have published their respective reports on the issue of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Both reports contain important recommendations and I will be working closely with my officials to ensure that these recommendations are acted upon as a matter of priority.

My predecessor, Peter Robinson met with the NI Permanent Secretaries to discuss sickness absence and to hear what they were doing to address the problem within their respective Departments. He impressed on senior officials the Executive's commitment to dealing robustly with the issue and reinforced the importance of senior management accountability.

My officials have since issued an updated civil service wide action plan, setting out a number of key actions for all Departments. Actions include top management commitment and greater accountability, improved case management, improved training and awareness for line managers and staff and a greater level of audit and compliance.

There will also be a new focus on local strategies where individual Departments and Agencies will analyse patterns of sickness absence within their

organisations with a view to highlighting any trends or "hotspots" requiring particular attention.

There is now a much higher profile given to sickness absence across all NI Departments and arrangements are in place to provide for regular reporting on performance against target at departmental and agency Board level and to Ministers.

Efficiency Savings

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what monitoring is undertaken by his Department on efficiency savings achieved across all departments; and what assurance he can give that these are savings are not achieved through cuts in service. (AQO 305/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My officials monitor the delivery of efficiency savings as part of their normal engagement with departments on financial matters. However, I must stress that the responsibility for the delivery of the Executives 3% efficiency target lies with the individual departments.

The aim of the 3% target was to drive out inefficiency and use the resources released to improve the public services provided by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The focus is on protecting frontline services. However this does not mean that frontline services cannot be delivered more efficiently, or that services should continue indefinitely if the original rationale for intervention no longer exists or where a programme has been shown to be ineffective.

Department's have agreed to publish their Efficiency Delivery Plans (EDPs) against which the achievement of the efficiencies will be monitored. Their publication is intended to ensure that Departments are open and transparent about the actions they are taking to achieve the efficiency targets agreed by the Executive. As a result Assembly Committees have an important role in assisting in the scrutiny of the delivery of these plans.

Water Charges

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the consequences on the budget of any decision to defer water charges for another year; and any implications for services delivery across departments. (AQO 309/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive faces tough choices with regard to the way forward on the funding of local water and sewerage services. These decisions are made more difficult by the harsher economic climate faced by the people of Northern Ireland following the increases in the general cost of living experienced over the past year. To ease

this burden, the Executive is giving serious consideration to the deferment of water charges until 2010.

Whatever final decision is made, the Executive will seek to minimise the impact on the provision of services to the people of Northern Ireland.

The full details are still to be considered by the Executive and the implications for Departments will be known once the Executive makes its decisions.

Public-Sector Jobs

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to undertake a significant decentralisation of public sector jobs to deliver a more equitable spread of the benefits of these jobs.
(AQO 291/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An independent team was established at the end of December 2007 to review the policy on location of public sector jobs. The review team has now completed its work and the Chairman, Professor George Bain will be publishing his report tomorrow – 30 September. I understand that all Executive Ministers and MLAs will receive copies of the report tomorrow.

This was an independent Review and the recommendations of the Review team will have to be carefully considered before decisions on a way forward can be reached.

I plan to refer the report to an early meeting of the Executive to gather the initial views of Ministerial colleagues.

2012 Olympics

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will ensure that Northern Ireland will maximise its share of the investment potential of the 2012 Olympics.
(AQO 292/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The 2012 Olympics offer tremendous opportunities for providing a boost to the NI economy, which the Executive will be very keen to grasp, particularly given its number one priority of economic growth. This is a cross-cutting issue affecting a number of Departments and, as Minister for Finance, I will be seeking to work closely with all of my Ministerial colleagues to ensure a successful outcome for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what achievements have been delivered

by the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit.
(AQO 290/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The role of PEDU is to help ensure that departments deliver on the commitments made during the Programme for Government and Budget processes. Ultimately the achievements of PEDU will be reflected in the achievements of departments in those areas where PEDU becomes involved.

The Unit's focus to date has been primarily on four areas. At a cross-cutting level, it has been working to establish a mechanism to both monitor progress and facilitate delivery of the targets set out within the Programme for Government. In terms of specific projects, it is also on course to complete its work with the Planning Service in November. The Unit has also examined the delivery arrangements for the Innovation Fund to gauge their effectiveness and the prospects for departments

achieving the aim of this important aspect of the recent Budget, and has completed some work with LPS to ensure they remain focussed on improving recent performance on the collection of rates.

Workplace 2010

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline progress on Workplace 2010.
(AQO 268/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The two remaining bidders for the Workplace 2010 contract, Land Securities Trillium and Telereal, submitted their best and final offers on 2nd June 2008. The bids have been subject to detailed evaluation and negotiations are continuing with both bidders. The Department will look to appoint a preferred bidder towards the end of 2008 with a view to finalising the contract in quarter 1 of 2009.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Hospital Cleaning Services

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the £2 million allocated in this financial year towards hospital acquired infections has been spent on front line cleaning services, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 91/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Of the £2 million

additional money allocated in 2008/09 to patient safety including measures to reduce healthcare-associated infections, the Department has retained £570k for measures that are being commissioned centrally. The remaining £1.43m has been allocated to the Boards, most of this on the basis of the Capitation Formula. Within this amount, each Trust's current allocation for front line cleaning services is as follows.

£1.43m additional allocation to Boards for healthcare- associated infections, 2008/09	
Trust	Current allocations for front line cleaning
Belfast HSC Trust	£175,000
South Eastern HSC Trust	£111,000
Southern HSC Trust	£177,000
Northern HSC Trust	£237,000
Western HSC Trust	£170,000

The balance of the £1.43m is being spent on antimicrobial pharmacists and other posts and measures that prevent infections.

Prescription Drugs

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to ensure that prescription drugs are only provided under the name by which they are commonly known. (AQW 407/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Current statutory requirements state that the container of a dispensed relevant medicinal product must be labelled to show the name of the product or its common name.

The Department's generic prescribing policy has resulted in an increase in generic dispensing rates of 12 % between 2005 and 2008. This may result in different names appearing on both prescriptions and labels, with the potential that patients will be temporarily less familiar with a medicine's generic name.

Generic medicines are of course considered to be equivalent to their branded counterparts.

Osteoporosis Awareness Campaign

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce an Osteoporosis Awareness Campaign. (AQW 408/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no plans to introduce a specific

osteoporosis awareness campaign. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is however raising awareness of osteoporosis through the promotion of regular exercise, a balanced diet, smoking prevention/cessation and a responsible approach to alcohol consumption.

From September 2008, osteoporosis has been included in the General Medical Services Contract as a Direct Enhanced Service. This new service will target patients aged 65 and over who have suffered a fragility fracture.

Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) Scan

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the (i) waiting list; and (ii) age profile is, of those waiting for a Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scan. (AQW 409/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people waiting for a Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scan at 30th June 2008, the most recent quarter for which official data are available, is shown in the table below.

Trust	Number of People waiting for a DXA Scan at 30th June 2008 (weekly timebands)				Total Number Waiting
	0 - 6	> 6 - 9	> 9 - 13	13 +	
Belfast HSC Trust	266	98	20	0	384
South Eastern HSC Trust	27	11	39	0	77
Southern HSC Trust	286	26	1	0	313
Western HSC Trust	61	0	0	0	61
Northern Ireland Total	640	135	60	0	835

Source: Departmental Return SDR1

The age profile of those people waiting for a DXA scan is not collected by the Department.

Fracture Risk Assessment

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the Health and Social Care Trusts in which the Fracture Risk Assessment (FRAX) tool is used; and what plans he has to introduce the FRAX tool to Health and

Social Care Trusts that do not currently operate it.
(AQW 410/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a number of methods for determining those at increased risk of fracture of which FRAX is one. The FRAX tool is currently being used by Rheumatology Consultants in the Western Health and Social Care Trust for assessing patients with possible osteoporosis.

Techniques used in other Trusts include DEXA scanning and multi disciplinary assessment of patients according to Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) guidelines for the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

It is the responsibility of Health and Social Services Boards to plan and allocate resources to meet the needs of their local population, including those with osteoporosis. It is a matter for individual Trusts to bring forward proposals for any change to their current rheumatology and trauma and orthopaedic services and to submit these to the commissioners for consideration.

Hip Fractures

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has set a target to reduce hip fractures.
(AQW 411/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has not set a target specifically to reduce hip fractures. However, the Home Accident Prevention Strategy and Action Plan published in 2005 aims to reduce the number of accidental deaths and injuries in the home, and includes a target to reduce by 25% the number of older people admitted to hospital as a result of falls by 2009.

Hip Fractures

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients with hip fractures are currently blocking beds due to delayed discharge.
(AQW 412/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of hip fracture patients who are currently awaiting measures to be put in place to facilitate their discharge from hospital is set out below.

TRUST	Number
Belfast HSC Trust	0
South Eastern HSC Trust	4

TRUST	Number
Northern HSC Trust	0
Southern HSC Trust	0
Western HSC Trust	1

Note: reflects the position for week commencing 15 September 2008

I have set stringent new targets for delayed discharge, which mean that, from April 2008, 90% of complex discharges take place within 48 hours, with no discharge taking longer than seven days. All other patients will, from April 2008, be discharged from hospital within six hours of being declared medically fit.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the current buildings for children's and women's services at the Royal Victoria Hospital meet health and safety standards.
(AQW 421/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Compliance with health and safety standards in relation to its estate is the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Trusts, and in this regard, each Trust reports annually to my Department on their compliance status across a number of Controls Assurance Standards, including Health and Safety.

The Belfast HSC Trust manages risk of all their estate and buildings until such times as replacement facilities are provided.

Agenda for Change

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if all bandings under Agenda for Change are the same across all Health and Social Care Trusts.
(AQW 422/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Agenda for Change pay bands used in the Health and Social Care are the same as those used throughout the NHS. All Trusts use the agreed Agenda for Change processes to determine the appropriate pay band. A job title or an existing grade is not the basis on which jobs in the health service are banded; it is the content and the responsibility of the job that determines the rate of pay. It is therefore not always appropriate to compare similar job titles or existing grades across other parts of the health service and expect to see exactly the same Agenda for Change band for those jobs.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is committed to providing a new hospital for children and women at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQW 423/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials have worked closely with the Belfast Trust to finalise proposals for the new Women's and Children's Hospitals. The Trust is currently finalising the business case which will be submitted to the Department for assessment. Only when the business case has been submitted and scrutinised can I make a commitment and take decisions on funding and timing of the project. Those decisions will of course need to be taken alongside decisions on other competing priorities emerging from the ongoing review of capital priorities which will report to me at the end of September.

I bid for £5.7bn, as part of the Investment Strategy 2008, £1.1bn of which was in the CSR period. I received £3.3bn to cover the 10 years, with just over £700m in the CSR period. However, this is not enough to meet the demands within the Health and Social Care estate, hence the need for the capital priorities review.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost is to retain the existing buildings for children's and women's services at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQW 424/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Trust estimates that annual maintenance costs for the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital and Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children sites at 2007/08 prices are as follows:

	Total RBHSC & RJMH £k
Heat, Light & Power	546
Building Maintenance	478
Rent, Rates, Insurance, Water	359
Total	1,383

Women's Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what grants have been issued to women's groups from (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) Health and Social Services Boards; and (iii) his Department, in the South Eastern Health

and Social Care Trust area, in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 425/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following grants set out in the attached Annex A have been issued to Women's Groups in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, the Eastern Board and my Department over the last two years.

Minor Ailments Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in resolving the problems in relation to the minor ailments scheme. (AQW 435/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The expanded Minor Ailments Scheme remains available to community pharmacists and I hope more will take it up, since it provides a valuable service to patients. A remuneration offer has been made which I believe is fair and reasonable. At the end of June 2008, before the introduction of the expanded Scheme on 1 August, I invited the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee to meet with me to discuss their concerns over the enhanced Scheme. This offer was declined. I wrote again to PCC in mid-August 2008 and on this occasion they agreed to a meeting, which has recently taken place.

I am hopeful that the sharing of information at this meeting will lead to improved understanding of our respective positions. I advised PCC of my willingness to meet with them again to continue discussions.

Herceptin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by his Department on herceptin, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 447/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Herceptin was made available to patients in Northern Ireland for the treatment of early stage breast cancer in November 2005. The amount spent on the drug per year is as set out below:

2005/06	£420,000
2006/07	£1.41 million
2007/08	£1.85 million

In the current financial year, £490,000 has been spent on the drug to date. The total expenditure on

herceptin since its introduction in 2005 is currently therefore £4.17 million.

Health Service Dentists

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service dentists are in the (i) Cookstown; and (ii) Magherafelt, District Council areas. (AQW 455/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) At 16 September 2008, Central Services Agency figures show that there are 9 and 19 dentists¹ registered to provide Health Service dental treatment in the Cookstown and Magherafelt District Council areas respectively².

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

1. Figures include Principal dentists only; figures exclude assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
2. Based on location of the dental surgery where the dentist is employed.

Carers and Home Helps

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) home helps; and (ii) home care workers, have been employed in the Mid-Ulster constituency, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 457/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of (i) home helps is not applicable as the Northern Health and Social Care Trust stated that they did not employ Home Helps in the Mid-Ulster area during this time period; and (ii) the headcount for home care workers employed in the Mid-Ulster constituency is only available for the past 3 years and is detailed below:

2008	332
2007	333
2006	339

Home Helps

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reduction of home helps for the elderly in the (i) Cookstown; and (ii) Magherafelt, District Council areas; how

many clients will be affected by this reduction; and what steps he is taking to address the effects of the reduction. (AQW 458/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Home Help Scheme provides help with basic household tasks such as cleaning, ironing and shopping. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has indicated that there are no plans to reduce home help provision in the Trust area. It is normal practice for the Trusts to periodically review the individual needs of a service user to ensure that the service provided to that client is still appropriate. As a result of these types of reviews, there may be occasions when home help provision is reduced or, indeed, increased. Regular reviews will not only ensure that the client is receiving the appropriate level of service, but will also ensure that the Trust targets its resources on those clients whose needs are greatest.

The Trust has provided the following statistics which indicate that while the number of clients in Magherafelt and Cookstown areas receiving home helps has decreased, the overall number of hours has increased:

MAGHERAFELT DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	Home help clients	Hours delivered
Sept 2007	487	8065
Sept 2008	377	8683
Difference	Reduction of 110 clients	Increase of 618 hours

COOKSTOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	Home help clients	Hours delivered
Sept 2007	396	7649
Sept 2008	358	7648
Difference	Reduction of 38 clients	No significant change

Carers and Home Helps

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people required carers and home helps in the (i) Cookstown; and (ii) Magherafelt, District Council areas, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 459/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) type, of ambulances in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 487/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I propose to answer AQWs 487/09, 489/09 and 491/09 together.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has 60 vehicles based in its Western Division which has the same boundaries as the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The details requested are shown in the table below.

Ambulance Station	Vehicle Type	Mileage	Age (years)
Altnagelvin	A&E Ambulance	45,045	2
		53,196	4
		77,027	7
		82,035	8
		84,493	8
		125,375	5
		125,491	4
		127,462	5
		142,410	10
	Rapid Response Vehicle	112,88	2
		47,564	2
	Patient Care Service Vehicle	14,332	2
		76,126	7
		86,655	7
		97,575	7
		108,110	7
		129,513	6
		134,597	5
		139,484	7
		195,976	5
		157,661	7
	Officer Response Vehicle	61,640	7
		77,466	7
		13,970	1
		31,369	1
		80,621	5

Ambulance Station	Vehicle Type	Mileage	Age (years)
	Training Officer Vehicle	92,552	6
Castlederg	A&E ambulance	34,937	2
		109,577	8
	Patient Care Service	82,367	7
Enniskillen	A&E Ambulance	42,838	2
		134,387	7
		139,087	6
		186,567	8
		216,581	10
	Rapid Response Vehicle		
		184,106	6
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	18,344	0.5
		113,445	8
		134,934	8
		162,158	7
		257,187	5
Limavady	A&E ambulance	170,015	6
		216,787	10
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	136,639	8
Omagh	A&E ambulance	54,842	2
		55,258	2
		114,523	5
		127,917	5
		131,429	7
		132,668	10
	Rapid Response Vehicle	55,994	3
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	4,665	0.5
		45,444	2
		46,761	2
		76,786	0.5
		179,859	7
		208,060	8

Ambulance Station	Vehicle Type	Mileage	Age (years)
Strabane	A&E ambulance	169,054	8
		185,491	5
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	159,881	8

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) age; and (ii) mileage, of each ambulance in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 489/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I propose to answer AQWs 487/09, 489/09 and 491/09 together.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has 60 vehicles based in its Western Division which has the same boundaries as the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The details requested are shown in the table below.

Ambulance Station	Vehicle Type	Mileage	Age (years)
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		46,761	2
		76,786	0.5
		179,859	7
		208,060	8
Strabane	A&E ambulance	169,054	8
		185,491	5
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	159,881	8

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) type, of ambulances based at each ambulance station in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 491/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I propose to answer AQWs 487/09, 489/09 and 491/09 together.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has 60 vehicles based in its Western Division which has the same boundaries as the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The details requested are shown in the table below.

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		179,859	7
		208,060	8
Strabane	A&E ambulance	169,054	8
		185,491	5
	Patient Care Services Vehicle	159,881	8

Alimta

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will introduce the drug Alimta for use by patients, within the next 2 years. (AQW 496/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A circular was issued to the HSC on 15 February 2008 endorsing National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance on the use of Alimta for the treatment of malignant pleural mesothelioma. HSC organisations have since confirmed that funding has been allocated to support the delivery of this treatment and that patients are currently receiving this drug in line with the NICE guidance.

My Department has also endorsed NICE guidance which indicates that Alimta is not recommended for the treatment of locally advanced or metastatic non-small cell lung cancer.

Health Provision

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether it is the intention of his Department to move out-of-hours health

provision from Strabane to Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 511/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer you to my reply to AQW 8819/08.

In August Departmental Officials met with the Review Programme Board for GP Out-of-Hours Services, who have been tasked with developing an options appraisal paper by the end of September 2008.

When I have had the opportunity to consider this I intend to take views on proposals for the way ahead through a formal consultation exercise. This being the case, no decisions have been made on what changes, if any, will be made to the current provision of Out of Hours services in Strabane or elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Mental-Health Cover

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the provision of the out-of-hours mental health cover in the Strabane District Council area; and to state if this cover meets the needs in the area, given that it has been identified as a suicide cluster. (AQW 512/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The out of hours mental health cover for the Strabane District Council Area comprises an on-call service (1 mental health professional) which responds to Western Urgent Care (the Primary Care out of hours service) and to A&E at Altnagelvin Hospital. The service currently operates from 5.00pm – 1.00am (Mon-Fri) and from 1.00pm – 1.00am (Weekends and Bank Holidays). Between 1.00am and 9.00am cover is provided by local GPs in conjunction with Western Urgent Care. The Trust intends to extend the out of hours service to cover the 5.00pm to 9.00am period when funding becomes available.

I have allocated additional funding for suicide prevention, which has enabled the “Protect Life” strategy and the regional helpline, “Lifeline” to be supported. It has also ensured that local voluntary organisations in this field can be supported to deliver vital frontline services for those affected by suicide.

Potential Mental-Health Issues

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the role of a GP when contacted by people presenting with potential mental health issues between the hours of 1am and 9am, in the Strabane District Council area. (AQW 513/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the Western Health and Social

Services Board area between the hours of 1am and 9am, all patients who present with potential mental health issues are dealt with directly by the on-call GP, who liaises with psychiatric hospitals directly, if he or she feels it necessary.

Home Delivery of Incontinence Products

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what Health and Social Care Trust areas (i) provide; and (ii) do not provide, home delivery of incontinence products; and what plans he has to ensure that all Health and Social Care Trust areas provide this service. (AQW 514/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At present two HSC Trusts provide a full delivery service to their patients – namely the Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trusts.

The Northern Trust operates a home delivery service to patients within the former Homefirst HSS Trust area. The Trust is considering a proposal to roll out this service to patients in the former Causeway HSS Trust area.

The Western HSC Trust offer a collection service from 13 sites across the Trust, and is currently undertaking a review of community equipment within which the option of a home delivery service for incontinence products is being considered.

The Southern HSC Trust do not routinely provide a home delivery service but offer a wide range of collection facilities across the geographical area to ensure that service is provided close to patient homes. Local arrangements are offered to meet individual need and exceptional circumstances are accommodated.

In relation to future provision, the planning and design of service delivery is undertaken at Trust level and is based on local circumstances and assessment of need.

Cancer Research

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has given financial assistance to Queen's University, Belfast, for cancer research. (AQW 516/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department, through the HSC Research and Development Office, has provided financial support to Queen's University, Belfast, for cancer research. This support includes funding for cancer research capacity building schemes, cancer research projects, and infrastructure that can enable and facilitate cancer research.

Newtownards Ambulance Station

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulance and paramedic staff are currently employed at Newtownards ambulance station; and to detail how this figure compares with 2006 and 2007.

(AQW 517/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Staff Grade	September 2006	September 2007	September 2008
Station Supervisor	3	3	3
Paramedic	12	11	11
Emergency Medical Technician	10	11	11
Trainee Emergency Medical Technician	-	1	1
Patient Care Services Attendant	6	5	4
Total	31	31	30

Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost incurred by the Fire and Rescue Service in attending malicious fires in the (i) Newtownards; and (ii) Strangford areas, since January 2007. (AQW 518/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested, which has been provided by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and is based on the 2007/08 average Fire and Rescue Service cost per mobilised incident, is detailed in the table below.

	No of 'Deliberate'/ 'Malicious' Fires from January 2007 to August 2008	Cost
Newtownards	492	£1,074,528
Other Strangford areas	248	£541,632

Passport System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to the introduction of a passport system similar to that used in other parts of the United Kingdom,

to replace the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults system. (AQW 524/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is leading a project to establish a new Vetting and Barring Scheme for Northern Ireland, which will be implemented in full by October 2009. When implemented, the Scheme will replace in full the current arrangements under the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (NI) Order 2003. It is being established under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007 in response to the Inquiry into the events at Soham by Sir Michael Bichard. The new arrangements will mirror those being put in place in England and Wales from the same date and complement broadly equivalent arrangements for Scotland. A new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) will be central to the Scheme. The ISA, which will work on behalf of Northern Ireland, England and Wales, will register all individuals working in specified positions with children and vulnerable adults. It will also maintain lists of those whom it has barred from such work in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Central Services Agency

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Central Services Agency will not issue medical cards with the correct spelling of children's names in Irish, as they appear on the child's birth certificate, including fadas. (AQW 529/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Both the GP Practice system and central patient index (the National Health Application and Infrastructure Services (NHAIS)) are part of a national NHS system, which currently does not include accents for non-English proper names in its agreed dataset, such as the Irish fada, the French acute, grave or circumflex, the Spanish tilda or the German umlaut. It is, therefore, not possible to print such marks on medical cards.

Rheumatic Diseases

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking in light of the declaration of the European Parliament on 5 June 2008, calling on the Council of Ministers to establish national plans to fight rheumatic diseases. (AQW 539/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of its overall reform and modernisation programme, the Department of Health,

Social Services and Public Safety is looking at various ways to enhance the care and treatment of people with a range of long term or chronic conditions, including rheumatic diseases such as arthritis.

The Department has promoted the development of specialist services delivered by multi-disciplinary teams, the introduction of comprehensive self management programmes to help individuals and their carers manage their conditions more effectively and the introduction of pro-active case management arrangements for those with more complex conditions. An additional £43 million is to be invested in the management of long term conditions over the CSR period.

The HSC also provides hospital rheumatology services, including appropriate specialist drug therapies such as anti-TNF drugs for people with severe inflammatory arthritis.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to fund provision for a new regional women's and children's hospital at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQO 319/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials have worked closely with the Belfast Trust to finalise proposals for the new Women's and Children's Hospitals. The Trust is currently finalising the business case which will be submitted to the Department for assessment. Only when the business case has been submitted and scrutinised can I make a commitment and take a decision to fund provision for the project. This decision will of course need to be taken alongside decisions on other competing priorities emerging from the ongoing review of capital priorities which will report to me at the end of September.

Home Adaptations

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's role in providing home adaptations for those in need. (AQW 561/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not make direct provision of home adaptations for people in need.

The provision of the housing adaptations service is undertaken jointly by HSC Trusts and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Occupational therapists, employed by HSC Trusts, assess the need for adaptations and make recommendations to

housing providers. The exact provision pathways are determined by tenure.

- The NIHE provide adaptations for their tenants.
- NIHE Disabled Facilities Grant aid is utilised alongside HSC Trust provision of lifts and minor works for clients in privately owned or privately rented property.
- Housing Association Grants managed by the NIHE are utilised to fund adaptations in housing association property.

The DHSSPS has a strategic role in policy development, in collaboration with the NIHE and DSD. It also monitors the performance of HSC Trusts who have delegated responsibilities for the delivery of specific aspects of the housing adaptations process e.g. needs assessment by HSC Trust occupational therapists.

Eating Disorders

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are available for people suffering with eating disorders in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 595/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the sheets attached. I am committed to the development of specialist eating disorder services. I have secured an additional £1 million over the next three years to enhance access to these services.

Osteoporosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions his Department has had with GPs in relation to enhanced services, particularly for people suffering from osteoporosis. (AQW 599/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Officials from my Department have held a series of meetings with representatives from the Northern Ireland General Practitioners' Committee (NIGPC) of the British Medical Association (BMA) to negotiate the introduction of a number of new Directed Enhanced Services in 2008/09.

As a result of these discussions, two new Directed Enhanced Services have now been introduced. The first will support the Northern Ireland Cardiovascular Service Framework and will provide enhanced treatment for a range of patients suffering heart failure, as well as those at risk of developing Peripheral Vascular Disease. The second will cover Osteoporosis and the Secondary Prevention of Fractures and provide

enhanced treatment to a target group of patients aged 65 and over who have suffered a fragility fracture.

Anti-Histamines and Asthma Medication

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why his Department has refused free prescriptions to 19 year olds for anti-histamines and asthma medication. (AQW 600/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Patients who are aged under 19 and in full time education are entitled to free prescriptions. They may also qualify if they have a listed medical condition and have a valid medical certificate. Allergies and asthma are not included in the current list of medical exemptions.

I have now announced that the cost of prescription charges will reduce to £3 from 1 January 2009 and from April 2010 prescriptions will be free to all.

Severe Allergies

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with severe allergies in age groups (i) 10-18 years; (ii) 18-30 years; (iii) 30-50 years; and (iv) 50 years plus. (AQW 605/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people diagnosed with severe allergies is not available.

Patients Transferred to Hospitals Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last three years, the number of patients transferred to hospitals outside Northern Ireland due to lack of beds or personnel, broken down by Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 606/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients transferred to hospitals outside Northern Ireland due to lack of beds or personnel is collected by Health and Social Care Trusts and not Health and Social Service Boards and can only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Breast-Screening Waiting Lists

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the effectiveness of the measures put in place to tackle

breast-screening waiting lists and waiting times.
(AQW 609/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Chief Executives of the HSS Boards were requested by my Department to develop a viable plan for the provision of an equitable breast screening service for Northern Ireland.

The Regional Plan had envisaged that it would take until June 2009 before the Breast Screening Programme would be able to meet the national standard (of having 90% of women invited for breast screening within 36 months of their previous breast screening mammogram: known as 36 months "Round Time").

It is expected that the Breast Screening Programme will be able to meet the national standard by March 2009. This is 3 months ahead of the June 2009 expected target date.

Art Works

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 18/08, to detail the amount spent by each hospital on art works, for each of the last five years.
(AQW 610/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the amount spent by each hospital on art works is not held centrally.

Western Health and Social Care Trust Area

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many consultants are currently employed in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area; and how this compares with figures for each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 616/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Consultants currently employed in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area and for each of the previous 3 years is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CONSULTANTS EMPLOYED IN THE WESTERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA AS AT 30 JUNE 2005 - 2008.

Year	Headcount	WTE
2008	184	179.69
2007	177	171.98
2006	160	156.44
2005	152	146.47

Source: Human Resources Management System

Note: WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

House Officer Doctors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) Junior House Officers; and (ii) Senior House Officers doctors there are currently working in the Health Service.
(AQW 630/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since the start of 2007, as part of the Modernising Medical Careers Programme in line with Great Britain, new medical grades were introduced which currently overlap with (and will in future subsume) the old Junior House Officer, Senior House Officer and Specialist Registrar Grades. The table below shows a breakdown of Foundation House Officers, Senior House Officers, Specialty Registrars and Specialist Registrars as at 30th June 2008.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF FOUNDATION HOUSE OFFICERS, SENIOR HOUSE OFFICERS, SPECIALTY REGISTRARS AND SPECIALIST REGISTRARS AS AT 30TH JUNE 2008.

Grade	Headcount	WTE3
Foundation House Officer ¹	341	341.0
Senior House Officer	173	170.3
Specialty Registrar ²	813	808.4
Specialist Registrar	452	440.0

Source: Human Resources Management System

Notes:

1. Foundation House Officer encompasses the old Pre-Registration House Officer grade and Year one Senior House Officers.
2. Specialty Registrar encompasses staff who previously would have been Year two or above on the old Senior House Officer grade, as well as some staff who would previously have been graded as Specialist Registrars.
3. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Hospitality and Entertainment

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what record is maintained by his Department of the amount of public money spent by (i) his Department; and (ii) by each hospital, on hospitality and entertainment.
(AQW 631/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A record of expenditure on hospitality and entertainment incurred by my Department is maintained by business area and accounted for separately on the Departmental financial management system.

No record is held by the Department of such expenditure at hospital level. Information is collected annually for each HSC Trust rather than by hospital.

Consultant Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many consultants there are per head of population compared to (i) England; (ii) Wales; and (iii) Scotland. (AQW 632/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Consultants per head of population in Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CONSULTANTS PER 1000 HEAD OF POPULATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND, ENGLAND, WALES AND SCOTLAND AS AT 31ST MARCH 2007.

Country	Consultants per 1000 Population (Headcount)	Consultants per 1000 Population (Whole-Time Equivalent)
Northern Ireland	0.72	0.68
England	0.66	0.62
Wales	0.66	0.63
Scotland	0.76	0.72

Source: Consultant numbers – Figures as at March 2007

Northern Ireland data: Human Resources Management System

English data: Information Centre for health & Social Care

Welsh data: Statistics Wales

Scottish data: Information Services Division Scotland

Population – Mid Year Population Estimates 2007

Northern Ireland data: Northern Ireland

Statistics & Research Agency

English data: Office for National Statistics

Welsh data: Statistics Wales

Scottish data: General Register Office for Scotland

Doctors Coming From Abroad

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures are in place to vet new doctors coming from abroad to work. (AQW 633/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: For doctors coming from abroad who will be employed by Trusts, there are a range of vetting procedures in place. These include: verification of the doctor's identity; their immigration status; verification of registration with the GMC; whether they are on a disqualification list which contains names of individuals disqualified from working with children and vulnerable adults; criminal records checks; occupational health clearance; and employer references.

Doctors coming from abroad who are GPs must be registered on the performers list of the relevant Health and Social Services Board. The Board must ensure that the doctor meets the criteria for inclusion on the

list. The criteria for inclusion on the list includes: registration with the GMC; registered as a GP; details of previous experience; two current references; an enhanced criminal record certificate; and evidence of a knowledge of English.

Regional Support Services Organisation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff he expects to be employed by the Regional Support Services Organisation when it is established. (AQW 634/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of staff to be employed by the Regional Support Services Organisation has yet to be determined. It remains subject to the outcome of current work on the implementation of the proposed reforms.

Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) Scan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the proportion of women aged between 65 and 74, with a positive diagnosis of osteoporosis confirmed by a Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scan, who are receiving treatment with a bone sparing agent. (AQW 636/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) Scan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many women aged between 65 and 74, with a history of fragility fractures in the last 12 months, have had a positive diagnosis of osteoporosis confirmed by a Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scan. (AQW 637/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Cervical Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine is available to combat cervical cancer. (AQW 638/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 3 September 2008 the Department launched its routine HPV immunisation programme.

This is a permanent programme which will offer HPV vaccination each year to all girls in Year 9 of school. A 2-year catch-up programme is planned for the period 2009-2011, to offer HPV vaccination to four additional cohorts of older girls in post-primary education. This programme is being delivered by the school health service. In addition, in 2008/09 a one-off programme offering the vaccination to 17-18 year old girls is being provided through primary care services.

Cervical Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with cervical cancer in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 639/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Table 1 below, details the number of females diagnosed with cervical cancer (ICD -10 C53) in the last three years.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF CERVICAL CANCER IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS

	Incidence
2004	73
2005	87
2006 (P)	98

Note: Incidence information for 2006 is currently provisional and is therefore subject to change. Finalised figures for 2006 will be available in early 2009.

This information has been provided by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry and is the most up to date currently available.

Bone Sparing Agent

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of women aged 75 and over, with a history of fragility fractures, are currently receiving treatment with a bone sparing agent. (AQW 640/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

New Ambulances

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the procurement process for new ambulances, for which £2 million was earmarked. (AQW 675/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service submitted to my Department a business

case covering fleet, medical equipment, ICT and estate which is currently under consideration and it is anticipated that a decision will be made in the next few weeks. Subject to the approval of the business case, funding of £2m has been earmarked within the current financial year to support the replacement of accident and emergency vehicles.

New Ambulances

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many new ambulances he is planning to allocate to the Foyle constituency; and when these ambulances will be made available. (AQW 676/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) fleet is managed as a regional resource and it is for NIAS to determine where they allocate new ambulances, taking into account local factors such as the age and condition of existing vehicles.

I have allocated some £14.5 million capital funding to modernise the Ambulance Service's fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure during the Comprehensive Spending Review period to 2011.

Disability Discrimination

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what health centres (i) do not have access for people with disabilities; and (ii) are not compatible with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. (AQW 703/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health centres in the health and social care sector are required to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. The information regarding individual health centres is not held centrally.

Ballycastle Health Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the situation at Ballycastle Health Centre, where 3 doctors are currently working from 2 consulting rooms. (AQW 704/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I appreciate the accommodation in which the GP practices in Ballycastle Health Centre operate falls below the standards I would wish to see for health and social care facilities in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, I am aware that there have been a number of discussions between the Northern Health

and Social Services Board, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the GP practices based in Ballycastle Health Centre, to consider options for the possible re-development of these premises.

I have commissioned an urgent review of capital investment priorities across the health and social care services to help determine investment priorities over the next 10 years. This review is due to be completed in the near future, and I expect to be able to make announcements on further developments shortly after that.

Ballycastle Health Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the need for a new purpose built facility at Ballycastle Health Centre; and what funding can he provide for this. (AQW 706/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The need for a new purpose built facility at Ballycastle Health Centre is being considered as part of the business case submitted by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust for a range of schemes within the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure programme.

Capital investment proposals have been submitted by the Northern Board and Trust for health and social care facilities in their area as part of the Capital Priorities Review, which is being undertaken by my Department. I expect the review to be completed in the near future.

I will not be in a position to indicate the specific allocation of capital funding until the review has been completed.

Dental Services

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has to increase the number of dental services directly employed by Health and Social Service Boards; and what areas are being considered. (AQW 722/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently consulting on a proposal to increase the number of dentists directly commissioned by the Health and Social Services Boards in areas where access to Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland is problematic. This is being addressed by way of a tender for additional dental services. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, and when all legal matters have been fully addressed, I would hope to be in a position to issue a tender to commission additional dentists by the end of 2008.

The areas under consideration are those in all four Board areas where access problems exist, and specifically as follows:

- **Western Board** – Enniskillen, Omagh, Strabane and Londonderry
- **Southern Board** – Banbridge, Dungannon and Newry
- **Northern Board** – Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Cookstown
- **Eastern Board** – Bangor, Holywood, Dundonald, Outer Belfast, (Lisburn, Castlereagh and Carryduff).

Lakeview Hospital

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the 10 bed ward at Lakeview Hospital in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is earmarked for closure; and for his assessment of the impact this will have on young adults with learning disabilities, their families and carers. (AQW 732/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Melvin, 10 bedded adult ward within Lakeview Hospital is earmarked for closure. The purpose of Lakeview Hospital is for assessment and treatment of patients, however almost half of the patients currently occupying adult beds in Lakeview Hospital have completed their treatment and will be resettled into an appropriate place in the community. This is in line with the Bamford vision that long stay patients from learning disability hospitals should be relocated to a community setting.

Demand for assessment and treatment can be managed within the remaining beds and therefore the closure of this ward should not have any adverse impact on young adults with learning disabilities, their families and carers.

Young People with Learning Disabilities

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the 'Reward' system in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, for young adults with learning disabilities, is to cease; and for his assessment of the impact this will have on young people with learning disabilities. (AQW 733/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked to meet with the Chief Executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust to discuss this issue in the very near future.

Prescription Charges for Cancer Patients

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to abolish prescription charges for cancer patients in line with proposals in the rest of the UK. (AQW 808/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here continues to be of significant strategic importance to our economy. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to Mr Eric Daniels, Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

I plan to write to Mr Andy Hornby, Chief Executive HBOS Plc, again stressing the importance of the HBOS investment here and requesting a meeting to discuss any implication this proposed acquisition may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However, I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Heart Disease

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is investigating links between heart disease and poor dental care. (AQW 837/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services does not undertake research. However, the Department has, through the Research and Development Office, recently funded research into the link between periodontal (gum) disease and coronary heart disease and stroke. The research is being undertaken by Professor Gerry Linden at School of Dentistry at Queens University. This research project will take 5 years to complete and the results will not be known until 2011. At present there is no strong evidence to suggest that gum disease causes heart disease.

Omagh Hospital

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the recently retired consultant at Omagh Hospital has been replaced; and whether his Department intends to retain this key post in the South West region, as set up in the Developing Better Services model. (AQW 865/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Developing Better Services (DBS) set out the future configuration of hospital services in Northern Ireland which in the south west will comprise the new acute hospital to the north of Enniskillen and an enhanced local hospital in Omagh.

To support services in the Western Trust area and to facilitate the transition towards the DBS model, I made available an additional £600,000 this year to allow the Trust to progress the recruitment of essential clinical staff.

However, the recruitment and retention of staff, including consultant medical staff, is a matter for the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

Strategic Capital Projects

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 8893/08, to detail the commitments made by his Department for strategic capital projects, in each Health and Social Care Trust Area, during the period 2008-12. (AQW 868/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My capital investment budget over the next 3 years, 2008/09 to 2010/11, is just under £700m, following the outcome of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

In light of the existing funding constraints, and to ensure available resources are being targeted appropriately, I instigated, earlier in the summer, a strategic review of capital priorities. The aim of the review was to examine Trust and Board proposals for infrastructure needs in the medium to long term within the budgetary constraints and to make recommendations to me on the way forward.

I have just received the report and once I have had time to consider all the findings within the report I intend to make a series of announcements on the outcome of the review over the next few weeks.

The table below indicates contractual commitments made by my Department to major strategic capital projects for the period 2008-2012 by Trust area.

Trust	Project
Belfast	Redevelopment at Royal Group of Hospitals Phase 2b
	Castlereagh Health & Care Centre
	Redevelopment of Muckamore Abbey Hospital
Northern	Carnview Children's Home
South Eastern	Ulster Redevelopment Phase A
	Downe Enhanced Local Hospital
	Ards Intensive Support Unit (Children's Home)
	Lisburn Assessment Resource Centre (LARC)
Southern	Portadown Health & Care Centre
	Trauma & Orthopaedics, Craigavon Area Hospital
Western	Altnagelvin Area Hospital Redevelopment
	New South West Acute Hospital enabling works
	Omagh Enhanced Local Hospital enabling works

Strategic Capital Projects

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 8893/08, to detail the commitments made by his Department for strategic capital projects, in each Health and Social Care Trust area, during the period 2013-2018. (AQW 869/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In light of the existing funding constraints, and to ensure available resources are being targeted appropriately, I instigated, earlier in the summer, a strategic review of capital priorities. The aim of the review was to examine Trust and Board proposals for infrastructure needs in the medium to long term within the budgetary constraints and to make recommendations to me on the way forward.

I have just received the report and once I have had time to consider all the findings within the report I intend to make a series of announcements on the outcome of the review over the next few weeks.

There are currently no contractual commitments for the period 2003-2018.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Major's Wall

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2068/08, to detail a timetable for the improvements

to the Major's Wall, Moyle Road, Newtownstewart. (AQW 500/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My Department's Roads Service is progressing a verge strengthening scheme at the Major's Wall, Newtownstewart. Discussions with the landowner have taken place and it is anticipated that the landowner will sign a "Permission to Enter" lands agreement later this month. It is proposed that work on site will commence within two weeks of the signing of this agreement with a view to completion in this financial year.

Planned Upgrading of the A8

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the comments made by the Taoiseach that all infrastructure projects, barring the completion of major motorways, are being reconsidered, if the planned upgrading of the A8 will proceed as planned. (AQW 593/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to inform you that development work on the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling scheme is proceeding to programme. My Department's Roads Service is on course to meet the first scheme milestone agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council, later this year, to identify the preferred corridor in which the new road will lie.

Road Signs

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the legal position for the creation of road signs in a language other than English. (AQW 607/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Senior Counsel has confirmed that my Department has the necessary legislative power to prescribe or authorise traffic signs, which include a second language in addition to English. Accordingly, there is no need to seek additional primary powers. The signs must be either prescribed or authorised in accordance with Article 28 of the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

Belfast to Dublin Train

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to list on how many occasions the Belfast to Dublin train arrived (a) up to 30 mins late; (b) between half an hour and an hour late; (c) between 1 and 2 hours late; (d) between 2 and 3 hours late; and

(e) more than 3 hours late, for both outward and return journeys in each of the last three years. (AQW 611/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The information you requested is provided in the attached table.

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
From Belfast to Dublin			
11-30 minutes late	280	252	247
31-60 minutes late	53	43	57
61-120 minutes late	18	7	16
121-180 minutes late	2	0	4
181+ minutes late	0	0	1
From Dublin to Belfast			
11-30 minutes late	228	135	157
31-60 minutes late	61	25	37
61-120 minutes late	15	14	22
121-180 minutes late	1	0	3
181+ minutes late	0	0	0
Total number of train services between Belfast and Dublin	5,449	5,490	5,500

The table presents lateness against the target set in the Translink Passenger's Charter of 90% of trains on the Dublin line arriving no more than 10 minutes late i.e. only after the first 10 minutes are trains recorded as being late. The above table excludes trains that were late due to circumstances outside the control of NIR e.g. security alerts and extreme weather conditions.

Traffic Calming

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans Roads Service has to introduce traffic calming measures in Cargan and Martinstown. (AQW 621/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: A traffic calming scheme for Martinstown and Cargan has been included in the programme of works for the current financial year and Roads Service officials are currently considering the most appropriate traffic calming measures for both villages.

The villages are situated on "A" class roads and it is not considered appropriate to use features such as road humps or speed cushions as speed control measures. When details of scheme proposals have been developed, Roads Service will consult with the local community association and Ballymena Borough Council.

A43 Cushendall/Glenravel Road Route Study

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all the work that (i) has been completed; and (ii) remains outstanding, in relation to the A43 Cushendall/Glenravel Road Route Study. (AQW 622/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that all necessary safety-related improvements along the A43 Cushendall/Glenravel Road to upgrade road markings and signs, have now been completed.

A Collision Remedial Scheme at a bend near Cargan has also been completed for some time now and it is anticipated that this scheme will improve road safety at this location.

Roads Service has currently no plans to provide any additional street lighting on the A43.

Roads Service has also advised that footway schemes on the Glenravel Road in Cargan, from the picnic area out to the GAA grounds, and at Martinstown, from the existing footway in the village towards the local St Mary's Church, have been completed.

Further footway provision on this route will be prioritised taking into account the technical merit of the proposal, consultation with the District Council and the availability of funding.

Ulsterbus Workforce

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of the Ulsterbus workforce is (i) male; (ii) female; (iii) protestant; and (iv) catholic; and what action he is taking to address any under-representation in the workforce. (AQW 623/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has provided me with the following information:-

Male – 85.6%	Female – 14.4%
Protestant – 57.6%	Catholic- 42.4%

The perceived religious affiliation among Ulsterbus employees is in line with the overall population community background of the North.

Translink is currently involved in a number of initiatives aimed at increasing the number of female employees within Ulsterbus. These include "positive action" recruitment advertising to attract more women to apply for posts and the continued promotion of opportunities for women at careers and job fairs. Additional initiatives are also currently being developed.

Carland Reservoir

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has been made of the fitness for purpose of Carland Reservoir near Dungannon; to confirm that there is sufficient water to meet existing demand; and to outline the frequency with which the reservoir is topped up and the average volume of water that is added on these occasions.

(AQW 626/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that future water demand has been assessed for the Altmore supply zone, which includes Carland Service Reservoir. As a result, a major capital investment project costing in excess of £20 million is proposed which will provide a new trunk water main to supply additional water resources to the area from Castor Bay Water Treatment Works. The project, which is planned for completion during 2010, will also provide a new service reservoir on the existing Carland Reservoir site to substantially increase storage capacity.

Carland Service Reservoir currently uses around 0.9 megalitres of water daily and is maintained at levels of between 2.6 and 3.5 metres to ensure continuity of water supply for the area.

Land in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to sell land owned by his Department in the North Down area. (AQW 661/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not collate details of land for sale on a constituency area basis. However, I am able to provide you with details of land declared surplus by my Department in the North Down Borough Council area. This land is currently in the process of being disposed of in accordance with the procedures laid down by Department of Finance and Personnel, Land and Property Services.

The location of the surplus land is listed in the following table:-

Location	Town
Area of Land at A2 Dual Carriageway	Holywood
18 Ambleside Drive	Bangor
31A Ashdale Crescent	Bangor
57, 57A, 59 & 61 Ballymaconnell Road	Bangor
208 Bangor Road	Craigavad
49 Bangor Road	Conlig
Cayman Cottages, Balloo Road	Bangor

Location	Town
Cottown Road/Upper Gransha Road	Bangor
Cottown Road	Bangor
East Circular Road	Bangor
Gransha Road	Bangor
2 Green Lane	Conlig
Green Road	Bangor
Newtownards Road	Bangor
Rathgael Road	Bangor
Redburn Square	Holywood
2 Rockport Road	Craigavad
17 Seahill Drive	Holywood
Six Road Ends, Cotton/Upper Gransha Road	Bangor
Six Road Ends, Upper Gransha Road	Bangor
The Crescent	Holywood
Old Belfast Road	Bangor

Bonfire Clean-Up Cost

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 120/09, to provide a breakdown of this expenditure by council area. (AQW 670/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to the Member's recent Assembly Question AQW 120/09, I advised that during the period 1 July to 31 August 2008, it is estimated that around £60,000 was spent by my Department's Roads Service on attending / repairing bonfire related sites. Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of this expenditure by Council area. However, an estimation of Roads Service expenditure attending / repairing bonfire related sites by Section Office area, which broadly mirrors Council areas, is provided in the table below.

Section Office	Bonfire Clean-up Cost
Coleraine	£150
Ballymena	£1,500
Craigavon	£450
Down	£620
Newry	£620
Ballymoney	£800
Belfast North*	£21,000
Belfast South*	£25,000
Castlereagh	£7,000

Section Office	Bonfire Clean-up Cost
Lisburn	£2,300
Total Cost	£59,440

* Belfast North and Belfast South section office figures should be combined to give a total figure for Belfast City Council area.

Public Transport Infrastructure System in Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve the public transport infrastructure system in Upper Bann. (AQW 671/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Future plans to improve the public transport infrastructure system in Upper Bann include the following:

- An upgrade of the Knockmore to Lurgan section of the Belfast to Dublin railway line - due to commence in 2009 and expected to be completed in 2011;
- Improvements to the footpath through Bells Row Crossing at Lurgan - scheduled to be completed by 2010/11;
- The ongoing programme of improvements to rail stations and halts to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation;
- Potential upgrade of the Portadown Railway Station - a feasibility study is currently being prepared; and
- A review of providing bus facilities in Banbridge is currently underway.

All plans are subject to the availability of suitable funding.

Belfast to Portadown Rail Line

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to improve the rolling stock on the Belfast to Portadown rail line; and what plans he has to further upgrade it in the future. (AQW 673/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are no immediate plans to further improve the rolling stock deployed on the Belfast - Portadown line. The rolling stock currently in use on this line is almost exclusively the new CAF trains, the last of which were introduced into passenger service in September 2005. Since then there has been an increase in passenger numbers of over 40%. The next sets of new trains are due to be ready for service by 2012. Additional train sets may then be available to provide additional capacity and frequency on the line.

Dungiven By-Pass

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development when the proposed Dungiven by-pass will be opened. (AQW 701/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member attended the Regional Development Committee meeting on 17 September 2008 when I advised the Dungiven Bypass, subject to the availability of funds and satisfactory progression through the statutory processes, will be completed as part of the A6 Derry to Dungiven scheme, planned to commence in the 2012/13 financial year.

The Bypass will be prioritised for commencement at the start of this scheme, but at this time it is not possible to be more prescriptive on the timescale for the construction, as the preferred route for the scheme has not been selected. However, it is anticipated that the Bypass section of the scheme will take about eighteen months to complete.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to prevent the job losses recently announced by Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 720/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Board of Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been tasked with improving the efficiency of the company and reducing costs. We must all recognise that this cannot be achieved without some reduction in staff numbers given that staff costs represent a significant part of the organisation's overall cost base.

In line with the Executive's agreed approach to "endeavour to reduce the burden on consumers and taxpayers through delivering efficiencies", and, following discussion with stakeholders, I have set stretching efficiency targets for NIW: targets which I should stress were below those recommended by the independent review of water and sewerage services. I am awaiting a view from the Regulator on the deliverability of these.

In terms of the individuals involved, my primary concern is obviously to ensure that all NIW staff are dealt with fairly and with dignity. With this in mind, I have met with trade union representatives at regional and local level and have relayed their views to senior management in NIW. However, it is the company's responsibility to work with the trade unions in handling these industrial relations and to take forward the efficiency programme as a whole.

Northern Ireland Water

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development if a private landowner can withhold access to a Northern Ireland Water main on his/her property, thereby depriving a neighbouring householder from acquiring a connection to the mains water supply. (AQW 737/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has powers of entry to carry out maintenance and repairs to water mains located within private lands. However, in the situation where a customer wishes to make a new connection to a water main, the customer is responsible for laying a private water supply pipe from their property to the point of connection. If the private water supply pipe is to cross land that is not in the ownership of the customer, it is the customer's responsibility to obtain permission from other landowners. If permission to lay a private supply pipe on third party land is refused thereby preventing a connection to the public watermain, this would be a private matter for which NIW has no responsibility.

Flooding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what assistance his Department has given to the owner of the vehicle submerged at the Westlink during the recent flooding. (AQW 738/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The construction of Broadway Underpass is part of the ongoing improvement works being carried out on the M1/Westlink under the Roads Service Design, Build, Finance, Operate (DBFO) Package 1 Contract. The DBFO Contract requires a free recovery service to be provided through the works. I have been advised by my Department's Roads Service that, as soon as all water had been removed from the underpass, the DBFO contractor, Highway Management Construction (HMC), recovered the vehicle. They then took the vehicle to an agreed location so that the vehicle could be inspected by the owner's insurance company.

The DBFO Contract indemnifies my Department against any claims arising from the works. Any claims relating to the ongoing M1/Westlink Scheme, which are received by my Department, will be addressed through the normal procedures.

Flooding of Roads

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department (i) liaises with the

PSNI; and (ii) posts warning signs, when roads are flooded. (AQW 739/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to the first part of the Member's question, my Department's Roads Service has plans in place to deal with roads related flooding incidents, which ensure that a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week response is available. Roads Service cooperates with, and works alongside Northern Ireland Water, Rivers Agency and the other responding organisations, including the PSNI, local councils, Fire and Rescue Service and other statutory agencies as far as possible, to ensure a quick and appropriate response is made to flooding incidents.

In relation to the second part of the question, I can advise that Roads Service seeks to restore normality to flooded roads, having regard for the safety of the public and Roads Service personnel, the prevention of traffic disruption and the protection of homes and property. When Roads Service becomes aware of roads which are flooded, where practicable, signs are erected advising of the possible risk to road users. However, in the event of widespread flooding, resources would be targeted to busier routes, carrying the greater volume of traffic.

Usage of the Door-to-Door Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the usage of the door-to-door service in the Ards area in the last 18 months. (AQW 741/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: During the 18 month period from March 2007 to August 2008, 4235 trips were taken by members of the Door-to-Door transport scheme in the Ards Borough Council area. These comprise of 341 trips in the Comber operational area and 3894 in the Newtownards operational area and are a mixture of single and return journeys.

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development how many Penalty Charge Notices were issued for car parking offences in each of the last three years, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 742/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department became responsible for parking enforcement at the end of October 2006. The police were previously responsible for this function, and would therefore have information on the numbers of penalty notices issued prior to November 2006.

Information on Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued, is not maintained by parliamentary constituency.

However, the table below details PCN numbers by District Council area in each year since November 2006.

Council Area	Nov 06 to Mar 07	Apr 07 to Mar 08	Apr 08 to Aug 08
Antrim	1,083	2,181	540
Ards	976	4,369	1,375
Armagh	1,587	4,238	1,233
Ballymena	2,330	5,652	1,866
Ballymoney	588	2,195	605
Banbridge	1,014	1,839	687
Belfast (inc Castlereagh)	14,797	47,878	18,968
Carrickfergus	868	2,884	711
Coleraine	2,330	6,923	2,797
Cookstown	1,024	2,519	980
Craigavon	3,817	6,713	2,087
Derry	5,995	20,226	4,789
Down	1,286	4,813	1992
Dungannon	1,081	3,498	1,499
Fermanagh	4,326	9,745	3,491
Larne	398	896	319
Limavady	654	1,886	626
Lisburn	2,290	5,674	3,003
Magherafelt	939	4,072	1,508
Moyle	53	329	226
Newry and Mourne	3,053	5,349	1,854
Newtownabbey	843	1,827	535

Council Area	Nov 06 to Mar 07	Apr 07 to Mar 08	Apr 08 to Aug 08
North Down	1,942	5,390	2,068
Omagh	2,970	5,864	2,117
Strabane	2,195	3,561	1,059
Total	58,439	160,521	56,935

Restoration Footpaths and Roads

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what statutory duties are currently in place that require service providers such as BT and Northern Ireland Water to restore footpaths and roads to their original condition. (AQW 750/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 750/09, my Department's Roads

Service has advised that Utility providers have a statutory right to open roads and footpaths for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. While Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, there are powers to regulate them, for the purpose of coordination and minimising disruption to road users.

Roads Service carries out regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements set out in the 'Specification for the reinstatement of openings in roads' statutory Code of Practice.

The Code of Practice prescribes the materials to be used and the standards of workmanship to be observed during road reinstatements. Roads Service records the results of inspections and where works are not carried out in accordance with the reinstatement specification, the appropriate utility is notified and instructed to arrange the necessary remedial works.

With regard to AQW 751/09, I can advise that Roads Service is aiming to strengthen the existing regulatory process, through new legislation contained in the Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. This Order will enable new regulations to be developed, including powers that could require utilities to resurface the road to a greater extent than is currently required under the existing legislation.

Restoration Footpaths and Roads

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to introducing statutory duties on utility service providers to restore footpaths and roads to their original condition, particularly in the case of public realm schemes. (AQW 751/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 750/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that Utility providers have a statutory right to open roads and footpaths for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. While Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, there are powers to regulate them, for the purpose of coordination and minimising disruption to road users.

Roads Service carries out regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements set out in the 'Specification for the reinstatement of openings in roads' statutory Code of Practice.

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the appropriate utility is notified and instructed to arrange the necessary remedial works.

With regard to AQW 751/09, I can advise that Roads Service is aiming to strengthen the existing regulatory process, through new legislation contained in the Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. This Order will enable new regulations to be developed, including powers that could require utilities to resurface the road to a greater extent than is currently required under the existing legislation.

Residents Parking Schemes

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development if consultations regarding residents parking schemes in the (i) Lisburn Road; (ii) lower Malone Road; and (iii) Stranmillis areas, have commenced; and if not, when will they commence. (AQW 774/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it plans to carry out initial surveys in the Lisburn Road, lower Malone Road and Stranmillis areas during October 2008. These surveys will identify any parking problems and establish whether they can be addressed by the introduction of residents' parking schemes.

However, further progress towards scheme design and implementation will depend on the outcome of my review of the issues and concerns arising from the initial five areas, where consultation on the proposals for residents parking schemes has already taken place.

Traffic Congestion

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he will introduce to alleviate traffic congestion in Newcastle, Co Down. (AQW 839/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The member will be aware that work on an Environmental Improvement Scheme in Newcastle, promoted by Down District Council and funded by the Department of Social Development and my Department, was completed at the end of June 2008.

As part of the scheme, streetscape works, improvements to the parking facilities, an extra pedestrian crossing and traffic calming measures have been introduced to reduce traffic speed and increase road safety.

I will be meeting with the Member on 7 October 2008 to discuss traffic matters in Newcastle and my Roads Service officials will be happy to investigate

any issues arising from that meeting and take appropriate action, where possible.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Ms Purvis asked the Minister for Social Development what resources are being spent in order to move Muckamore Abbey Hospital residents into appropriate supported housing. (AQW 465/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): As these two questions are linked I will answer them together.

During the next three years my Department will develop 38 new units at a cost of £4.6m for the resettlement of Muckamore Abbey Hospital patients.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Ms Purvis asked the Minister for Social Development how many supported housing units will be available to Muckamore Abbey Hospital residents in the next 3 years. (AQW 467/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these two questions are linked I will answer them together.

During the next three years my Department will develop 38 new units at a cost of £4.6m for the resettlement of Muckamore Abbey Hospital patients.

Credit Crunch

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to help vulnerable communities that are suffering from the credit crunch. (AQW 493/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In May 2008 I launched a Benefit Uptake Programme to increase awareness of social security benefits. This will see over 115,000 people contacted about possible benefit entitlement. Social Security Agency staff, as part of day to day business, also provide a range of services to ensure that people are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits including outreach services. The Agency also recently commenced an advertising campaign to increase awareness of the Winter Fuel Payment for newly eligible customers.

On 26 February 2008 I launched my New Housing Agenda announcing a number of initiatives to assist people to get on and stay on the property ladder, including

the Shared Equity and House Sales Scheme along with my recently approved Mortgage Rescue Scheme which will assist people who are in mortgage arrears.

I established a Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008 to identify measures to tackle fuel poverty, including short term recommendations to assist those most in need this winter. I have prepared a paper on Tackling Fuel Poverty, which has been circulated to Ministerial colleagues seeking their endorsement of a number of recommendations. I intend to bring this paper to the Executive at the earliest opportunity.

My Department's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy focuses on the 36 most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. It seeks to tackle complex, multi-dimensional disadvantage by working with the communities affected. In addition to Neighbourhood Renewal, the Areas at Risk Programme operates in a further 22 areas to address disadvantage.

Finally, the Community Support Programme, provides £1 million of ring fenced money specifically for the provision of advice and attracts match funding from the Council. This independent advice is vital to deal with difficulties emerging from the credit crunch such as mortgage repossession, bankruptcy, serious debt and fuel poverty.

Improving Housing

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money will be invested in the Ballymacruse housing estate, Millisle, to improve housing over the next 3 years. (AQW 535/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together.

Over the next three years a total of £50,000 will be invested in a heating replacement scheme in the Ballymacruse housing estate, Millisle. £637,000 will be invested in heating replacement, external cyclical maintenance and multi element improvement schemes in the Victoria Gardens housing estate, Donaghadee and £171,000 will be invested in heating and external cyclical maintenance schemes in the Ashfield housing estate, Donaghadee.

Improving Housing

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money will be invested in the Victoria Gardens housing estate, Donaghadee, to improve housing over the next 3 years. (AQW 536/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together.

Over the next three years a total of £50,000 will be invested in a heating replacement scheme in the Ballymacruse housing estate, Millisle. £637,000 will be invested in heating replacement, external cyclical maintenance and multi element improvement schemes in the Victoria Gardens housing estate, Donaghadee and £171,000 will be invested in heating and external cyclical maintenance schemes in the Ashfield housing estate, Donaghadee.

Improving Housing

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money will be invested in the Ashfield housing estate, Donaghadee, to improve housing over the next 3 years. (AQW 537/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together.

Over the next three years a total of £50,000 will be invested in a heating replacement scheme in the Ballymacruse housing estate, Millisle. £637,000 will be invested in heating replacement, external cyclical maintenance and multi element improvement schemes in the Victoria Gardens housing estate, Donaghadee and £171,000 will be invested in heating and external cyclical maintenance schemes in the Ashfield housing estate, Donaghadee.

Housing Executive

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development what measures she has taken to ensure that the Housing Executive will be able to deliver its decent homes target by 2010. (AQW 566/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A review of the maintenance investment requirements for NIHE stock is underway. This will include requirements to meet decent homes standards. A stock condition survey is being commissioned by DSD to assist in the review. The results of the survey are expected in May 2009.

Departmental Projects: Social Development

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the successful projects her Department has completed in the last 12 months in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 591/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has completed a range of successful projects, across a wide spectrum of our business, over the last 12 months. In relation to urban regeneration my Department funded a £75,000 Town Centre Promotions and Marketing Scheme in Antrim and also provided

funding of £19,286 to four groups in the deprived Glenvara area of Newtownabbey. The Voluntary and Community Unit funded 28 Local Community Fund projects and 15 Community Volunteering Scheme projects throughout South Antrim at a cost of £181,408. Four Social Housing Schemes were completed in Randalstown (1), Crumlin (2) and Newtownabbey (1) and a number of Improvement Schemes were also completed in Antrim and Newtownabbey.

Resource Centre Project in Rathenraw

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the community and business resource centre project in Rathenraw, Antrim; and what the estimated completion date is. (AQW 592/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Work on the community and business centre project in Rathenraw, Antrim, commenced in May and had been progressing well with an expected completion date of June 2009. Unfortunately the contractor has now gone into liquidation. The project architect and the group are exploring all other options and are hopeful of early resolution so as to cause the minimum delay to the project's successful completion.

Bonfire Clean-Up Costs

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 119/09, to provide a breakdown of this expenditure by council area. (AQW 667/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by District Council area. However, the table below details the costs incurred by the Housing Executive district offices for the removal and reinstatement works associated with bonfires this year.

BONFIRE CLEAN-UP COSTS (BY HOUSING EXECUTIVE DISTRICT OFFICE AREA*)

North Belfast	£12,772.84
East Belfast	£1,506.37
South Belfast	£3,514.86
West Belfast	£5,196.25
Belfast Shankill	£10,540.41
Antrim	£8,808.99
Ballycastle	£0.00
Ballymena	£2,006.90
Ballymoney	£1,513.00

North Belfast	£12,772.84
Carrickfergus	£3,910.59
Coleraine	£14,496.50
Larne	£100.00
Newtownabbey 1	£5,048.01
Newtownabbey 2	£5,768.40
Bangor	£3,400.00
Castlereagh	£6,287.90
Downpatrick	£1,687.00
Lisburn (Antrim Street)	£5,002.50
Lisburn Dairyfarm	£0.00
Newtownards	£1,766.60
Armagh	£0.00
Banbridge	£0.00
Lurgan/Brownlow	£2,564.00
Dungannon	£3,944.00
Fermanagh	£547.00
Newry	£0.00
Portadown	£3,136.00
Cookstown	£240.00
Limavady	£2175.00
Waterloo Place (Londonderry 1)	£3,525.00
Waterside (Londonderry 2)	£525
Collon Terrace (Londonderry 3)	£12,825.00
Magherafelt	£1200.00
Omagh	£480.00
Strabane	£720.00
Total	£125,208.12

* Housing Executive district office areas correspond directly with local council areas, with the exception of the Belfast City Council and Derry City Council areas.

Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the regeneration of the Village area of South Belfast. (AQW 692/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since the Village area was declared an Urban Renewal Area in May 2008 the Housing Executive has been carrying out preliminary work to make an application to vest around 550 properties. This will be lodged with my Department later this year and all interested parties will be served with a Notice of Intention to Vest. Interested

parties will then have the right to object to the proposals within 6 weeks of receipt of the formal Notice.

All residents in the proposed redevelopment area are also being visited to determine their future housing requirements and this process is almost complete.

Environmental Improvement Scheme

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development when the Environmental Improvement scheme for the Andersonstown Road will commence. (AQW 765/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Work is ongoing on the development of a significant Environmental Improvement scheme for the Andersonstown Road area. A draft scheme has been developed and consultation with local residents and traders about the proposed design is planned to commence in October 2008.

All scheme proposals are subject to the completion of satisfactory economic appraisal, agreement on scheme design and the necessary funding being available. On current plans it is expected that work on the ground should commence about the middle of next year. Engagement with the local community and traders in the area will continue during the work..

Fuel Poverty

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to introduce a benefits uptake campaign to assist in the relief of fuel poverty. (AQW 767/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In May of this year I launched the 2008/09 Benefit Uptake Programme to increase awareness of social security benefits. This builds on the previous successful uptake programmes which have been in place since 2005 and resulted in £15 million of additional benefit paid to the most vulnerable in our society. The total cost of these programmes was £1.1 million.

In this year's programme 115,000 people across Northern Ireland will be contacted to make sure they are not missing out on benefits.

Complementing this targeted approach, Social Security Agency staff, as part of day to day business, provide a range of services to ensure that people are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits.

The Social Security Agency also recently commenced an advertising campaign to increase awareness of the Winter Fuel Payment for newly eligible customers. Winter Fuel Payments provide assistance specifically to help older people with their winter fuel bills.

Income Support

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are in receipt of Income Support in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 769/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The numbers shown reflect the number of claims for Income Support where an amount of Income Support was in payment at 30 August 2008.

Belfast East	4,084
Belfast North	9,202
Belfast South	4,406
Belfast West	11,889
East Antrim	3,173
East Londonderry	4,495
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	4,148
Foyle	10,318
Lagan Valley	3,225
Mid Ulster	4,457
Newry and Armagh	6,060
North Antrim	4,511
North Down	2,419
South Antrim	3,474
South Down	5,047
Strangford	2,931
Upper Bann	5,597
West Tyrone	5,952
Unallocated Postcode*	581
Total Claimants	95,388

* In producing this analysis individual records were attributed to electoral ward and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated a ward or Council area using this method and some cannot be allocated at all.

Fuel Payment

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what plans her Department has to introduce a fuel payment this winter for people with disabilities. (AQW 807/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Disabled people who satisfy the qualifying conditions are already included in the Winter Fuel Payment Scheme. Cold Weather Payments are also made to vulnerable groups, including those people who get a disability

premium in their income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance regardless of age, when there is severe weather in their area.

Disabled people can receive disability benefits, and the disability premium in income-related benefits, in recognition of their extra costs. The care and mobility components in Disability Living Allowance for a person under 65 years old are used as broad indicators of the extra costs a disabled person has which include heating, laundry or special diets.

There are other schemes available to help with fuel costs such as the Warm Homes Scheme. Among the eligible groups for this Scheme are householders who claim disability related benefits such as Disability Living Allowance. This Scheme provides assistance towards insulating their homes with a grant of up to £850.

In response to the ever increasing cost of fuel I established a Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008, which brought together representatives from Government departments and the wider energy sector. I have prepared a paper on Tackling Fuel Poverty, which has been circulated to Ministerial colleagues seeking their endorsement of a number of recommendations emanating from the Task Force. I have brought this paper to the Executive for consideration.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development the number of cases of Disability Living Allowance payments being made to people other than the lawful applicant, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 843/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no payments of Disability Living Allowance being made to people other than the lawful applicant. The Social Security Agency pays all customers direct or in the case where they are deemed as being incapable of managing their own affairs, to their legal appointee. The SSA does not hold details of the number of approved appointees. When a customer avails of the Motability Scheme, payment of the higher rate mobility component is paid directly to Motability Operations on behalf of them. The table below shows the number of customers who have availed of the Motability Scheme over the last three years:

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Number of customers with a Motability Agreement	24,956	25,627	26,556

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have received Disability Living Allowance payments as a result of their allergies, broken down by the following age groups (i) 0-18; (ii) 18-30; (iii) 30-50; and (iv) 50 years and over, in the last financial year. (AQW 864/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not held by the Department. While there are disability codes attributed to all Disability Living Allowance awards, there is no specific disability code relating to allergies.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many people received Disability Living Allowance as a result of their allergies, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 892/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not held by the Department. While there are disability codes attributed to all Disability Living Allowance awards, there is no specific disability code relating to allergies.

First-Time Buyers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to boost the housing market for first-time buyers. (AQW 898/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer the member to the response provided to the question AQW 382/09 answered on 26th September 2008 (Official written answer booklet 26th September 2008).

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to reduce the backlog of applications to the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 955/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I introduced prioritisation of applications to target the Warm Homes Scheme waiting list. All applicants aged over 70 have had their home surveyed and those with no central heating, solid fuel or Economy 7 will be assisted first. This will allow Eaga to ensure that those in greatest need will be assisted first.

I met recently with the Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Michelle Gildernew, and agreed a £400k contribution from DARD's Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion

Fund to the Warm Homes Scheme budget to assist with improvements in energy efficiency in rural homes. The additional resources from DARD will assist around 630 homes which at present cannot be assisted by the Warm Homes Scheme because the cost exceeds the statutory grant limit.

I will continue to bid for additional resources for the Warm Homes Scheme through the in-year monitoring process.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 10 October 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Strategic Investment Board

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Strategic Investment Board has considered specialist advice from the Department of the Environment in relation to the causes of climate change as part of its assessment of infrastructure needs and design; and if so, to detail (i) the nature of that advice; and (ii) whether the Minister of the Environment's analysis of the causes of climate change has impacted on the Strategic Investment Board's decision-making. (AQW 680/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Specialist advice from the Department of the Environment on the causes of climate change has not been considered by the Strategic Investment Board in assessing infrastructure needs and design.

Neighbourhood Renewal Posts

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what Neighbourhood Renewal posts and services it will fund from March 2009. (AQW 713/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM as a Department has a role to play across a number of activities which form part of the overall Neighbourhood Renewal network but does not directly fund Neighbourhood Renewal posts and services.

Former Military Sites

Mr Craig asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what plans the Department has in relation to securing the transfer of former military sites from the Government.

(AQW 965/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Along with the Minister of Finance and Personnel we have corresponded with and held meetings with the UK Government in order to progress the gifting of former military sites. Our officials also maintain regular contact with the Ministry of Defence in relation to these matters.

We will continue to press the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for a favourable response and will ensure the Assembly is informed of progress on this issue.

Civic Forum

Mr McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the attendance record of each member at meetings of the Civic Forum. (AQW 1089/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The attendance record of members at plenary meetings of the Civic Forum is detailed in the attached schedule. The Civic Forum met in plenary format twelve times between 9 October 2000 and the suspension of devolution in October 2002 with its last plenary meeting on 28 August 2002.

Surname	Known As	No of Meetings Attended
Bicker	Elizabeth	11
Bowser	Avery	9
Bryan	Frank	12
Buchanan (i)	Pauline	0
Bustard (ii)	Susan	4
Carvill	Lynn	9
Chapman	Jeannette	9
Cooper	Kevin	12
Cradden	Keith	12
Daly	Kevin	8
Donaldson	Peter	11
Dougherty	Brian	8
Elliott	Doug	9
Farrell	Duane	10

Surname	Known As	No of Meetings Attended
Frazer (iii)	Hugh	3
Gallagher	Eileen	11
Gibson	Clare	8
Gibson	Chris	12
Gilmour	Daphne	10
Glenn	George	7
Gregg (iv)	Margaret	5
Haughey	Sharon	11
Jay	Richard	10
Johnston	Bryan	9
Keenan	Eamonn	8
Lucy	Gordon	11
MacBride	Patricia	5
MacNiallais	Donncha	9
Mahony	Patrick	10
McBride	Alan	8
McClean	P.J	12
McClurg	Betty	8
McConaghie	David	10
McCormack (v)	Inez	0
McCulla	Alan	3
McDowell	Emma	11
McGlone	Roisin	8
McKeever	Jim	11
McKinney	Carmel	4
McLaughlin	Kevin	8
McMichael	Gary	6
McNamee (vi)	Aidan	6
McNulty	Eithne	10
Monteith	Richard	2
Muller	Janet	7
O'Reilly	Mick	2
O'Reilly	Brian	8
Orr	James	10
Porter	David	9
Savage (vii)	Gwen	5
Shillington	Colin	12
Stelfox	Dawson	10
Symington	Brian	11

Surname	Known As	No of Meetings Attended
Warde Hunter	Louise	9
Watson	Avril	8
Weldon	Annabel	8
Whatmough (viii)	Jo	5
White	David	8
Williams	Ryan	7
Woods	Gordon	11
Yu	Patrick	1

- (i) Pauline Buchanan resigned November 2000
- (ii) Susan Bustard resigned December 2001
- (iii) Hugh Frazer resigned June 2001
- (iv) Margaret Gregg appointed August 2001
- (v) Inez McCormack resigned November 2001
- (vi) Aidan McNamee resigned May 2002
- (vii) Gwen Savage resigned 2002
- (viii) Jo Whatmough resigned November 2001

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Animal Cruelty

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she has given to increasing the penalties that can be imposed for animal cruelty, in light of recent high profile cases.
(AQW 648/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Since Questions 648/09 and 649/09 refer to the same subject matter, this response deals with both questions together.

The Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, including on whether penalties for cruelty offences should be significantly increased.

Following an initial consideration of responses to the 2006 consultation, I have been meeting a number of stakeholders in order to hear at first hand their concerns on existing animal welfare legislation. The level of penalties available to the Courts has been discussed during these meetings, and has also been the subject of a number of recent letters to me and my officials. The issue of penalties will therefore form a significant part of my deliberations on what new animal welfare legislation may be needed.

I have asked my officials to finalise a report that will summarise the responses to the 2006 consultation, and in doing so to reflect on emerging legislative developments in the South and on the outcome of my stakeholder meetings. While I have not specifically assessed the legislative position in Germany, I have asked my officials to take cognisance of legislation in other jurisdictions in order to inform my policy review.

It is my intention to ensure that the penalties available for animal cruelty are a sufficient deterrent and will therefore provide adequate protection for animals. However, until I complete my review I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of my deliberations.

Animal Cruelty

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of animal welfare legislation in Germany, where a 3 year prison sentence can be imposed for the killing of a vertebrate as a result of cruelty; and what consideration she has given to the introduction of similar legislation. (AQW 649/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since Questions 648/09 and 649/09 refer to the same subject matter, this response deals with both questions together.

The Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, including on whether penalties for cruelty offences should be significantly increased.

Following an initial consideration of responses to the 2006 consultation, I have been meeting a number of stakeholders in order to hear at first hand their concerns on existing animal welfare legislation. The level of penalties available to the Courts has been discussed during these meetings, and has also been the subject of a number of recent letters to me and my officials. The issue of penalties will therefore form a significant part of my deliberations on what new animal welfare legislation may be needed.

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It is my intention to ensure that the penalties available for animal cruelty are a sufficient deterrent and will therefore provide adequate protection for

animals. However, until I complete my review I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of my deliberations.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much compensation was paid out to farmers whose cattle tested positive for bovine tuberculosis, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 685/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Compensation paid to farmers with respect to bovine tuberculosis was as follows:

2003/04	£15,408,521
2004/05	£12,586,405
2005/06	£9,225,891
2006/07	£7,887,123
2007/08	£8,547,534

Bio-Security

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what guidance her Department has issued to farmers and landowners about bio-security. (AQW 686/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department believes that the prevention of disease spread in the North is essential to promote a competitive industry, protect public health and safeguard the interests of all.

In 2004 the Department issued a booklet entitled "Biosecurity Code for NI farms", which also included guidance for official visitors and recreational users of farms. This booklet was issued to all livestock keepers and is also available on the DARD website. Copies are also available on request.

In June 2006, as a result of the increased threat of avian influenza, the Department issued biosecurity advice to all registered bird keepers. This is available on the DARD website as well as additional biosecurity guidance for people organising bird shows.

With the increased threat of foot and mouth disease following a reported case in England in August 2007, leaflets on biosecurity were printed for distribution by DARD staff.

In May 2008 all cattle herd owners were sent letters and leaflets with details on measures they could take to protect their herds from brucellosis infection. The leaflets were also sent to Divisional Veterinary Offices to be made available at their counters and to

Newry & Mourne District Council, who had made a request for information.

A series of farmers meetings on brucellosis were held in the spring of 2008 at which biosecurity issues were discussed and verbal advice given. Biosecurity has also been on the agenda for the farmers' liaison groups on brucellosis, which my Department is leading.

The DARD booklet 'TB In Your Herd' is available from Divisional Veterinary Offices as well as on the DARD website. The booklet covers various aspects of a TB breakdown including detailed biosecurity advice to reduce the risk of infection in cattle. In the event of a tuberculosis breakdown, herd owners are issued with this booklet.

In the event of any disease outbreak, the keeper is visited and issued with detailed animal and public health advice, which outlines advisory and legislative biosecurity practices, to prevent spread of the disease.

Biosecurity includes the prudent sourcing of stock and associated on-farm quarantine. I, and my Department, have repeatedly stressed this message in relation to bluetongue by regular press releases.

Flood Risk Management Plan

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the progress of a flood risk management plan for (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) Belfast; and to detail the climate change science this plan is based upon. (AQW 689/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A number of flood risk management plans covering all of the North will be prepared in accordance with the European Union Directive on the assess and management of flood risks, known as the Floods Directive. These plans will be the culmination of a process of assessment, mapping and the setting of management objectives for areas identified at potential significant risk of flooding. The Directive requires completion and publication of flood risk management plans by 22 December 2015.

Work on the assessment of the areas at potential significant risk is already underway. In addition, a flood management study for Belfast which will form part of a catchment based flood risk management plan is about to commence.

The Floods Directive requires climate change to be taken into account which in the North will be based on the latest available research, information and guidance from numerous sources including the UK Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP), the Scottish NI Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER), the Community Climate change Consortium for Ireland (C4I), and the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC).

Production of Eggs

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proportion of eggs produced originate from (i) battery cages; (ii) barn production systems; and (iii) free range. (AQW 702/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The most recent figures held by my Department, from November 2007, would indicate that 81% of eggs produced in the North are from Battery / Intensive systems of production, 18% are from Free Range and 1% are produced in Barn systems.

Price of Beef

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to decrease the beef price differential between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 734/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I appreciate the concern of local beef farmers caused by the price differential. The price of beef, both here and in Britain, is a commercial matter and therefore entirely outside my control. However I do believe that I have a role to encourage and facilitate dialogue to increase understanding about the issues. I have therefore met with representatives of the Norths meat exporters and with many of the major retailers to express these concerns and to emphasise the importance of everyone in the supply chain sharing in the profits.

I should point out that EU State Aid Rules place severe constraints on the use of Government funds for promotional activities, therefore DARD cannot provide direct funding for marketing or advertising of beef in the North.

The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for the promotion of red meat in the domestic and export markets. Promotional activities aimed at the domestic market include; a press and television campaign highlighting the importance of red meat as part of a balanced diet; provision of advertising posters for butchers' shops and promoting Farm Quality Assured beef.

In relation to the export market, the LMC is heavily involved in major international red meat trade shows, such as ANUGA in Germany and SIAL in France.

Clay Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development who currently owns the existing

lake sluices at the Shrigley end of the Clay Lakes, Killyleagh. (AQW 756/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: DARD Rivers Agency is in the process of establishing ownership of the existing sluice gates at the Shrigley end of the Clay Lakes. Work is ongoing with a view to the Agency taking over legal responsibility for control of the sluice gates at the Shrigley end of Clay Lakes from the current private landowners Dunbia.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what role the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme will have within the new Countryside Management scheme. (AQW 768/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme commenced in 1988 and continues to provide funding for farmers for positive environmental work across 5 areas in the North (Mournes and Slieve Croob, Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin, West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland, Sperrins and Slieve Gullion).

The Scheme closed for applications at the end of 2006. Farmers with a current ESA Scheme agreement will continue to receive funding according to the terms and conditions of their agreement.

The land within the ESA represents some of the most important habitat areas in the region. In recognition of this, the ESA, together with designated sites such as Natura 2000 and Areas of Special Scientific Interest, will be given high priority in the new Countryside Management Scheme.

River Bann Bank Erosion

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to finance the reinstatement of agricultural lands in the Hilltown area that were washed into the River Bann as a result of the floods on 16 and 17 August 2008. (AQW 780/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Bank erosion has taken place to the River Bann at various locations. Remedial measures on bank erosion are normally undertaken by Rivers Agency where the erosion presents a threat to flood defences, roads or built property and structures and works are cost beneficial. However, effective works to arrest erosion on designated watercourses are very expensive and can seldom be justified in relation to the benefits gained. Unfortunately bank protection works by Rivers Agency in this area cannot be justified as

it would not be cost beneficial. I am very aware of the crop losses suffered by farmers and am currently considering funding options available to me, subject to affordability and business case considerations.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the proposed timetable for issuing letters of offer to each of the 7 local action groups bidding to deliver part of the Rural Development Programme. (AQW 782/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The letter of offer or contract must issue to the legal entity responsible for the corporate governance of the programme. In this case this will be the Joint Committee. I would hope that we will soon be able to approve the completeness of the strategies and enter into these contracts for the initial allocations of funding. My officials have reported that all areas are working towards the opening of calls and putting in place the required structures to implement the programme as soon as these allocations have been made. To support this work and the work of the Local Action Groups we are looking at the possibility of extending animation contracts to allow the lead councils to set up their administration units so that on approval of initial allocations areas can move quickly to issuing letters of offer.

Assistance for Farmers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what provision has been made for farmers who suffered financial loss as a result of the flooding that occurred in August 2008; and how many applications for assistance have been successful. (AQW 833/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is currently no compensation available or reimbursement scheme for crop or other losses and therefore no applications have been made or been successful.

However, following the severe flooding on 15/16 August I tasked my officials with conducting an assessment of the damage, concentrating on potato and cereal crops in the worst affected river catchment areas of, Moyola, Lagan, Upper Bann, Blackwater, Maine and Sixmilewater. That assessment is now almost complete and an estimate of the cost is in the order of £600,000. I am currently considering funding options available to me, subject to affordability and business case considerations.

MEP Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the meetings she has had with the 3 MEPs over the past 12 months; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings. (AQW 849/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Details of meetings with MEPs since September 2007.

Date	MEP meetings	Purpose of meetings
28/02/2008	Tele call with Jim Nicholson MEP and Bairbre de Brún MEP	To update MEPs on my proposals for Bluetongue Import Controls
01/04/2008	Meeting with Jim Nicholson MEP Meeting with Bairbre de Brún MEP	To brief the MEPs on the outcome of the Commissioner Borg meeting on the 01/04/08
02/06/2008	Meeting with Jim Nicholson MEP	Meeting to discuss: - Funding for the NI Equine Industry - DARD position on Bio Fuels - Rising feed prices - Animal diseases Rural Development Scheme 2007 - 2013.
23/09/2008	Meeting with Bairbre de Brún MEP	Update given on position with Europe re FNMS, Sheep tagging and CAP Health Check.

I have been pro-active in seeking meetings with all our local MEP's.

Production of Milk Powder

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the standards of quality assurance in relation to the production of milk powder. (AQW 857/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is not responsible for monitoring the standards of quality assurance in relation to the production of milk powder. Food hygiene and food standards inspections of milk powder plants are undertaken by Local Authority, Environmental Health Officers who report to the Food Standards Agency NI (The central competent authority for food hygiene and safety)

Independent Panel

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the role; (ii) the membership; and (iii) the appointment process, in relation to the Independent Panel. (AQW 910/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) The role of the External Panel is to consider representations in relation to DARD's decision on the awarding or withholding of financial support, taking account of the constraints imposed by the relevant EU and national legislation. After considering a case the Panel members make a written recommendation to me.
- (ii) Panels are selected from a pool of 22 people. The Single Farm Payment Stage 2 Panel comprises 2 members, one of whom has a legal background. Panel members are required to declare, prior to considering a case, any conflict of interest, for example if they have a personal interest in a case under consideration or if the applicant is known to them eg a relative, friend or associate. In such a situation the Panel Member is excluded from involvement in that particular case.
- (iii) Panel members are appointed by publicly advertised competition. Applications are subject to shortlisting and interviews are subsequently held for those who are shortlisted. Panel members are appointed initially for a three-year period with the possibility of renewal thereafter for a further three year period.

New Entrants Scheme

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide (i) the number of applications received for the new entrants scheme; (ii) the breakdown of applications by parliamentary constituency; (iii) what plans she has to hold discussions with the European Commission on possible future funding schemes to encourage young people to enter the agriculture industry. (AQW 1019/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There have been 431 applications received for the New Entrants Scheme.

My Department does not record applications received for the New Entrants Scheme by Parliamentary Constituency.

The European Commission, under Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, has already made provision for granting support to young farmers both in terms of the initial establishment and the structural adjustment of their holdings after the initial set up.

This Regulation governs the period up to 2013. You will be aware that my Department's New Entrants Scheme is currently suspended to new applications as we have reached the stage where the number of applications to the Scheme could fully commit the budget. At this time it is looking unlikely that we will re-open the Scheme. An in-depth assessment of the Scheme has commenced in order to reach an assessment of its impact and cost effectiveness. I will make a decision on the way ahead for the North after I review that evaluation.

In-Vessel Composting

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will carry out research into the composting of agri-green waste and poultry waste, being carried out at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute Environment and Renewable Energy Centre, through the process of in vessel composting. (AQW 1056/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The aerobic process of in-vessel composting is not undertaken at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Hillsborough site.

However, AFBI has recently installed a mesophilic anaerobic slurry digester at its Hillsborough site. Anaerobic digestion (AD) is a treatment that composts waste material in the absence of oxygen, producing a biogas that can be used to generate electricity and heat.

The research programme for this digester that is being agreed with and funded by my Department is based around cattle slurry, which constitutes 88% of farm slurry feedstock available within the North. Additionally, the draft research programme includes studying the feasibility of enhancing digester performance by co-digesting cattle slurry with other farm organic materials, e.g. silage, farmyard manure, pig slurry and poultry manure.

It is, however, important to note that planning approval for the AD plant at Hillsborough specifically restricts the AD to use of materials produced on site. As no poultry litter is currently produced on the Hillsborough site, specific approval from planning authorities would be required prior to the commencement of research using poultry waste.

In relation to composting of agri-green waste, AFBI has carried out an extensive programme of Research & Development (R&D) into mushroom composting at its Loughgall and Newforge Lane sites over many years. AFBI Loughgall is equipped with 4 fully computer controlled forced aeration enclosed composting units. AFBI Newforge Lane has the latest analytical technology that allows investigation of decomposition during the composting process.

Adjustment of the composting research programme to include non mushroom related materials is being considered by AFBI and the Department.

Fishing Council

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the likely areas of co-operation with the Republic of Ireland in the December meeting of the Fishing Council; and what discussions she has held on this matter with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1060/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I had the opportunity to meet with Brendan Smith TD last month and I raised fisheries matters with him at that time. We agreed that the Fisheries Council in December would be a difficult negotiation and that issues surrounding the scientific advice on prawns, the outcome of the review of Cod Recovery and the prospects of further TAC cuts and the Commission's proposals for discard reduction have the potential to impact severely on fishing opportunities for our fleets. I will be having a further meeting with Fisheries Minister, Tony Killeen TD about these issues and others in more detail prior to the December Council.

Rural Development Programme

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to publicise the new rural development programme. (AQO 447/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Rural Development Programme offers tremendous opportunities for rural communities across the North. I want to ensure that people know what is available and how both funding and support can be accessed.

Officials within my Department's Rural Development Division, Press Office and OFMDFM's Government Advertising Unit have been working closely to develop and deliver an integrated communications campaign in support of the Programme. The campaign will raise awareness of the Programme and its benefits, provide details of how and when to apply for funding and encourage applications. It will involve a consistent campaign identity across all advertising and design work, to include a campaign website and a variety of publicity materials including an information pack that can be requested via a bespoke enquiry RDP phone-line. I expect the main advertising element of the campaign to launch early in the New Year.

In the preceding months additional promotional activities will be undertaken at both local and regional levels. District Councils through Local Action Groups will be responsible for ensuring maximum publicity for funding available under Axis 3 of the Programme. In addition, I have recently announced the appointment of a dedicated Rural Network which will also play an important role in publicising the Programme at local level.

Over the lifetime of the Programme my Department will invest over £500m in rural communities. The Rural Development Programme provides a wide range of opportunities for all and will make a significant contribution to the future sustainability of farmers and rural dwellers generally.

EU Fisheries Council

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what preparations have been made for the December EU Fisheries Council.
(AQO 434/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following the publication of the scientific advice on Irish Sea stocks I met with the key Commission officials in July to discuss the implications of this advice. Fisheries Administrations have agreed a programme of meetings in the lead-up to the December Council to discuss and develop negotiating priorities. These arrangements include meetings with key stakeholders. I had the opportunity to meet with the representatives of local fishermen on 22 September to discuss my priorities for these negotiations and to hear their views. I intend to meet with them again prior to my attendance at Council in December. I have also had the opportunity to discuss those priorities with my Southern counterpart, Brendan Smith TD when I met with him on 19 September. A further meeting will be held with the Fisheries Minister, Tony Killeen TD prior to Council. I will be briefing the ARD Committee on my approach to this year's Council when I meet them tomorrow.

Code of Good Agricultural Practice

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to promote the Code of Good Agricultural Practice.
(AQO 441/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A fully revised Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Prevention of Pollution of Water, Air and Soil was published at the beginning of September. The latest Code outlines environmental

legislative requirements for farmers. It also provides practical advice on management practices designed to reduce any negative impact from agricultural activities on the environment.

My Department hosted an event to launch the revised Code on 3 September. Following this I began a programme of promotion to raise awareness of the Code amongst members of the farming public, industry representatives and non-government organisations. A press release was issued encouraging all farmers to follow the guidelines within the Code. Subsequently, four press articles and two radio interviews on BBC Radio Ulster's 'Farm Gate', have further promoted the Code, including information of how to obtain a copy. The DARD E-newsletter has also carried information about the Code, and copies are available on the RuralNI and DARD websites.

I anticipate that this programme of promotion will continue on an ongoing basis. My Department will release press articles, containing advice from the Code, to coincide with seasonal activities such as silage cutting and slurry spreading to maximize their impact on protecting the environment. DARD will also promote the Code at the Winter Fair in December.

Locally Produced Mushrooms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to encourage local food retailers to sell locally produced mushrooms.
(AQO 437/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have met with the senior management from 5 of the large retailers operating in the North over the past 15 months. During these meetings we have discussed their relationship with producers of all farm products including mushrooms. I have encouraged them to increase the amount of produce that is sourced from the North for both their stores here and further afield. They have expressed to me their desire to source product in the North and to support local communities. They have also stated their willingness to identify new products and to source more produce from here.

In addition, I have recently written to all of the retailers operating in the North to express my concerns about producers having to absorb a disproportionate share of rising costs. I highlighted the pressure that producers are under due to increased production costs, particularly with respect to feedstuffs, fertiliser and fuel, and the need for sustainable farm gate prices.

Neighbourhood Renewal Posts

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of the neighbourhood renewal posts and services that her Department will fund from March 2009. (AQO 462/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Neighbourhood Renewal is a Department for Social Development funded programme, operating in urban areas. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no direct involvement in the Programme, and would have no remit to fund posts and services in connection with it.

Assistance for Farmers

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance her Department has made available to farmers given the losses they have suffered due to the recent heavy rain and flooding. (AQO 432/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is currently no compensation available or reimbursement for crop or other losses. However, following the severe flooding on 15/16 August I tasked my officials with conducting an assessment of the damage, concentrating on potato and cereal crops in the worst affected river catchment areas, Moyola, Lagan, Upper Bann, Blackwater, Maine and Sixmilewater.

That assessment is now almost complete and an initial estimate of the cost is in the order of £600,000. I am currently considering funding options available to me, subject to affordability and business case considerations.

Executive's Brussels Office

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what contact she has had with the Executive's Brussels Office in the last month. (AQO 448/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Europe is central to the future of the local agricultural, fishing and agri-food industries and I firmly believe that local interests need to be represented. Since I came into office the development of a more direct relationship with Europe has been an important objective of mine. I am working to widen our influence in Brussels and have personally lobbied the European Commission on key local matters.

The Executive's Brussels office is an important resource that I have used on my many visits to Brussels. The officials in Brussels are working

continually to improve our relationship with the EU institutions. My Department has posted a member of staff to the office who is dedicated to agri-food, veterinary, fisheries and rural development issues. Daily contact is made between DARD staff based in the North and the DARD staff member in Brussels. Over the past month, the contacts have included exchanges of information on such issues as the process of the negotiations for the CAP Health Check, state aid regulations in relation to flooding damage, content and outcome of fisheries, veterinary and agriculture meetings, arrangements for September's Agriculture and Fisheries Council, facilitation of an LFA meeting for officials and the setting up of a telephone discussion between myself and Commissioner Fisher Boel.

I assure the House that I will continue to press Brussels for the best deal I can get for local farmers and fishermen.

Foyle and Carlingford Loughs Agency

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the estimated annual cost of operating the catamaran owned by the Foyle and Carlingford Loughs Agency. (AQO 464/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Based on the economic appraisal carried out on the procurement of the monitoring vessel, estimated running costs will be in the region of £113,500. The Loughs Agency has not sought any increase in its budgets to cover these running costs.

Local Fishing Boats

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with fishing organisations to ensure that local fishing boats are not prevented from fishing for clams. (AQO 452/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has had a number of discussions with local fishermen about fishing opportunities for scallops (clams). Following proposals made by the NI Scallop Association the Department will shortly bring forward legislation which will introduce conservation measures that industry has requested which will contribute to a more sustainable fishery offering better fishing prospects for local fishermen.

Dangerous Dogs Legislation

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the review of dangerous dogs legislation. (AQO 460/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Since I announced my Review of dangerous dogs and dog fighting legislation, I have met a number of key stakeholders including the PSNI and local Councils. I have also held discussions with a number of animal welfare representatives, including the Kennel Club and the Companion Animal Welfare Committee. Additionally, I have raised issues of mutual concern with my Ministerial counterpart in the South. I have found the discussions to date very constructive and informative and many of the views expressed will be reflected in my findings. Before completing the Review, I also plan to meet the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

My review is therefore ongoing. Once it is complete I will consider a number of policy options, including any requirement for new legislation.

In the meantime, as enforcement of the legislation is crucial to my Review, and as many of the issues raised to date have been about public safety, a Working Group made up of my officials, PSNI and local Councils, continues to meet to consider enforcement issues. The Working Group is drawing up a Memorandum of Understanding which will provide a mechanism for better co-operation in the enforcement of current legislation. Having met the Working Group in September, I am delighted to say that the Memorandum of Understanding is expected to be finalised soon.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Expenditure on Leisure Facilities

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure on leisure facilities and provision per person, broken down by parliamentary constituency; and how these calculations are made. (AQW 542/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): Details pertaining to the expenditure on leisure facilities and provision per person, broken down by parliamentary constituency are set out below.

The Member should note that although spend may be allocated to a parliamentary constituency; the catchment area of a particular leisure facility may be beyond the constituency's boundaries, for example the investment in the refurbishment of the Ulster Museum, based in Belfast South, represents investment for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Total expenditure by DCAL and its relevant arms length bodies in 2007/08 on leisure facilities amounted to £97, 060, 273.

ARTS & MUSUEMS*

Parliamentary Constituency	Population Per Constituency (2007 Mid Year Estimate)	Capital Spend (£) 2007/08	Revenue Spend (£) 2007/08	Total Spend (£) 2007/08	Spend Per Capita (£) 2007/08
Antrim East	87, 054	0	15, 750	15, 750	0.18
Antrim North	108, 559	0	14, 281	14, 281	0.13
Antrim South	106, 087	0	0	0	0
Belfast East	78, 249	0	1, 150, 000	1, 150, 000	14.70
Belfast North	82, 455	3, 300	78, 250	81, 550	0.99
Belfast South	91, 722	20, 406, 000	4, 694, 047	25, 100, 047	273.65
Belfast West	84, 473	7, 000	388, 486	395, 486	4.68
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	100, 024	0	17, 212	17, 212	0.17
Foyle	108, 535	3, 190, 940	904, 724	4, 095, 664	37.74
Lagan Valley	108, 758	0	25, 417	25, 417	0.23
Londonderry East	91, 243	10, 001	78, 922	88, 923	0.97
Mid Ulster	94, 101	0	30, 000	30, 000	0.32
Newry & Armagh	108, 511	161, 000	1, 283, 000	1, 444, 000	13.31
North Down	88, 934	824, 000	8, 917, 000	9, 741, 000	109.53

Parliamentary Constituency	Population Per Constituency (2007 Mid Year Estimate)	Capital Spend (£) 2007/08	Revenue Spend (£) 2007/08	Total Spend (£) 2007/08	Spend Per Capita (£) 2007/08
South Down	114, 724	0	7, 661	7, 661	0.07
Strangford	101, 841	0	0	0	0
Tyrone West	90, 938	412, 000	1, 489, 500	1, 901, 500	20.91
Upper Bann	112, 850	0	40, 788	40, 788	0.36

* Figures were calculated using the 2007 mid-year estimated population in the parliamentary constituencies.

DCAL is unable to breakdown, by parliamentary constituency; spend on sports, libraries, inland waterways and inland fisheries facilities. Details pertaining to breakdown spend per capita for the whole of Northern Ireland are however set out below.

Division	Spend (£) 2007/08	Spend Per Capita (£) 2007/08*
Libraries	35, 191, 000	20
Sport (inclusive of Lottery)	13, 595, 868	7.73
Inland waterways Inland Fisheries	4, 124, 126	2.34

* Figures were calculated using the 2007 mid-year estimated population in the whole of Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland population June 2007 mid-year estimate: 1, 759 148).

Fixed Bag Nets

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to protect and safeguard people who have the right to fish using fixed bag nets on the North coast. (AQW 784/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has a statutory responsibility to conserve and protect wild salmon stocks and research has shown that Atlantic salmon populations are under threat. DCAL also has to comply with EU legislation under the Habitats Directive and other European legislation to conserve and protect this endangered species. The Department has offered the remaining commercial salmon net licence holders on the North Coast compensation for a voluntary cessation of fishing. This has not been accepted and the Department is now consulting with the netsmen on a way forward.

I am aware of the cultural and social factors associated with the commercial salmon industry. I will consider all relevant information before making a final decision regarding the fixed bag nets on the North Coast.

After-School Sports Activities

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available from his Department to assist with transport costs for after school sports activities. (AQW 983/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding. One possible source of funding would be the Awards for All programme, under which grants may be available to assist with transport costs for after schools sports activities. Awards for All is a joint Lottery distributor programme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Sport Northern Ireland and the Big Lottery Fund.

Irish-Language Groups

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the Irish-language groups that have been funded by his Department; and (ii) the amount of funding provided to Irish-language groups in the Mid-Ulster constituency over the last 3 years. (AQW 994/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The only Irish language group funded directly by my Department is Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency, which along with the Ulster-Scots Agency comprises the North/South Language Body.

Foras na Gaeilge provides funding for community based Irish language groups and has identified the following payments to groups in the Mid-Ulster constituency between 2006 and 2008.

Year	Details	Award
2008	Coiste Forbartha (Maghera)Cairde Uí Néill	£66,974
	(Coalisland) & Pobal Speirín (Cookstown)	£2,792
2007	Naiscoil Charn Tochair (Maghera)	£2,100
2006		Nil

EDUCATION

After-School Sports Events

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what grants are available through her Department for after school sports events. (AQW 340/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá ráite ag an Roinn Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta go mbíonn Sport NI (SNI) freagrach as spórt a fhorbairt i dtuaisceart na hÉireann lena n-áirítear maoiniú a dháileadh.

The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure have commented that Sport NI (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in the north of Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI currently runs two programmes from which funding may be available for after school sports events. These are an Awards for All Programme and a Sport in Our Community Programme. Details of these programmes are available from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

The Department of Education provides funding of some £10m under the Extended Schools programme, targeted on children and young people who are disadvantaged, marginalised or have the most limited access to current services. Funding can be spent on diverse activities including after schools sports activities. In the first year of the programme, 2006/07, the Education and Library Boards Extended Schools Annual Reports indicated that 66% (322 out of 486) of schools offered additional sporting activities funded by the Extended Schools Programme.

The Boards Extended School Annual Reports for 2007/08 should be available late autumn.

Children and young people can benefit greatly from developing their physical literacy skills and participating in sporting activities. My curriculum sports programme provides additional opportunities to do so for our youngest primary school children, and I welcome the opportunities available to pupils in after school settings.

Educational Facilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to improve educational facilities in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 735/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá scéimeanna um mionoibreacha á bpleanáil chun áiseanna a fheabhsú ag na scoileanna seo a leanas sa toghcheantar:

Schemes of minor works are in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in the constituency:

School	Scheme
Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus	CCTV and Fire alarm system
Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne	Refurbishment of toilets
St James' Primary School, Newtownabbey	Upgrade of bell system and refurbishment of toilets
St Comgall's High School, Larne	Replacement fire doors
Larne Grammar School	Air conditioning
Belfast High School	Comfort cooling system in ICT room and replacement hot water cylinder
St MacNissi's College, Garron Tower	Toilet refurbishment, fire risk assessment work and CCTV

There are a number of proposed schemes for major works for schools in the area which have been identified by the relevant education authority and are the subject of consideration within the department.

Free School Meals

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils were in receipt of free school meals in each (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary school, in the East Belfast constituency, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 821/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

PUPILS ENTITLED TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST BELFAST CONSTITUENCY – 2003/04 – 2007/08

School name	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08
Belmont Primary School	7	7	5	6	8
Euston Street Primary School	96	108	114	131	115
Strand Primary School	59	44	37	65	45
Mersey Street Primary School	68	71	60	N.A.	N.A.
Strandtown Primary School	59	61	47	71	69
Elmgrove Primary School	191	205	184	167	177

School name	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08
Avoniel Primary School	133	105	105	111	112
Beechfield Primary School	71	73	70	84	73
Orangefield Primary School	38	42	43	39	30
Sydenham Infants Primary School	39	35	34	43	36
Greenwood Primary School	7	10	11	8	7
Knocknagoney Primary School	67	64	48	52	57
Dundela Infants School	46	41	49	45	37
St Joseph's Primary School	*	*	*	*	*
St Matthew's Primary School	208	190	199	176	163
Bloomfield Collegiate	0	0	0	0	*
Cabin Hill School	0	0	*	0	*
Strathearn School	0	0	0	0	0
Gilnahirk Primary School	21	24	30	28	37
Cregagh Primary School	47	42	42	54	61
Lisnasharragh Primary School	50	48	45	51	44
Knockbreda Primary School	16	19	19	11	17
Braniel Primary School	35	31	31	35	36
Tullycarnet Primary School	91	80	75	51	45
Lead Hill Primary School	5	6	5	5	5
St Bernard's Primary School	0	*	*	*	8
Loughview Integrated Primary School	28	26	16	20	12

PUPILS ENTITLED TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST BELFAST CONSTITUENCY – 2003/04 – 2007/08

School name	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08
Ashfield Girls' High School	144	149	132	132	122
Ashfield Boys' High School	175	161	154	145	129
Orangefield High School	158	142	124	122	122
Grosvenor Gs	41	34	42	46	36
Bloomfield Collegiate	13	14	17	19	15
Campbell College	5	5	6	6	7
Strathearn School	17	19	20	15	12
Lisnasharragh High School	120	111	107	93	36
Knockbreda High School	180	184	166	151	162
Our Lady And St Patrick's College	28	23	23	16	18

Source: Annual school census

“*” denotes fewer than 5 pupils.

Note: Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

Free school meal entitlement for nursery class pupils measured as those children who have a parent in receipt of Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance or who are recorded as entitled to free school meals.

Post-Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail by grade how many pupils transferred to each post-primary school in the (a) Newry and Mourne District Council; and (b) Armagh City and District Council areas. (AQW 878/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Deiscirt don Roinn gur mar seo a leanas líon na ndaltaí de réir na ngrád a fuair siad, a d'aistrigh chuig gach iarbhunscóil i limistéir (a) Chomhairle Cheantar an Iúir agus Mhúrn; agus (b) Chomhairle Chathair agus Cheantar Ard Mhacha.

The Southern Education and Library Board have advised that the number of pupils by grade that transferred to each post-primary school in the (a) Newry and Mourne District Council; and (b) Armagh City and District Council areas is as detailed in the tables below.

(A) NEWRY AND MOURN DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	Pupils Admitted 2008/09					
Post Primary School	Grade A	Grade B1	Grade B2	Grade C1	Grade C2	Grade D
Kilkeel High School	0	0	2	2	3	3
Newry High School	1	0	6	1	5	7
Newtownhamilton High School	1	0	0	1	2	8
St Columban's College	0	0	0	6	4	8
St Joseph's Boys' High, Newry	0	0	5	8	6	23
St Joseph's High, Crossmaglen	9	2	7	9	10	25
St Mark's High, Warrenpoint	1	3	5	13	16	56
St Mary's High School, Newry	0	1	4	3	7	32
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	23	15	15	28	17	53
Christian Bros Abbey Grammar	108	17	3	1	0	0
Our Lady's Grammar School	79	31	8	1	1	0
Sacred Heart Grammar School	113	2	4	2	0	0
St Colman's College	88	16	10	1	0	2
St Louis' Grammar School	45	14	14	4	2	1

(B) ARMAGH CITY AND DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	Pupils Admitted 2008/09					
Post Primary School	Grade A	Grade B1	Grade B2	Grade C1	Grade C2	Grade D
City of Armagh High School	0	0	0	0	3	7
Markethill High School	2	0	0	3	3	9
Tandragee Junior High	0	0	0	0	1	1
Armagh Integrated College	0	0	0	0	1	0
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	0	0	0	0	0	6
St Catherine's College	14	4	6	7	4	19

	Pupils Admitted 2008/09					
Post Primary School	Grade A	Grade B1	Grade B2	Grade C1	Grade C2	Grade D
St Patrick's High School, Keady	3	5	2	1	1	8
Royal School, Armagh	46	15	15	14	2	2
St Patrick's Grammar, Armagh	32	10	17	18	16	13

Post-Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many pupils transferred to each post-primary school without sitting the transfer test, in the (i) Newry and Mourne District Council; and (ii) Armagh City and District Council areas. (AQW 880/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt don Roinn gur mar seo a leanas líon na ndaltaí a d'aistrigh chuig gach iarbhunscóil i limistéir (a) Chomhairle Ceantair an Iúir agus Mhúrn; agus (b) Chomhairle Chathair agus Cheantar Ard Mhacha gan an scrúdú aistrithe a dhéanamh.

The Southern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that the number of pupils that transferred to each post-primary school without sitting the transfer test, in the (i) Newry and Mourne District Council; and (ii) Armagh City and District Council areas is as detailed in the tables below.

(I) NEWRY AND MOURN DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

Post Primary School	Pupils Admitted that opted out of the transfer test 2008/09
Kilkeel High School	117
Newry High School	58
Newtownhamilton High School	23
St Columban's College	26
St Joseph's Boys' High, Newry	24
St Joseph's High, Crossmaglen	56
St Mark's High, Warrenpoint	56
St Mary's High School, Newry	31
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	74
Christian Bros Abbey Grammar	0
Our Lady's Grammar School	0
Sacred Heart Grammar School	0
St Colman's College	8*
St Louis' Grammar School	0

(II) ARMAGH CITY AND DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

Post Primary School	Pupils Admitted that opted out of the transfer test 2008/09
City of Armagh High School	29
Markethill High School	83
Tandragee Junior High	75
Armagh Integrated College	7
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	28
St Catherine's College	120
St Patrick's High School, Keady	141
Royal School, Armagh	0
St Patrick's Grammar, Armagh	4*

* The Southern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that these pupils were admitted under the special provisions which exist for:

- Children whose parents/guardians wish them to transfer to a Grammar School from a school outside the North of Ireland;
- Children who have received more than half their education outside the North of Ireland;
- Children entered for the transfer tests, who because of unforeseen and serious medical problems, which are supported by medical evidence, were unable to participate in the transfer tests.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education when she will circulate a Policy Memorandum to Ministers on the future post-primary transfer arrangements from next year. (AQW 906/09)

The Minister of Education: Déanfaidh mé cinnte go dtabharfar Meabhrán Beartais ar mo thograí le haghaidh leasú na socruithe um aistriú iarbhunscoile d'Airí roimh an chéad chruinniú eile de chuid Choiste an Fheidhmeannais.

I will arrange for the circulation to Ministers of a Policy Memorandum on my proposals for the reform of post-primary transfer arrangements in advance of the next meeting of the Executive Committee.

Post-Primary Schools

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what post-primary schools in the North Down constituency cater for special needs children. (AQW 933/09)

The Minister of Education: Since the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order (SENDI) in September 2005, all mainstream schools have the potential to cater for most pupils with SEN. Special schools continue to play a vital role in supporting pupils with significant and complex needs, in accordance with parental wishes and the professional advice given.

Is iad na hiarbhunscoileanna seo a leanas i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh a dhéanann freastal ar pháistí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu:-

The following post-primary schools in the North Down constituency currently cater for children with special educational needs:

School	SEN stage 1 - 5 pupils
Donaghadee High School	129
Bangor Academy	174
St Columbanus' College	96
Priory College	98
Glenlola Collegiate	13
Bangor Grammar school	29
Sullivan Upper School	26
Clifton Special School	56
Lakewood Special School	11

Source: School Census 2007/08

Note: 1. Figures for Special schools relate to children of post-primary school age.

Educational Facilities

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to improve educational facilities in the North Down constituency. (AQW 934/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá scéimeanna faofa móroibreacha agus mionoibreacha ann chun áiseanna a fheabhsú ag na scoileanna seo a leanas:

There are approved schemes of major and minor works to improve facilities at the following schools:

School	Current position
Major Capital Works Schemes:	
Bangor Grammar School	In planning
Hollywood/Redburn Primary School	In planning
Priory College	In planning
St Columbanus' College	In planning
Towerview PS	Project underway
Minor Capital Works Schemes:	
St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood - Replacement Windows	In planning
Bangor Grammar School -	
Essential Home Economics accommodation	In planning

Post-Primary Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what proportion of pupils left post-primary education with no qualifications in each of the last 5 years; and how do these figures compare with those for (i) England; (ii) Scotland; and (iii) Wales. (AQW 940/09)

The Minister of Education: Féach an tábla thíos. Ba chóir bheith faichilleach faoi aon chomparáidí mar go mbíonn modheolaíochtaí éagsúla ann sna réigiúin.

Please see the table below. Any comparisons should be viewed with caution as methodologies differ between Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

Percentage of school leavers achieving no formal qualifications 2001/02 to 2006/07 in England, Scotland, north of Ireland and Wales.

	North of Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales
2006/07	3.0	2.7	4.1	2.0
2005/06	3.2	3.3	4.0	2.6
2004/05	3.5	3.6 ⁽²⁾	4.3	2.7
2003/04	4.9	5.3	4.0	2.8
2002/03	N/A ⁽¹⁾	5.2	4.7	2.8
2001/02	5.2	5.4	4.6	3.0

1. Due to technical problems in schools no North of Ireland data for the 2002/03 academic year are available.
2. Results from 2004/05 onwards incorporate GCSEs, GNVQs and a wide range of other qualifications approved pre-16. Prior to 2005 results are based on GCSEs and GNVQs only.

Slemish College

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on her consideration of replacing temporary buildings at Slemish College with a permanent building. (AQW 1004/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní dhearna Slemish College teagmháil oifigiúil leis an Roinn maidir le foirgneamh buan a thógáil in áit na bhfoirgneamh sealadach.

Slemish College has not formally approached the Department about replacing temporary buildings with a permanent building. The College is currently engaging with the Department with regard to repairs to the roof and metal substructure of some temporary classrooms and the provision of a sports hall.

Unauthorised Absence

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) how many incidences of unauthorised absence were recorded in each Education and Library Board area in each of the last 4 years; and (ii) what advice was provided by her Department to schools for dealing with persistent cases. (AQW 1025/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not currently hold the information sought.

Since September 2006, a new standardised system of recording absences has been used in schools, following an update of the attendance module of the Classroom 2000 (C2K) system. This enables schools to record pupils' absences, the reasons for the absence and whether the absence is authorised or unauthorised.

The Department had planned to collect this new data with the annual school census in October 2007. However additional software is required to facilitate the transfer of detailed, yet anonymised, attendance data to the Department for analysis. This software has been commissioned and the intention is to collect data for the 2006/07 and 2007/08 school years during the census in October 2008.

A separate exercise took place earlier this year to collect detailed attendance data from all post-primary schools and this data was published on the Department's website (www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32-statistics_and_research_statistics_on_education_pg/32_statistics_and_research_-_statistics_on_education-pupil_attendance.htm).

This information and the data from both primary and post-primary schools that will be collected this month will be used to inform the setting of targets on pupil attendance. Once targets have been developed, the Department will issue guidance to schools on how best to promote regular attendance and on approaches to early and effective intervention.

Faigheann an Roinn eolas ó na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne faoi dhaltaí a mbíonn buarthaí ann fúthu toisc go mbíonn fadhb acu le freastal. Cruinnítear an t-eolas seo ag deireadh gach scoilbhliana agus foilsítear ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne é.

The Department does collect information from the education and library boards about pupils referred due to concerns around non-attendance. This information is collected at the end of each school year and is published on the Department's website (www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils_parents-pg/pupils_parents-suspensions_and_expulsions_pg.htm). The Education and Welfare Service will receive a referral from a school when a pupil's attendance pattern causes

concern and each referral will be dealt with according to the individual circumstances.

School Pupils

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many pupils (i) there are in each constituency; and (ii) travel to schools outside the constituency where they live. (AQW 1027/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra le fáil sna táblaí thíos.

The answer is contained in the tables below.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS BY CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE AND THE NUMBER OF PUPILS WHO ATTEND SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THEIR CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE – 2007/08

Constituency	No. of pupils resident	No. of pupils who attend schools outside the constituency they reside in
Home Postcode Not Known/Provided	748	NA
Belfast East	5,893	706
Belfast North	7,082	480
Belfast South	6,425	862
Belfast West	8,243	975
East Antrim	7,656	825
East Derry	8,138	509
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	9,097	692
Foyle	11,346	58
Lagan Valley	10,106	1,749
Mid Ulster	9,297	318
Newry and Armagh	10,958	642
North Antrim	9,966	479
North Down	6,713	376
South Antrim	9,741	1,050
South Down	11,061	920
Strangford	8,722	1,252
Upper Bann	10,656	613
West Tyrone	9,091	148
Total	166,639	12,654

POST PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS BY CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE AND THE NUMBER OF PUPILS WHO ATTEND SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THEIR CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE – 2007/08

Constituency	No. of pupils resident	No. of pupils who attend schools outside the constituency they reside in
Home Postcode not Known/Provided	2,113	NA
Belfast East	5,314	2,168
Belfast North	6,714	1,420
Belfast South	5,820	2,265
Belfast West	8,410	1,680
East Antrim	7,077	1,527
East Derry	7,303	1,257
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	8,425	570
Foyle	10,652	403
Lagan Valley	8,831	3,882
Mid Ulster	8,726	1,537
Newry and Armagh	9,781	1,425
North Antrim	8,461	1,087
North Down	6,222	1,690
South Antrim	8,434	3,697
South Down	10,351	2,288
Strangford	7,909	4,089
Upper Bann	9,218	1,322
West Tyrone	8,181	725
Total	147,942	33,032

SPECIAL SCHOOL PUPILS BY CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE AND THE NUMBER OF PUPILS WHO ATTEND SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THEIR CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE – 2007/08

Constituency	No. of pupils resident	No. of pupils who attend schools outside the constituency they reside in
Home Postcode not Known/Provided	160	NA
Belfast East	231	199
Belfast North	380	337
Belfast South	215	88
Belfast West	501	370
East Antrim	236	61

Constituency	No. of pupils resident	No. of pupils who attend schools outside the constituency they reside in
East Derry	184	26
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	194	7
Foyle	272	14
Lagan Valley	389	72
Mid Ulster	123	63
Newry and Armagh	154	31
North Antrim	253	76
North Down	242	162
South Antrim	259	175
South Down	183	120
Strangford	286	91
Upper Bann	141	47
West Tyrone	208	27
Total	4,611	1,966

Source: Annual school census 2007/08

Note: Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes
Home postcode details are not available for some pupils.

Bangor Academy and St Columbanus College

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education if she will increase the enrolment figures for Bangor Academy and St Columbanus College, to prevent a recurrence of the inability of secondary schools in Bangor to provide places for all year 8 pupils.
(AQW 1029/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl ganntanas áiteanna scoile ann do phaistí i gceantar Dhún Thuaidh taobh istigh d'achar réasúnach taistil óna mbailte. Socraítear líonta iontrálacha agus rollaithe Bangor Academy agus St Columbanus College de réir na cóiríochta atá ar fáil sna scoileanna.

There is no shortage of school places for children in the North Down area within a reasonable travelling distance of their homes. The admissions and enrolment numbers of Bangor Academy and St Columbanus College are set in accordance with the accommodation available at the schools. There are no plans to increase the admissions and enrolment numbers of Bangor Academy. St Columbanus College has a capital scheme in development for a new school in the future but there are no plans to increase its numbers based on its present accommodation.

The Department is always willing to consider requests from schools for temporary variations to their

admissions and enrolment numbers. However when considering such requests, the Department must take account of the availability of alternative school places in order to maintain a viable schools' estate.

Charge Levied by Hochtief

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the charge levied by Hochtief for (i) cleaning up a lemonade spill; and (ii) replacement of an internal ceiling tile at Bangor Academy/ Nendrum College.
(AQW 1043/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil glanadh frithghníomhach ar cheann de na seirbhísí a sholáthraítear faoin chonradh agus mar sin de, ní bhíonn aon táille ar iarratais aonair glanta.

The Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that reactive cleaning is one of the services that is provided under the contract and there is, therefore, no charge applied to individual cleaning requests. Similarly, the replacement of a ceiling tile comes under the heading of building maintenance, which is provided under the contract, and there is, therefore no charge for this work.

Dalriada Sure Start Programme

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide funding to the Dalriada Sure Start programme to extend it to include the Glens of Antrim.
(AQW 1061/09)

The Minister of Education: Is é an beartas reatha atá ag an Roinn Oideachais ná Sure Start a chothú in 20% de na ceantair barda is díothaí i dtuaisceart na hÉireann, mar a rangáítear iad de réir Scór Tomhais Díthe Ilchineálaí.

The current policy of the Department of Education is to maintain Sure Start coverage of the 20% most deprived ward areas in the North of Ireland, as ranked by the Multiple Deprivation Measure Score. As the Glens of Antrim fall outside the catchment areas there are no plans to increase funding to Dalriada Sure Start for it to extend and include the Glens of Antrim.

School Amalgamations

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what proposals for school amalgamations she is (i) involved in; and (ii) aware of.
(AQW 1072/09)

The Minister of Education: School amalgamation proposals emanate from the relevant education

authorities and the Department is not involved in formulating such proposals. Proposals for amalgamations require the support of a published development proposal. This is a statutory process which facilitates public consultation and includes a two-month period during which comment or objection may be offered to the Department. I will reach a decision on a development proposal as soon as possible after that period.

Tá dhá mholadh foilsithe cónasctha á mbreathnú ag an Roinn faoi láthair, mar atá:

There are currently two published amalgamation proposals with the Department which are:

School	Proposal
St Comgall's College, Larne, St Aloysius High School, Cushendall and St MacNissi's College, Garron Tower	Amalgamation of the 3 schools on the Garron Tower site.
Augher, Clogher and Carntall Primary Schools	Amalgamation of the 3 schools in a new school on a new site.

Threshold Payment Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education why musical instrument tutors employed by the South Eastern Education and Library Board have not been able to access the Threshold Payment scheme; and what plans she has to extend this to musical instrument tutors. (AQW 1121/09)

The Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé do Simon Hamilton MLA, an Comhalta do thoghcheantar Loch Cuan, ar AQW 659/09 a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 3 Deireadh Fómhair 2008.

I would refer the Member to the reply I gave Simon Hamilton MLA, the Member for Strangford, to AQW 659/09 published in the Official Report on 3 October 2008.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Educational Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what educational groups are funded by his Department in the North Down area. (AQW 660/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department funds one educational group in the North Down area, Conservation Volunteers NI. The funding is made available under the European Social Fund programme.

In addition, the following groups and organisations have contracts with the Department to deliver Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI in the North Down area:

- A4E
- Belfast Central Training
- Belfast College of Training
- Conservation Volunteers NI
- CAFRE Rural Enterprise Team
- CRAFT Training
- Dairy Farm
- Electrical Training Trust
- Engineering Training Services
- Food and Drink Training Council
- Hair Academy/Jennymount
- National Federation of Roofing Contractors
- NIE
- North Down Training Ltd. & Datalink Reprographics
- Oriel Training Services
- Opportunity Youth
- Paragon Training
- People 1st
- Plumbing and Mechanical Services Training
- Protocol Skills
- RT Resources
- Rutledge Joblink
- Seven Towers Training
- TTE Training
- Transport Training Services
- VT Training

Neighbourhood Renewal Posts

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what Neighbourhood Renewal posts and services his Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 710/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not core fund posts. It does, however, deliver a range of programmes related to employment and skills which aim to address disadvantage and are targeted at the needs of individuals, many of whom live in Neighbourhood Renewal areas. These include ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success, the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) and the new Steps to Work provision. FE Colleges across Northern Ireland are also in the process of contracting for the delivery of learner mentoring and support under the auspices of the new Learner Access

and Engagement provision. Organisations which are currently funded through Neighbourhood Renewal monies therefore have the opportunity to bid for a variety of contract opportunities for the delivery of services as and when they arise.

Southern Regional College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the budget is for the Southern Regional College this financial year. (AQW 723/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The Further Education College allocations are made on an academic year basis, and for the 2008/09 academic year the Southern Regional College will receive £24,770,900 through their main recurrent block grant allocation. Additionally, almost £12million is made available in-year sector wide, for specific purposes which are allocated through demand led earmarked funds, and as such cannot be disaggregated to college level at this stage in the academic year.

Belfast Regional College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the budget is for the Belfast Regional College this financial year. (AQW 724/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The Further Education College allocations are made on an academic year basis, and for the 2008/09 academic year the Belfast Metropolitan College will receive £34,561,800 through their main recurrent block grant allocation. Additionally, almost £12million is made available in-year sector wide, for specific purposes which are allocated through demand led earmarked funds, and as such cannot be disaggregated to college level at this stage in the academic year.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the budget is for the South Eastern Regional College this financial year. (AQW 725/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The Further Education College allocations are made on an academic year basis, and for the 2008/09 academic year the South Eastern Regional College will receive £21,756,000 through their main recurrent block grant allocation. Additionally, almost £12million is made available in-year sector wide, for specific purposes which are allocated through demand led earmarked funds, and as such cannot be disaggregated to college level at this stage in the academic year.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what education groups the South Eastern Regional College funds in the North Down Area. (AQW 726/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The South Eastern Regional College does not fund any education groups in the North Down area.

Irish-Medium Colleges

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning the number of Irish medium colleges. (AQW 816/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
There are no colleges which deliver their provision solely through the medium of Irish. St Mary's University College does, however, provide a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) to train aspiring teachers who wish to teach through the medium of Irish.

St Mary's University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning the budget for St Mary's University College in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 818/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
Details of grants allocated by my Department to St Mary's University College in each of the last 3 academic years are shown in the attached table. Prior to 2008/09 recurrent grant was allocated as a block funding amount, based on the previous year's allocation, and did not take account of the number of students enrolled at the college.

A new funding methodology has been introduced from academic year 2008/09 which takes account of actual student numbers.

**FUNDING ALLOCATED TO
ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
ACADEMIC YEARS 2006/07 – 2008/09**

	2006/07 £	2007/08 ¹ £	2008/09 £
Recurrent grant	5,077,493	5,077,493	5,210,358
Widening Participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds	62,442	62,442	65,923
Widening Access for students with disabilities	10,000	10,000	10,000
Diversity and Mutual Understanding (DMU)	30,000	30,000	30,000
International Awareness	40,000	40,000	40,000
Irish Medium Education (IME)	100,000	145,226	194,334
Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLS)	66,520	47,154	48,000
Capital Equipment	50,000	50,000	50,000
Total Allocations	£5,436,455	£5,462,315	£5,648,615
Conversion Funding			£50,000
Development of Strategic Options			£30,000
			£5,728,615

Notes on the allocations

- (1) Pending the introduction of a new funding model, and in light of declining student numbers, funding for both university colleges in academic year 2007/08 was held at 2006/07 levels except for the separate initiative funded elements of IME and CETLS.

North West Regional College

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) if he is aware of student numbers on some part-time courses offered by the North West Regional College being reduced to a limit of 25 people; (ii) his assessment of the impact of this on the number of people in the North West who are able to access third-level education; and (iii) if the Department has been informed of any reason why this limit may have been imposed. (AQW 870/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: North West Regional College (NWRC) has advised me that there has been no reduction of places on part-time courses. However, to comply with health and safety requirements, classes which have an element of practical tuition continue to operate a ceiling on the number of enrolments.

Where a course is over-subscribed, subject to sufficient demand, a further class will be created or,

alternatively, provision on a comparable course within the College will be offered.

Steps to Work Programme

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if any organisations that were awarded contracts under the tender process for Steps to Work, were granted time extensions to comply with tender/contract requirements in the period up to and after 28 September 2008; if TWL have been granted any extension beyond 28 September 2008 in relation to its tender/contract obligations; and if TWL (i) was open for business; (ii) were able to accept Steps to Work referrals; and (iii) had staff in place in operational premises on 28 September 2008. (AQW 1171/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Contracts for the Steps to Work Programme were awarded on 17th September 2008. No organisations were granted time extensions to the required timescales.

TWL was open for business, were able to accept Steps to Work referrals and had staff in place in operational premises on 29th September 2008, the date on which Steps to Work commenced

**ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND
INVESTMENT**

GAA Games

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to feature significant GAA games on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's consumer website. (AQW 655/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) features events and sporting activities on its website:

- when it is notified of these;
- when these are relevant to tourists and NITB's corporate plans and objectives; and
- when these are of national and international prominence.

NITB retains full editorial control of its website and the information uploaded to it.

Cruise Ships Visiting Northern Ireland

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many cruise ships have visited Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. (AQW 775/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The number of cruise ships which have visited Northern Ireland in the last 5 years is as follows:

Year	Belfast	Londonderry	Total
2004	13	7	20
2005	18	3	21
2006	23	2	25
2007	31	8	39
2008*	39	2	41
Totals	124	22	146

* By the end of November 2008

It is estimated that 42 cruise ships will be coming to Belfast in 2009.

Merger of HBOS and Lloyds TSB

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she intends to take to safeguard jobs at HBOS following the takeover by Lloyds TSB. (AQW 809/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here continues to be of significant strategic importance to our economy. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to Mr Eric Daniels, Group Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, stressing the importance of the HBOS investment to the Northern Ireland economy and outlining the Northern Ireland proposition for further investment.

I plan to write to Mr Andy Hornby, Chief Executive HBOS Plc, again stressing the importance of the HBOS investment here and requesting a meeting to discuss any implication this proposed acquisition may have for Northern Ireland and how Northern Ireland may contribute positively to their future plans.

In addition, Invest NI continues to work closely with senior management in HBOS to develop its contacts within both Lloyds TSB and HBOS to ensure all parties are aware of the importance of HBOS's continued presence here and the opportunities for further investment in Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the proposed acquisition is still in the very early stages and it is not expected to be completed until the end of February 2009. However, I can assure you that I, together with Invest NI, will continue to work proactively to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland.

Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much public money has been invested by Invest NI in Perfecseal; and what measures are in place to safeguard the public investment made in this company's operations in the North West. (AQW 855/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has offered a total of £5.35 million financial assistance to Perfecseal. Most of this assistance (£5.3 million) relates to an offer made in December 2005 in respect of Perfecseal's planned new premises. The remainder relates to two small offers for consultancy support in relation to training and costs for a Business Improvement Agent.

The December 2005 Financial Assistance Agreement included a number of conditions to facilitate Invest NI's monitoring of the project. The company agreed to furnish Invest NI with quarterly management accounts and signed year end accounts within specified timescales. The Financial Assistance Agreement also required that the company submit to Invest NI a quarterly report providing information on areas such as sales growth, job creation, capital expenditure and an update on progress towards relocation to the new factory at Campsie Industrial Estate. Invest NI completes financial and project monitoring reports for this project in line with

Invest NI monitoring guidelines. The relocation project was successfully completed as Perfecseal relocated to a new, purpose built facility at Campsie in mid 2007. In addition to the information submitted by Perfecseal, Invest NI has held regular meetings with the company to ensure that Invest NI is fully aware of current business activities, future plans and business issues.

Invest NI considers Perfecseal to be of strategic importance to both the Life Sciences sector and the North West. The Managing Director (Clients Group and Entrepreneurship, Invest NI) met senior management of Perfecseal on 23rd June 2008 and offered to travel to the US to meet with senior management of Perfecseal's parent company if such a meeting would be helpful in attracting further investment to Perfecseal in Northern Ireland. At a meeting on 12th September 2008, senior officials from Invest NI and I, again offered to meet with

Perfecseal's senior management and that of its parent company in order to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location.

Invest NI remains in close contact with Perfecseal and is working to secure any further potential Perfecseal investment at Campsie. Recent discussions have included considering options to support research and development and training projects in addition to any potential financial assistance for capital expenditure/ growth in employment.

Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many meetings Invest NI has had with Perfecseal during the last 12 months; and what action it is taking, in conjunction with the company (i) to secure existing employment; and (ii) to facilitate new investment and employment at its existing plant. (AQW 856/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has met with Perfecseal on 9 occasions, in total, over the last 12 months. This includes two meetings organised by my office, which I attended and one meeting attended by the Permanent Secretary, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Invest NI offered Perfecseal £5.3 million of financial assistance in December 2005 which helped to secure existing jobs and to assist the creation of new jobs. This £18 million project saw the relocation of Perfecseal from Springtown Industrial Estate to a new, purpose built 120,000 sq ft factory at Campsie Industrial Estate, Londonderry, in mid 2007. Current employment at Perfecseal, Londonderry is approximately 277.

Over the last year Invest NI has provided advice to Perfecseal in respect of expansion into new export markets. The company also participated in the Invest NI sectoral trade mission to MEDICA (a medical device trade fair, held in Germany) in November 2007. Invest NI remains in close contact with Perfecseal and is working to secure any further potential Perfecseal investment at Campsie. Recent discussions have included considering options to support research and development and training projects in addition to any potential financial assistance for capital expenditure/ growth in employment.

Invest NI considers Perfecseal to be of strategic importance to both the Life Sciences Sector and the North West. Ian Murphy, Managing Director, Clients Group and Entrepreneurship, Invest NI, met senior management of Perfecseal on 23rd June

2008 and offered to travel to the US to meet with senior management of Perfecseal's parent company to help attract further investment to Northern Ireland. At a later meeting which I attended, senior officials from Invest NI and I, again offered to meet with Perfecseal's senior management and that of its parent company in order to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location.

Unemployment in Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the current level of unemployment in the Carrickfergus area. (AQW 873/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At August 2008 there were 520 Claimant Count Unemployed persons in Carrickfergus District Council area, 374 males and 146 females. This corresponds to 2.1% of persons of working age, compared to 2.7% in Northern Ireland as a whole. Carrickfergus had the equal ninth lowest rate of all the 26 District Council areas.

Neighbourhood Renewal Posts

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide details of the neighbourhood renewal posts and services that her Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 885/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department will not be funding any Neighbourhood Renewal posts from March 2009.

In terms of specific services support, an element within the new Small Business Support Programme is targeted at Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

This programme is currently at tender stage with annual resource estimates to the specific Neighbourhood Renewal element of £700,000.

NACCO

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she will take to secure the 93 jobs under threat in the NACCO plant in Craigavon. (AQW 893/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI is in regular contact with NACCO management at their Craigavon plant.

The potential 93 job losses at the factory have been triggered by a reported significant downturn in the

market for forklift trucks. NACCO management has reviewed production requirements on that basis.

Invest NI provided selective financial assistance towards two major manufacturing projects in 2003 and 2004 and these projects are still active.

Invest NI continues to work closely with NACCO to maintain the Craigavon plant's position as a competitive manufacturing unit, and to encourage new investment in Northern Ireland by the NACCO group.

Electricity Price Rises

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the Department has made an assessment of the lifetime cost difference between electricity produced by wind and the average cost of electricity produced by fossil fuels, given the recently announced electricity price rises. (AQW 945/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Neither the Department nor the Utility Regulator has carried out a detailed consideration of the lifetime cost of electricity produced by fossil fuels compared to electricity produced from wind. While some comparative costs were calculated within the Grid Study completed in late 2007, these would require updating in light of the recent significant increases in fossil fuel costs, and would not be considered suitable as a basis for comparison without substantial further analysis.

Renewable Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the all-island Single Electricity Market, how many megawatt hours of renewable energy have been traded from (i) Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland, over the last year; and what is the expected number to be traded between north and south from now until 2012. (AQW 947/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to differentiate between the types of electricity transmitted along the interconnector at any one time, and therefore not possible to identify the volumes of renewable energy transmitted between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and vice versa.

In any event, since the Single Electricity Market (SEM) was established on 1 November 2007, the electricity interconnector between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is considered as an integral part of the electricity grid network on the island. In effect, wholesale electricity is no longer traded

between North and South, as generated electricity produced from both conventional and renewable generation is traded within the SEM trading pool.

Renewable Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to give the year on year target for the percentage of electricity to be produced by renewable energy between now and 2012; and (ii) what is the current proportion of energy produced by renewables. (AQW 948/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland's renewable energy target is that, by 2012, 12% of electricity consumption will come from indigenous renewable energy sources and, of that renewable element, at least 15% will be from non-wind sources. There are no formal interim targets although DETI's current Operating Plan does include a milestone of 7% to be met by 31 March 2009 against the 12% target. Currently, renewables generation is providing around 6% of our electricity consumption.

Renewable Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the energy targets apportioned to Northern Ireland following the meeting of the EU Energy Council in spring 2007; and given that the burden of renewable energy will not be borne equally by the various consumption sectors, what percentage of electricity will need to be produced by renewable sources in order to meet the overall 2020 targets. (AQW 949/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The EU Energy Council meeting in Spring 2007 set a 20% target for the proportion of total energy within the EU that is to be met from renewable energy sources by 2020. Total energy includes heating and transport fuels as well as electricity. The draft EU Directive on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources sets the UK target at 15% and the UK Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform recently completed a consultation on how the UK, including Northern Ireland, as an EU Member State is to achieve this target. Given the low levels of renewables penetration in heating and transport fuels, the UK Government has suggested that the UK scenario for meeting the 15% target might be around 14% in heat, 10% in transport and 32% in electricity. No targets have been apportioned to Northern Ireland but I intend to set a target within the context of the overall UK national action plan and a revised Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland, once the Directive has been finalised.

European Social Fund

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she has taken to ensure that projects that have sought match funding from her Department, or its agencies under the European Social Fund, will be informed of the outcome of any requests for funding at the earliest opportunity. (AQW 950/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I can confirm that projects that have sought match funding from my Department, or its agencies under the European Social Fund, have been informed of the outcome of any requests for funding at the earliest opportunity.

New Approved Complaints Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide details of (i) the number of estate agents; (ii) how many have joined the new approved complaints scheme; and (iii) what plans the Minister has to ensure that all estate agents have joined the scheme when it comes into force on 1 October 2008. (AQW 951/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The premises data base of the Trading Standards Service (TSS) currently has a record of 603 estate agency branches in Northern Ireland.

There are two approved redress schemes in the UK established by The Estate Agents (Redress Scheme) Order 2008. These are the Ombudsman for Estate Agents and the Surveyors Ombudsman Scheme. I am advised by the administrators of the Estate Agents Ombudsman Scheme that 132 Northern Ireland Estate Agency branches had signed up by 2 October 2008. The administrators of the Surveyors Ombudsman Scheme were unable to supply numbers of Northern Ireland Branches that had signed up with them on that date.

To help improve awareness of the new law my officials in TSS wrote to all 603 estate agent businesses practising in Northern Ireland on 18 September 2008 advising them of their new obligations under the Estate Agents (Redress Scheme) Order 2008, giving them the contact details of the relevant schemes and informing them of the legal and financial consequences of non-compliance.

On 24 September my Department issued a press release covering the key aspects of the new law and followed this up with a number of newspaper and broadcast media interviews.

My Department, in liaison with the two Redress Scheme administrators, plans to monitor the level of compliance within Northern Ireland and to identify those businesses which have not joined a redress

scheme for appropriate follow-up action. This could include the issue of £1,000 penalty charge notices or, ultimately, a banning order by the Office of Fair Trading, for businesses which refuse to comply.

Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 6561/08, when the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland research project will be completed; and (i) how; and (ii) when, it will be made available to the public. (AQW 967/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland is currently working on this project, and as indicated in the answer to AQW 6561/08, expect to have this work completed by the end of 2008. Invest NI intends to present this information within its next Performance Information Report, which is planned for publication before the end of March 2009.

Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 166/08, to detail (i) each item of expense; (ii) the cost of each item; and (iii) the number and identity of officials who submitted expense claims on 25 and 26 November 2006, in relation to Invest NI activity in Shanghai. (AQW 969/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The total expenditure reported in answer to AQW 166/08 in respect of the visit to Asia in November 2006 was £22,005. The visit included Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Tokyo. The Shanghai expenditure totalled £20,668, and is broken down as follows:

Air Fares**	£18,490
Other travel	£ 132
Internet and telephone costs	£ 135
Hotel accommodation	£ 1,620
Meal allowances	£ 131
Trade mission dinner/Lunch etc	£ 160
	£20,668

** Please note that this is the total air fare cost and therefore also includes an element for onward travel to Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo.

The attached appendix shows the expenditure broken down by staff member, as requested.

The names of other staff involved are not being disclosed in order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

APPENDIX

Total Reported	Detail Reported	
	AQW 166/08	
25/11/2006	12,128	Hong Kong Beijing, Shanghai
26/11/2006	4,596	Shangai
26/11/2006	5,281	Shangai, Tokyo
	22,005	

Shanghai								Other Destination (Not Shanghai) (included in Original) £22,005 reported
Job title	Grade	Air fare **	Other travel Taxi's rail etc	Internet access Telephone costs	Hotel Accomodation	Meals	Trade mission Dinner / Lunch & Embassy costs	
Chief Executive	1	5,178.00			405.00	73.44		330.00
Managing Director	3	4,033.00	52.84	17.68	405.00	28.74		192.37
Director	5	4,739.00	25.41		405.00	28.91	132.50	355.11
Trade Executive	SO	4,540.00	53.83	117.17	405.00		27.93	460.00
Totals		18,490.00	132.08	134.85	1,620.00	131.09	160.43	1,337.48
Total costs relating to Shanghai							20,668.45	22,005.93

** Note that as some staff also travelled to Tokyo, Beijing and or Hong Kong the air fares costs shown include elements of costs for destinations other than Shanghai

Public-Private Partnerships Accommodation Contract

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to identify the names of the Permanent Secretaries or Deputy Permanent Secretaries of his Department or its predecessor, the Department for Economic Development, who were serving board members of Dunloe Ewart plc when the Public Private Partnerships accommodation contract for Invest NI's new headquarters was processed by invited application in July 2003 and awarded to McAleer and Rushe Ltd and Dunloe Ewart Ltd (MRDE) Accommodation Services in April 2004. (AQW 970/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There were none.

Public-Private Partnerships Accommodation Contract

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the precise terms and conditions of the Public Private Partnership

accommodation contract; and (ii) the amount paid to date, for Invest NI's new headquarters at Bedford Street, Belfast, which was processed by invited application in July 2003, and awarded to McAleer and Rushe Ltd and Dunloe Ewart Ltd (MRDE) Accommodation Services. (AQW 971/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Following a competition initiated in the OJEC in April 2003, the McAleer Rushe Dunloe Ewart (MRDE) Consortium was awarded the Invest NI HQ Contract in November 2004. The contract is in line with the Treasury and Strategic Investment Board guidance "Standardisation of PFI Contracts Northern Ireland". (A copy of this detailed contract has been placed in the Assembly Library.)

The Contract is for the provision of fully-serviced accommodation for the 25 year operational phase of the Project, to include cleaning, catering, maintenance, waste management, helpdesk facility etc.

The method of payment is by a Unitary Charge, currently £4,337,573 per annum, but is subject to an annual increase based on the Retail Price Index figure for February each year.

Within the contract certain additional services (e.g. hospitality, catering, additional file management) are paid for based on volume of usage.

For the period October 2005 – September 2008 the total of these fixed and variable elements is £12,921,852.

Public-Private Partnerships Accommodation Contract

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm the identities of any former (i) Chief Executives; (ii) Deputy Chief Executives; and (iii) Board Members, of either (a) Invest NI; (b) the Industrial Development Board; and (c) LEDU, who were serving as Board Members of Dunloe Ewart plc. when the Public Private Partnership accommodation contract for Invest NIs new headquarters at Bedford Street, Belfast, was processed by invited application in July 2003 and awarded to McAleer and Rushe Ltd and Dunloe Ewart Ltd (MRDE) Accommodation Services in April 2004. (AQW 973/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There were none.

Accommodation Sectors

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the levels of growth in the (i) Hotel; (ii) Bed & Breakfast; and (iii) Self Catering sectors in terms of visitors numbers. (AQW 980/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In 2004, it is estimated that there were 1,129,200 arrivals to hotels in Northern Ireland, 217,100 arrivals to bed & breakfasts and 109,100 arrivals to self-catering establishments.

For 2007, it is estimated that there were 1,134,600 arrivals to hotels in Northern Ireland, 247,100 arrivals to bed & breakfasts and 135,300 arrivals to self-catering establishments.

In the last three years these are respective increases of 0.5%, 13.8% and 24% in terms of arrivals to these accommodation sectors.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the level of marketing support given to the (i) Hotel; (ii) Bed & Breakfast; and (iii) Self Catering sectors by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. (AQW 982/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: With reference to developing markets and delivering world class visitor experiences, NITB has and will continue to support the accommodation sector in a number of ways.

A series of marketing campaigns is delivered annually by NITB and Tourism Ireland Ltd. One of the key aims of these campaigns is to drive visitors to the www.discovernorthernireland.com website where certified accommodation providers are promoted.

NITB also produces a variety of publications that promote the accommodation sector. These include:

- (i) Hotels and Guest Houses Northern Ireland
- (ii) B&B and Guest Houses Northern Ireland
- (iii) Self Catering
- (iv) Budget Accommodation

NITB regularly provides insights and intelligence to the industry in the form of a monthly ezine and regular research reports. These are available to the industry to download from www.nitb.com.

From 2005-2008 NITB piloted a programme of Masterclasses, Learning Journeys and Workshops to assist the industry including accommodation providers to develop its competitive skills in a number of business areas. This programme will continue and will be extended in 2008-2011.

Electricity and Gas Consumption

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment her Department has made of the anticipated reduction in electricity and gas consumption which will occur in a 12 month period as a result of the increase in prices this year. (AQW 990/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Due to the large number of uncontrollable variables e.g. temperature variation, possible changes in weather patterns, and fluctuations in customer numbers, it is not possible for my Department to accurately predict if there will be any reduction in electricity and gas consumption which will occur in a 12 month period as a result of the increase in electricity and gas prices this year. However, it is anticipated that consumers are more likely to consider energy efficiency measures when faced with higher fuel bills, thus reducing energy consumption.

Electricity Consumption

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to state (i) which measures

the Department is taking to reduce the consumption of electricity; (ii) the estimated (a) annual; and (b) lifetime saving each measure will contribute; (iii) the total cost of each measure; (iv) the proportion of cost that will be borne by the public purse; (v) the proportion of cost borne by consumers; and (vi) the average and total savings to householders. (AQW 991/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Statutory authority for implementing measures in relation to energy efficiency is shared between DETI, DSD, DFP and Invest NI. DETI, through Invest NI, funds the Carbon Trust to deliver an energy saving programme to the industrial and commercial sectors. The latest savings data available covers the period May 07- Mar 08 and is detailed below.

DETI / INVEST NI Measures	Estimated Annual saving (Giga watt hours GWh)	Estimated Lifetime saving	Total Cost of Measure (07/08)	Proportion of cost borne by public purse	Proportion of cost borne by consumers	Average and total savings to householders
Carbon Trust - Carbon Management Energy Efficiency and Carbon Surveys	84.255	£270m	£593,885	£593,885 (subsidy for surveys)	None	N/A
Energy Efficiency Interest-free loans	4.8	£15.3m	£2.0 million of interest free loans	£279,191 (grant to cover administration management and marketing costs)	None	N/A
SME Energy Grant Scheme	3	£9.6m	£180,000	£180,000 (capital grant)	None	N/A

Electricity Consumption

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment given the Department's target of reducing electricity consumption by 1% below trend, to state (i) the number of megawatt hours of electricity which must be saved to meet this target; and (ii) if this 1% reduction below trend is based on a rebasing of the trend line as a result of successful saving in the previous year. (AQW 992/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The 1% reduction in electricity consumption target amount for 2007/08 is based on actual electricity consumption for 2006/07. This equates to 88,270 megawatt hours.

Clearly there will be a number of factors, including weather, economic development climate, energy efficiency and social influences, which could contribute to changes in Northern Ireland's annual electricity consumption. Consequently the equivalent of a 1% reduction in electricity consumption may not be detectable in the trend on consumption alone. Monitoring of the 1% target is therefore based on a bottom up approach of monitoring energy efficiency performance data which is the method favoured in the EU Directive on Energy End-Use Efficiency and Energy Services. This method of measurement takes into account all the measures put in place to save electricity during the year across all organisations with statutory responsibility for energy efficiency.

Each year the target is based on actual consumption of the previous year with an allowance for economic growth which was taken as 1.8% in 2006/07 and 2007/08. Therefore for 2008/09 the target becomes 89,329 megawatt hours.

Carbon Emission Targets Report

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she expects the report on the 'Economic research on business opportunities and challenges presented by carbon emission targets' to be published. (AQW 993/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Work on this research project is ongoing. The analysis will provide a much greater understanding of the implications of carbon emission targets for businesses locally in Northern Ireland. Climate change is a key issue, and this research will provide comprehensive information on the level of emissions in Northern Ireland, and the challenges and opportunities presented by emissions targets.

The research is scheduled to be completed early in the New Year. I intend to publish the final report in the first quarter of 2009. The report will be issued for consultation with key stakeholders and other interested parties.

Incinerator Plant in Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to detail the progress to date of her Department's involvement in the Rose Energy's proposals for an incinerator plant in Glenavy; and (ii) how much public money her Department is considering offering for this project. (AQW 1017/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI completed a full commercial appraisal of the Rose Energy project in February 2008. Since then, there has been ongoing discussion between Invest NI/DARD/DETI and between Invest NI and the promoters of the project about potential support. In July, the Chairman of Rose Energy wrote to Invest NI indicating that the project costs had escalated significantly due to the rising steel price, Euro exchange rate and increasing global market for biomass energy generation. A review of the commercial appraisal was commissioned and will be completed in October 2008. Following this, further negotiations on a potential support package will be carried out and, depending on the outcome a case for support will be completed and presented for my consideration. DFP approval for financial support would also be required.

Consideration of the amount of public expenditure support is dependent on the outcome of the appraisal and negotiations between Invest NI and the project promoters. It would not be in the public interest to discuss this before the negotiations were completed.

Unemployment in Larne

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the current level of unemployment in the Larne area. (AQW 1066/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At August 2008 there were 340 Claimant Count Unemployed persons in Larne District Council area, 247 males and 93 females. This corresponds to 1.8% of persons of working age, compared to 2.7% in Northern Ireland as a whole. Larne had the fifth lowest rate of all the 26 District Council areas.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if records are kept of carbon usage; and what plans the Department has to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken, as is practiced in other European parliaments. (AQW 1107/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not record carbon usage and has no plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

DETI Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many page views her Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1113/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The number of page views at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment website for the past 12 months are set out in the table below.

Month	Page Views
Oct 2008	26307 (up to 8th October 2008)
Sep 2008	123285
Aug 2008	126074
Jul 2008	123087
Jun 2008	110083
May 2008	125696
Apr 2008	206327
Mar 2008	201624
Feb 2008	178610
Jan 2008	403284
Dec 2007	335904
Nov 2007	297997
Total	2,258,278

Estimated Uptake of Broadband

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to indicate the estimated uptake of broadband by (i) business users; and (ii) domestic users, broken down by council area. (AQW 1133/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The information requested is not available broken down by council area. Under the terms of the contract this Department has with BT, data on broadband uptake is available for each district exchange area across Northern Ireland, but on a strictly commercial-in-confidence basis. Broadband uptake data for cable operators is also available for Northern Ireland as a whole, but a sub-regional split is not available. At the Northern Ireland level, the uptake

of broadband by (i) business users is estimated to be 46,000; and by (ii) domestic users is estimated to be 330,000. According to recent survey evidence business uptake equates to some 63% of businesses, whilst domestic uptake equates to some 52% of households.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) what engagements she had with Professor Bain in relation to the review of the location of public sector jobs; and (ii) any offers she made to relocate jobs in her Department.
(AQW 1139/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Professor Bain met DETI officials to discuss the functions of the department and its NDPBs. The options canvassed in Professor Bain's report reflect the Review teams own views.

ENVIRONMENT

Climate Change

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what his Department's scientific and technical position is in relation to the causes of climate change.
(AQW 644/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 181/09.

Climate Change

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all policy advice given by his Department to other departments in relation to the causes of, and most appropriate policy response, to climate change.
(AQW 645/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not been asked by other Departments for policy advice in relation to the causes of, and most appropriate policy response, to climate change.

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the guidance given to Planning Service staff following the change in the definition of Brownfield land outlined in the Review of the Regional Development Strategy.
(AQW 654/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently working on a policy

addendum to Planning Policy Statement 7 'Quality Residential Environments'. This will consider new policy provisions on apartment development and flat conversions, and highlight the need for appropriate design measures to alleviate the risk of localised flooding due to rain and storm run-off. The policy addendum will also reinforce the application of current policy and take account of recent adjustments to the Regional Development Strategy.

Climate Change

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the (i) scientific; and (ii) policy, differences between the approach adopted by his Department in relation to the causes of climate change and those adopted by (a) the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs; and (b) the Scottish Government.
(AQW 677/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's approach to both the science and policy response to the causes of climate change has not led to any differences with other UK Government Departments.

Flood Risk Management Plan

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the progress of a flood risk management plan for (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) Belfast; and to detail the climate change science upon which this plan is based.
(AQW 678/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is not responsible for the preparation of a Flood Risk Management Plan for Belfast and Northern Ireland. Flood Risk Management is the responsibility of DARD Rivers Agency and only they could comment on the climate change science upon which the Flood Risk Management Plans are based.

My Department has a published policy in terms of planning for new development in areas of flood risk (PPS15: Planning & Flood Risk). It provides a robust set of land-use policies to deal with the potential for flood risk where new development is proposed. PPS15 seeks to prevent unnecessarily increasing future flood risk by adopting a precautionary approach to the location of new development.

Equality Legislation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 323/09, to detail how this legislation is applied to applicants who are not resident in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 679/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Equality legislation applies regardless of whether or not the person is resident in Northern Ireland.

Divisional Planning Office

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many enforcement officers are currently employed in each Divisional Planning Office; (ii) the average number of cases being dealt with by each officer; and (iii) for his assessment of the caseload compared with other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 699/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has provided the following information on (i) how many enforcement officers are currently employed in each Divisional Planning Officer and (ii) the average number of cases being dealt with by each officer.

Division	No. of Enforcement Staff	Average No of Cases being dealt with by each officer
Ballymena	5	104
Belfast	8	125
Craigavon	8	100
Downpatrick	7	317
Headquarters	6	71
Londonderry	8	120
Omagh	5	95

At this time my Department does not hold any statistics in relation to local authority enforcement cases in Great Britain.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all prosecutions for damage to Areas of Special Scientific Interest since 1 April 2001. (AQW 700/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of prosecutions for damage to Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) are given in the following table:

Defendants Name	ASSI	Fine
Mr McShane	White Park Bay	£300 plus £88 costs
Mr McLernon	Lough Neagh & Lough Beg	£1,000 plus £31
Mr Cooke	Strangford Lough Part 3	£3,000 plus £85 costs
Mr & Mrs Steele	Lough Neagh	£200

Defendants Name	ASSI	Fine
Mr McGrogan	Lough Beg	£500 plus £85 costs
Mr Foster	Knockninny Hill	£20,000 reduced on appeal to £4,000 with restoration order for damaged lands.
Mr Coleman	Lough Neagh & Lough Beg SPA	Bound over 2yrs
Sandycove Holiday Homes Ltd	Outer Ards	£300 plus £18 costs

Planning Office and Site Meetings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) planning office meetings; and (ii) site meetings, were held in the period 1 April 2007 to 31 July 2008, broken down by council area. (AQW 791/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I regret in order to provide figures for the number of office and site meetings a manual search of all files in the Divisions would have to be carried out. This could not be done in the time available and would incur a disproportionate cost.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for single dwellings in the countryside, submitted in the Down District Council area before (i) 1 February 2005; and (ii) 16 March 2006, have yet to be determined. (AQW 792/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of applications for single dwellings in the countryside in the Down District Council area, submitted before (i) 1 February 2005; and (ii) 16 March 2006 and yet to be determined, is set out in the attached table.

Application Id	Date Received	Development Type	Proposal
R/2004/0748/O*	17/05/2004	Erection of Building(s)	Rural style dwelling.
R/2004/1732/O*	14/10/2004	Erection of Building(s)	Site for dwelling and detached garage
R/2004/2096/O*	08/12/2004	Replacement	Renewal of outline permission R/2001/1397.

Application Id	Date Received	Development Type	Proposal
R/2005/0438/F*	01/03/2005	Change of Use	Restoration & Conversion to Single Residential Dwelling.
R/2006/0189/RM*	20/02/2006	Erection of Building(s)	Erection of new bungalow of rural character

Source: August 2008 Outstanding Report

* F, RM and O represent Full, Reserved Matters and Outline applications.

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.

Enforcement Case Files

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement case files (i) have been opened since April 2001; and (ii) have arisen as a result of (a) detection by Planning Service staff; (b) a complaint by a member of the public; and (c) a complaint by a public representative. (AQW 793/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of enforcement files that have been opened since 2001 is 26,593. These figures must be considered in terms of our current live enforcement caseload which as of September 2008 stands at 5570. Clearly a large proportion of the 26, 593 cases opened since 2001 have been dealt with and resolved by my Department.

In relation to points (ii) (a-c), the current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20 – does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested.

To provide accurate figures for the period in question can only be done by a manual search of all our existing files. This information would not be available in the time specified and would incur disproportionate costs.

Drainage

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that building does not occur on flood plains; and where building does take place, that adequate drainage is provided. (AQW 800/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's general policy approach to dealing

with flooding is contained within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15 'Planning and Flood Risk' which adopts a precautionary approach to decision making.

My Department will consult DARD Rivers Agency on planning applications on flood risk and continues to liaise with DARD Rivers Agency on planning and flood matters. Where it is clear mitigation measures are insufficient to offset any risk my Department may refuse planning permission. Northern Ireland Water's role in the consultation process where new development is proposed has been to provide advice on the availability of water and sewerage infrastructure to service the development.

My officials are continuing to liaise with Rivers Agency officials regarding consultation in areas of flood risk. As part of this process Planning Service will be contacting NIW to clarify if any of the recent flood events has identified any specific areas at particular risk from flooding associated with existing storm drainage infrastructure.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his Department's performance in relation to the targets set out in the Road Safety Strategy 2002-2012. (AQW 801/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The 2012 road safety targets are to reduce by 33% the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads and by 50% the number of children killed or seriously injured (from the 1996-2000 average). These would represent reductions from 1750 people per annum to fewer than 1200 and from 250 children to fewer than 125.

The latest published statistics show that in 2007, 1,210 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads, 106 of whom were children. These represent reductions of 31% and 57% against the respective targets.

Emergency Relief Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total amount of money paid in emergency relief payments as a result of the recent floods, broken down by district council area. (AQW 810/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A total of 1,911 claims have been received by 24 district councils under the current "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance", of which 1,519 were successful. Details for each district council are set out in the attached table.

The total expenditure on the Scheme to date is £1,519,000. Councils will be reimbursed for additional

costs incurred by them but the Department does not yet have details of this expenditure.

Council	Grant Applications	No. of successful claims
Antrim	201	176
Ards	6	5
Armagh	13	8
Ballymena	164	151
Ballymoney	15	11
Banbridge	113	106
Belfast	462	333
Carrickfergus	4	4
Castlereagh	101	75
Coleraine	5	3
Cookstown	8	8
Craigavon	153	119
Londonderry	0	0
Down	171	127
Dungannon & South Tyrone	21	17
Fermanagh	3	1
Larne	8	6
Limavady	1	1
Lisburn	193	145
Magherafelt	24	24
Moyle	2	1
Newry & Mourne	52	45
Newtownabbey	163	131
North Down	10	7
Omagh	18	15
Strabane	0	0
Total	1,911	1,519

Emergency Relief Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total amount of money paid in emergency relief payments as a result of the flooding that occurred in June 2007, broken down by district council area. (AQW 812/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The total amount of money paid in emergency relief payments, as a result of the June 2007 flooding, was £1,419,099. This figure includes £1,181,000 paid to individual

householders, which represents 1181 successful applications. A balance of £238,099 related to payments made to district councils to cover their additional costs for carrying out the operation. The Department does not hold a record of the total number of claims submitted to councils. The details for individual councils are set out in the attached table.

Council	No. of successful claims	Total amount paid £
Antrim	4	4,000
Ards	17	17,393
Armagh	6	6,000
Ballymena	11	11,000
Ballymoney	0	0
Banbridge	0	0
Belfast	609	827,626
Carrickfergus	0	0
Castlereagh	354	366,096
Coleraine	6	6,325
Cookstown	5	5,000
Craigavon	0	0
Londonderry	0	0
Down	17	17,536
Dungannon & South Tyrone	7	7,370
Fermanagh	0	0
Larne	9	9,000
Limavady	2	2,000
Lisburn	8	8,000
Magherafelt	3	3,000
Moyle	17	18,716
Newry & Mourne	5	5,000
Newtownabbey	1	1,000
North Down	3	3,000
Omagh	95	99,037
Strabane	2	2,000
Total	1,181	1,419,099

Emergency Relief Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many claims for emergency relief payments (i) were made; and (ii) were successful, in relation to the flooding that occurred in June 2007, broken down by district council area. (AQW 813/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The total amount of money paid in emergency relief payments, as a result of the June 2007 flooding, was £1,419,099. This figure includes £1,181,000 paid to individual householders, which represents 1181 successful applications. A balance of £238,099 related to payments made to district councils to cover their additional costs for carrying out the operation. The Department does not hold a record of the total number of claims submitted to councils. The details for individual councils are set out in the attached table.

Council	No. of successful claims	Total amount paid £
Antrim	4	4,000
Ards	17	17,393
Armagh	6	6,000
Ballymena	11	11,000
Ballymoney	0	0
Banbridge	0	0
Belfast	609	827,626
Carrickfergus	0	0
Castlereagh	354	366,096
Coleraine	6	6,325
Cookstown	5	5,000
Craigavon	0	0
Londonderry	0	0
Down	17	17,536
Dungannon & South Tyrone	7	7,370
Fermanagh	0	0
Larne	9	9,000
Limavady	2	2,000
Lisburn	8	8,000
Magherafelt	3	3,000
Moyle	17	18,716
Newry & Mourne	5	5,000
Newtownabbey	1	1,000
North Down	3	3,000
Omagh	95	99,037
Strabane	2	2,000
Total	1,181	1,419,099

Emergency Relief Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many claims for emergency relief payments (i) were made; and (ii) were successful, in relation to the recent flooding, broken down by district council area. (AQW 814/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A total of 1,911 claims have been received by 24 district councils under the current “Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance”, of which 1,519 were successful. Details for each district council are set out in the attached table.

The total expenditure on the Scheme to date is £1,519,000. Councils will be reimbursed for additional costs incurred by them but the Department does not yet have details of this expenditure.

Council	Grant Applications	No. of successful claims
Antrim	201	176
Ards	6	5
Armagh	13	8
Ballymena	164	151
Ballymoney	15	11
Banbridge	113	106
Belfast	462	333
Carrickfergus	4	4
Castlereagh	101	75
Coleraine	5	3
Cookstown	8	8
Craigavon	153	119
Londonderry	0	0
Down	171	127
Dungannon & South Tyrone	21	17
Fermanagh	3	1
Larne	8	6
Limavady	1	1
Lisburn	193	145
Magherafelt	24	24
Moyle	2	1
Newry & Mourne	52	45
Newtownabbey	163	131
North Down	10	7
Omagh	18	15
Strabane	0	0
Total	1,911	1,519

Climate Change

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 181/09, whether the view expressed is in line with his Department's assessment of the link between human activity and climate change. (AQW 827/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As I said in my answer to AQW 181/09, I believe there is still considerable debate on the degree to which climate change is caused by human activity.

Perfecseal

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of concerns on a planning application which could have a negative impact on the Perfecseal plant in Derry/Londonderry; and to detail what steps he is taking to address these concerns and safeguard the plant. (AQW 834/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am aware of the planning application and of the concerns raised by Perfecseal Ltd in relation to the potential impact the proposal may have on their continuing operation. Consideration of the planning application is ongoing and it is understood that Perfecseal Ltd intend to submit further information in support of their objection in the near future.

I can assure you that in processing the planning application, careful consideration will be given to all the relevant material considerations including the relevant policies and the impact on adjacent industrial enterprises before a decision is reached.

Perfecseal

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment what meetings and correspondence he has had with management of Perfecseal in the last year; and to outline the key areas raised in these engagements. (AQW 835/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have received two requests to meet with Perfecseal. I met with representatives from Perfecseal on one occasion and they outlined the background to their move to the site at Campsie, the company's expansion plans and their concerns about the proposed waste management facility.

Introduction of Environmental Taxes

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the introduction of environmental taxes. (AQW 846/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Taxation in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter and the responsibility of the Treasury.

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement cases have been discontinued since 2001 as a result of Planning Service staff failing to serve an enforcement notice before the (i) 4 year; and (ii) 10 year, rule came into force. (AQW 852/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The information held by Planning Service on its computer system does not include a facility related specifically to time limits. 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.

Epic Project

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to give details (i) of the costs to date associated with development of the Epic Project; and (ii) changes to the original specification for the project. (AQW 858/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

(i) Costs to Date Associated with Development of the ePIC Project.

- The project is being delivered by a consortium led by Hewlett Packard (HP), with BT and IDOX (formerly known as CAPs). The capital expenditure for the project per our audited accounts to 31 March 2008 was £7.39m. In addition, non capital expenditure relating to the project was £1.29m up to 31 March 2008. These amounts do not include Planning Service staff costs in relation to the development and delivery of the project.
- Further capital investment will be required to achieve full implementation and work on completion of a revised Business Case is ongoing. This further capital investment is required to address the following issues:
 - Additional development work to make ePIC fully compliant with Northern Ireland legislation; and
 - Essential improvements needed to e-forms, document scanning facility and the internet portal.

(ii) Changes to the Original Specification for the Project

- The scope of the ePIC business functionalities has not changed since the beginning of the project. The technical components used to deliver the business benefits highlighted in the ePIC business case have been revised to take into account time and value-for-money constraints. The ePIC benefits remain unchanged:
- Make optimum use of ICT to re-engineer, streamline and/or automate the current Planning Service business processes and facilitate changes in these processes;
- Provide a 'portal' for online submission of planning applications;
- Facilitate online issuing of property certificates;
- Enable faster, quality decision-making;
- Improve access to information throughout core Planning Service processes;
- Improve information sharing with consultees; and
- Improve management of the planning service processes.

Noise Nuisance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions for noise nuisance there have been in Carrickfergus Borough Council in the last 5 years. (AQW 871/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been no prosecutions for noise nuisance in Carrickfergus Borough Council over the last five years.

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/protect_the_environment/local_environmental_issues/noise/complaint_statistics_for_ni.htm

Public Transport Services

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) all the private operators who currently offer public transport services; and (ii) what routes they operate. (AQW 877/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 29 Road Service Licensees that offer stage carriage and/or express transport services.

1. Londonderry & Lough Swilly Railway Company T/A The Swilly Bus Service
 - Londonderry – Culmore Point

2. Mairead McAnulty & Hugh McAnulty T/A Yellow Line Coach Hire
 - Warrenpoint – Newry Market
 - Warrenpoint Town Centre – Ballydesland Road, Warrenpoint
 - Burren Chapel, Warrenpoint – Upper Dromore Road, Warrenpoint
 - Trevor Hill, Newry – Crieve Road, Newry
 - Church Street, Rostrevor – University of Ulster Jordanstown
3. Mr Francis McGinn T/A McGinn's Coach Hire
 - Rathlin Pier – West Lighthouse, Rathlin Island
 - Ballycastle – Belfast (Express Service)
4. Chambers Coach Hire Ltd
 - Ballygruby, Moneymore - Cookstown HS, Coolnafrankie Estate
 - Dunronan Road, Moneymore - Loup PS
 - Holy Trinity HS, Cookstown – Dunamore
 - Moneymore – Tamlaght
 - High Street, Moneymore - Cookstown HS, Coolnafrankie Estate
 - Moneyhaw Road, Moneymore – Magherafelt
 - Lough Fea Road, Cookstown – Churchtown
 - Beechway, Cookstown - Lissan Primary School, Cookstown
 - Moneymore - Savile Row, Castledawson
 - Moneymore - Desmond's Factory, Dungannon
 - Moneymore – Slaughtneill
 - Rockview Park, Moneymore – Loup, Moneymore
 - Magherafelt - Queen's University, Belfast
 - James Street, Cookstown - Queen's University, Belfast
 - James Street, Cookstown - Antrim Area Hospital
 - Dungannon - Viva bingo, Cookstown
 - Ballyronan Road, Magherafelt - Viva bingo, Cookstown
 - High Street, Moneymore - Cookstown High School
 - Kilrea Square - Empire bingo, Union Road, Magherafelt
 - Jonnys Corner, Draperstown - The Elk Bar, Hillhead Road, Toome
 - The Square, Kilrea - The Elk Bar, Hillhead Road, Toome
 - Randalstown Main Street - Empire bingo, Union Street, Magherafelt
 - Ardboe Hall, Killycanavan Road, Ballymaguigan - Islandhill, Ballymaguigan

- Moneymeena - Viva bingo, Cookstown
 - Moneymore – Foyle Street, Londonderry (Express Service)
 - Moneymore – Glengall Street, Belfast (Express Service)
 - Omagh, Bus Station – Belfast, Europa Bus Centre (Express Service)
 - Londonderry – Belfast (Express Service)
 - Moneymore – Belfast (Express Service)
 - Foyle Street, Londonderry – Belfast (Express Service)
5. Gerard, Elizabeth & Paul McCauley T/A McCauley Coaches
Garrison – Univeristy of Ulster, Jordanstown
 6. Patrick, Sean & Dorothy Logan T/A Logan Executive Travel
 - Dunloy Road, Ballymoney – Ballymoney Town Hall
 - Rogans Shop, Rasharkin – Ballymoney Town Hall
 - Main Street, Cloughmills – Ballymoney Town Hall
 - Loughguile – Ballymoney Town Hall
 7. Robert Darragh T/A Darragh's Coaches
 - Cloughmills – Kilrea Bingo
 - Rasharkin – Clady Bingo
 8. Gerald Cordner & Bernard Lyness T/A Lyness Coaches
 - Lurgan – Moypark, Portadown
 9. Adrian McDermott T/A McDermott Coach Hire
 - The Square, Portaferry – Castle Park, Bangor
 10. Patricia Mary Sheridan, Gerald Sheridan T/A Sheridan Coaches
 - Crossmaglen – Queens University & University of Ulster, Jordanstown (Express Service)
 11. John Cyril Matthew Bell T/A Ards Tours
 - Dundonald High School – North Down Tech, Bloomfield Road, Bangor
 - Tullycarnet – Dundonald High School, Dundonald
 12. Fredrick Ferguson T/A Cavehill Coaches
 - Maghaberry Village – Crumlin High School, Crumlin
 13. Slo-Coaches Ltd
 - Greencastle Street, Kilkeel – Buttercrane Area, Newry
 14. Ronnie Bullick T/A RJG Bullick Coach Hire
 - Lissize Avenue, Rathfriland – Iveagh Primary School, Castle Hill
 15. Colin Biggs T/A Biggs Coaches
 - Cornmill Centre, Coalisland – Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown
 - Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown – Cornmill Centre, Coalisland
 16. Eamonn Rooney T/A Rooney International Coach Hire
 - Hilltown Square – Queen's University, Belfast
 - Stonebridge, Newry – Coleraine University (Express Service)
 - Queen's University, Belfast – Coleraine University, Portstewart (Express Service)
 - Hilltown – Jury's Hotel, Great Victoria Sreet, Belfast (Express Service)
 - Hilltown – University of Ulster Jordanstown (Express Service)
 17. Daniel J Monaghan T/A Dial-A-Bus/Titanic City Tours/Diplomat Car & Coach Hire
 - Elmwood Avenue, Belfast - Queens Road Science Park, Belfast
 18. Sean Patterson T/A Ace Coaches
 - Granville/Ballygawley Road/Newell Road, Dungannon – Moypark – Wilanco Industrial Estate, Dungannon
 - Donaghmore Road/Thomas Road – Granville Industrial Estate, Dungannon
 - Dungannon Square – Moypark factory, Killyman Road, Dungannon
 19. Francis Bosco McAlinden T/A B&C Coaches
 - Mayfair Business Centre, Portadown – Victoria Centre, Chichester Street, Belfast
 - Mayfair Business Centre, Garvaghy Road, Portadown – Glenavon House Hotel, Drum Road, Cookstown
 - Bank of Ireland, High Street, Portadown
 - Costcutters, Garvaghy Road, Portadown – Rushmere Shopping Centre, Craigavon
 - Costcutters, Garvaghy Road, Portadown – Glengannon Hotel, Dungannon
 - Bank of Ireland, High Street, Craigavon –Portadown, Town Centre
 - Ashbrooke, Portadown – St Catherine's College, Armagh
 - Maghery – Ashbrooke, Portadown
 - Mayfair Business Centre, Portadown - IKEA
 - The Mall, Armagh – City Hall, Belfast (Express Service)

20. Joseph Lavelle, Lee Lavelle & Paul Johnston T/A Belfast City Sightseeing/Belfast City Coaches
 - HSS Stena Terminal, Belfast – Castle Place, Belfast
 - University Street, Belfast – St Mary's College, Falls Road, Belfast
21. West Belfast Taxis (Transport) Ltd
 - Stewartstown Road, Belfast – Lagmore Drive, Belfast
 - Whiterock Road, Belfast – Monagh-By-Pass, Belfast
 - Falls Road, Belfast – Junction at Stewartstown Road, Belfast
 - Falls Road, Belfast – Ladybrook Cross, Belfast
 - Falls Road/Glen Road Junction, Belfast – Suffolk Road, Belfast
 - King Street, Belfast – Glen Road, Belfast
 - Andersonstown Road, Belfast – Upper Dunmurry Lane, Belfast
 - Andersonstown Road, Belfast – Bell Street Road, Belfast
 - Castle Street, Belfast – Estoril Park, Belfast
22. Stephen Davidson T/A Davidson Coach Hire
 - Dunavon Park, Dungannon – Moypark, Killyman Road, Dungannon
 - George Street, Dungannon – Moypark, Killyman Road, Dungannon
23. Anthony Leo (Liam) Murray T/A Murray's Coaches
 - Drumcree Road, Portadown – Moypark Factory, Seagoe Industrial Estate, Portadown
24. Maura Breen T/A A 2 B Coaches
 - Garvaghy Road, Portadown – Bank Disco, Newry
25. Airporter Ltd
 - Londonderry to Belfast International and Belfast City Airports via Dungiven
26. Randal Carberry T/A Carberry's Coaches
 - Courthouse car park, Lurgan – Killeen, Newry
 - Courthouse car park, Lurgan
 - Cricket Club, Armagh – Rathfriland Road, Banbridge
 - Portadown – Rathfriland Road, Banbridge
27. B & I Transport Ltd, McGread Omagh
Omagh – Portrush
28. Eamonn Duff T/A Duff's Coaches
 - William Street, Lurgan – Moypark, Seagoe Industrial Estate, Craigavon

29. Derry Taxis Ltd
 - Galliagh – Shantallow
 - Ballymagroarty/Hazelbank/The Glen & Foyle Springs
 - Greater Shantallow Area
 - Creggan/Rosemount/Brandy Well

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to (i) explain the delay in the publication of the Ards & Down area plan; and (ii) confirm when it will be published. (AQW 918/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As previously advised, the Department received the Planning Appeals Commission's report on the public inquiry, requested by Planning Service to hear objections into the draft Ards and Down Plan, at the end of March 2008, later than was originally anticipated.

The specific content of the PAC report is confidential and can only be made available at adoption so there is a limit to what I can discuss at this stage. I can say, however, that it has raised a number of complex issues, which are linked to broader regional policy considerations and also contains a number of recommendations on the adoption process.

Unfortunately it has not been possible to finalise our consideration of the PAC report as early as originally programmed, due to the complexity of the issues involved. That said, I can assure you that considerable progress has been made and we anticipate having the remaining issues resolved by the end of October.

The Department is confident that a final Plan for Ards and Down will be published by the end of March 2009, in line with our Business Plan Objective.

Lecale Area

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to; (i) outline the current status of the Lecale area of outstanding natural beauty; and (ii) what plans he has to review the status of the area. (AQW 920/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Lecale Coast was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1967 under the Amenities Lands Act (1965). NIEA is currently conducting a review of Lecale AONB in conjunction with a review of Strangford Lough AONB which will be completed by the end of this year. The Agency will use the findings of the review to develop proposals for the future of Lecale AONB.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to identify what measures have been taken to prevent further pollution incidents in the Quoile River, Downpatrick; and (ii) to outline the recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and its predecessor the Environment and Heritage Service to resolve this matter. (AQW 977/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency works to reduce the number of pollution incidents occurring in Northern Ireland, including the Quoile River, through a range of proactive initiatives including:-

- Education about the effects and consequences of pollution;
- Advisory publications;
- Offering advice at site meetings;
- Promoting good environmental practices through responses to planning consultations;
- Pollution prevention programmes;
- Promoting sustainable drainage systems; and
- Conducting environmental audits.

The Agency has formed nine Catchment Stakeholder Groups (CSGs) in Northern Ireland which meet twice a year. The Strangford and Lecale CSG covers the Quoile area. The Group met on 23 April 2008 and next meets with the Agency on 4 November 2008.

The CSG meetings have been successful in helping to encourage local people to get involved in water management and have helped to improve awareness of local pollution problems and the reporting methods.

Draft River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs), which detail measures which will be implemented to improve water quality across Northern Ireland, including the Quoile River, will be issued for public consultation from December 2008 until June 2009. During this consultation period, NIEA will actively engage with local CSGs on key local water management issues and use this feedback to prioritise the issues and implement solutions.

At a local level these measures include an upgrade to the Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works (WWTW) which is currently underway. This is a £9.7 million investment by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) which is due to be completed in June 2010. As well as bringing benefits to the local economy and environment, the upgrade will ensure that the WWTW in Downpatrick complies with all current national and European regulations.

NIEA operates a freephone pollution response system that is available to the public at all times. The Agency also has a number of Water Quality Investigators who are actively working in the Quoile River System to investigate pollution concerns and prosecute polluters where appropriate.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if the Northern Ireland Environment Agency investigated reasons for low oxygen levels in the Quoile River, Downpatrick; and (ii) to detail the outcome of that investigation. (AQW 979/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, in conjunction with the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the Agri-Food and Bio-Sciences Institute, undertook an extensive chemical sampling programme of the Quoile River following the fish kill on 29 August 2008. The results did not identify the presence of any pollutants however they did detect low levels of oxygen throughout the Quoile Pondage.

The Quoile pondage contains saline water from Strangford Lough and freshwater from the Quoile River. Because the saline water is more dense than the freshwater, two distinct layers are formed in the system with the freshwater flowing over the saline water. The oxygen in the lower saline layer becomes depleted because of the breakdown of organic matter in the river sediments but, normally, there is still plenty of oxygen in the upper freshwater layer which allows fish to survive.

Following heavy rainfall and flooding, which also introduced additional organic matter into the pondage, the two layers mixed. This caused the available oxygen levels to fall which resulted in the fish kill.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representative of the Irish government onto the Advisory Committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, will have on the protection and monitoring of migratory birds. (AQW 1037/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representative of the Irish government onto the Advisory Committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, will have on the protection and monitoring of native birds on the island of Ireland. (AQW 1038/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representative of the Irish government onto the Advisory Committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, will have on the pollution of streams and rivers that flow in both jurisdictions. (AQW 1039/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representative of the Irish government onto the Advisory Committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, will have on the protection of birds, animals and insects under threat. (AQW 1040/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representative of the Irish government onto the Advisory Committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, will have on the prevention of fly tipping in rural areas. (AQW 1041/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Armagh City and District Council

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is aware of the shortfall in rates

revenue being experienced by Armagh City and District Council; and if he will discuss remedial options, such as transitional relief, with council officials. (AQW 462/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): For the year 2008-2009 Armagh City and District Council is due to receive £12,535,526 from the Department of Finance and Personnel for estimated revenues raised from district rates.

Land and Property Services has, through improved in-year monitoring arrangements, reviewed the Council's estimated income for 2008-2009 and has found that the Council is likely to raise £600,000 less than originally forecast. The review is based on rateable values in the Valuation Lists at 30 June 2008, as well as losses and the cost of collection at 31 March 2008.

I am advised that losses, for example, vacancies, and the cost of collection have increased significantly since the original estimate was provided in December 2007. In addition, a number of military bases are now considered closed, which also affects the forecast. However, the revised figures remain an estimate based on a worst case scenario and the position could change by the end of the financial year.

Land and Property Services will undertake a further review of the Council's projected income for 2008-2009 at the end of December 2008 and will discuss this with the Council.

Rating legislation confirms that any repayments of rate revenue falling due must be paid by the end of the financial year in which they become due. Providing transitional relief as has been suggested is not, therefore, an option, as this would be contrary to statutory obligations. Any shortfall in revenue will be dealt with in the finalisation process in mid-2009 and repayment made by March 2010 at the latest. However, it is too early to predict exactly what the Council's revenue position will be at 31 March 2009. Officials from Land and Property Services will be in a better position to discuss this following the December review.

Mr John Wilkinson, the Chief Executive of Land and Property Services, met Council officials on 2 October 2008 to discuss a range of issues including a special exercise on vacant property designed to minimise the amount of rates foregone in the 2008-2009 year. I asked him to use that meeting to discuss all possible options to increase the Council's revenue income between now and 31 March 2009 and thereby reduce to a minimum the potential for claw back in the 2009 finalisation process. I also asked him to consider, in conjunction with the Council, a further interim review of the revenue estimate for 2008/2009 based on figures at the end of September 2008.

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the present level of uptake is for Lone Pensioners Allowance in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) each local council area, detailing the number of recipients and the total monetary value; and how these figures compare to his Department's original estimate of the level of uptake for (a) Northern Ireland; and (b) each local council area. (AQW 615/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Lone Pensioner Allowance is administered jointly by Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. At 19 September 2008 19,564 had been received; 16,640 by Land and Property Services, and 2,924 by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Table 1 shows, by council area, the number of recipients and the monetary value of the claims processed by Land and Property Services.

Table 2 shows the Northern Ireland Housing Executive applications and their monetary value, although these are not available by council area. The monetary values represent annual figures on the basis that these claims will continue in payment until the end of the financial year.

The Department did not estimate the level of uptake by council area, but estimated that for Northern Ireland as a whole the uptake could be in the range of 50,000, equating to between £2 and £3 million. The total amount of relief awarded under the Lone Pensioner Scheme to date is in the region of £2m.

TABLE 1. CLAIMS FOR LONE PENSIONER ALLOWANCE PROCESSED BY LAND AND PROPERTY SERVICES SHOWING MONETARY VALUE.

Council	Applications processed	Monetary value £
Antrim	262	39,961.69
Ards	635	104,947.93
Armagh	349	48,195.42
Ballymena	529	83,092.72
Ballymoney	182	26,768.70
Banbridge	230	31,550.28
Belfast	2060	331,099.18
Carrickfergus	339	50,394.36
Castlereagh	902	127,428.67
Coleraine	548	91,055.39
Cookstown	122	16,574.33
Craigavon	495	66,896.53
Derry	423	67,272.98

Council	Applications processed	Monetary value £
Down	444	75,060.24
Dungannon & Sth Tyrone	203	27,401.29
Fermanagh	369	46,146.74
Larne	273	35,883.14
Limavady	129	19,139.32
Lisburn	816	128,937.06
Magherafelt	142	17,542.42
Moyle	105	17,854.17
Newry & Mourne	416	60,722.56
Newtownabbey	778	114,443.61
North Down	1051	173,085.68
Omagh	256	34,892.70
Strabane	125	15,335.23
Total	12,183	1,851,682.34

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel the take up of the Lone Pensioner Allowance in the last 12 months, broken down by constituency. (AQW 840/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Lone Pensioner Allowance is administered jointly by Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Since the introduction of this rate relief in April 2008, 19,564 applications have been received - Land and Property Services has received 16,640 applications, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has received 2,924.

While a breakdown of this information by constituency is not available, the table below shows, by council area, the number of applications (12,183) which, to date, have been processed by Land and Property Services.

Table showing applications for Lone Pensioner Allowance received and processed by Land and Property Services to date, broken down by council area.

Council	Applications processed by LPS to date
Antrim	262
Ards	635
Armagh	349
Ballymena	529
Ballymoney	182

Council	Applications processed by LPS to date
Banbridge	230
Belfast	2,060
Carrickfergus	339
Castlereagh	902
Coleraine	548
Cookstown	122
Craigavon	495
Derry	423
Down	444
Dungannon & S.Tyrone	203
Fermanagh	369
Larne	273
Limavady	129
Lisburn	816
Magherafelt	142
Moyle	105
Newry & Mourne	416
Newtownabbey	778
North Down	1,051
Omagh	256
Strabane	125
Total	12,183

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ni Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide details of the neighbourhood renewal posts and services that his Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 886/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP does not take forward any initiatives in order to provide Neighbourhood Renewal services. Other departments may take forward such initiatives and services.

Unclaimed Asset Scheme

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the unclaimed asset scheme. (AQW 966/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The unclaimed assets/dormant accounts scheme presents the citizens of Northern Ireland with a real opportunity. It represents a new and innovative concept for the setting of local priorities for distribution of funds

currently locked in dormant bank and building society accounts for the benefit of the community under the broad heading of social and environmental purposes whilst ensuring the rights of the account holder to reclaim their money remain protected.

Whilst it is unclear how much money is available, I believe that it is important that all interested parties should have the opportunity to be involved in the establishment of the spending priorities for Northern Ireland. Subject to Executive agreement, I am proposing the launch of a 12 week consultation on the Dormant Accounts Scheme during November.

Number of Births Broken Down by Mother's Place of Birth

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of births in each parliamentary constituency, broken down by the mother's country of birth. (AQW 975/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The tables attached give the number of births registered by parliamentary constituency, broken down by country of birth groupings for the mother, for the years 2005, 2006 and 2007.

BIRTHS BY MOTHER'S COUNTRY OF BIRTH GROUPING AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, 2005

Parliamentary Constituency	Mother's Country of Birth Grouping					All Births
	Northern Ireland	Rest of UK	Irish Republic	A8 Countries ¹	All Other Countries ²	
Belfast East	767	52	12	2	65	898
Belfast North	982	51	13	5	47	1,098
Belfast South	707	63	39	12	136	957
Belfast West	1,087	24	20	3	51	1,185
East Antrim	946	61	14	2	41	1,064
East Londonderry	857	105	30	6	43	1,041
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	989	82	104	24	51	1,250
Foyle	1,288	99	97	2	42	1,528
Lagan Valley	1,160	131	26	5	83	1,405
Mid Ulster	1,201	60	32	10	31	1,334
Newry and Armagh	1,307	82	113	17	50	1,569
North Antrim	1,221	78	12	2	50	1,363
North Down	761	92	16	1	54	924
South Antrim	1,154	127	23	6	55	1,365
South Down	1,276	115	52	2	38	1,483

Parliamentary Constituency	Mother's Country of Birth Grouping					All Births
	Northern Ireland	Rest of UK	Irish Republic	A8 Countries ¹	All Other Countries ²	
Strangford	1,028	65	13	5	58	1,169
Upper Bann	1,307	87	30	8	78	1,510
West Tyrone	1,001	88	59	6	31	1,185
Northern Ireland	19,039	1,462	705	118	1,004	22,328

- 1 A8 countries refer to the eight Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in May 2004, (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia).
- 2 Includes a small number of births where the mother's country of birth was not known.

BIRTHS BY MOTHER'S COUNTRY OF BIRTH GROUPING AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, 2006

Parliamentary Constituency	Mother's Country of Birth Grouping					All Births
	Northern Ireland	Rest of UK	Irish Republic	A8 Countries ¹	All Other Countries ²	
Belfast East	760	65	13	16	59	913
Belfast North	1,042	53	22	9	56	1,182
Belfast South	686	66	39	22	146	959
Belfast West	1,138	39	15	3	45	1,240
East Antrim	935	62	17	3	35	760
East Londonderry	942	86	27	21	53	1,129
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1,065	89	109	72	52	1,387
Foyle	1,291	94	87	6	52	1,530
Lagan Valley	1,191	110	20	19	72	1,412
Mid Ulster	1,172	60	35	57	36	1,360
Newry and Armagh	1,341	88	134	48	41	1,652
North Antrim	1,201	92	24	13	41	1,371
North Down	766	124	16	10	77	993
South Antrim	1,188	126	17	12	68	1,411
South Down	1,379	106	51	15	49	1,600
Strangford	1,031	74	14	5	64	1,188
Upper Bann	1,428	72	31	46	86	1,663
West Tyrone	1,055	71	65	13	26	1,230
Northern Ireland	19,611	1,477	736	390	1,058	23,272

- 1 A8 countries refer to the eight Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in May 2004, (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia).
- 2 Includes a small number of births where the mother's country of birth was not known.

BIRTHS BY MOTHER'S COUNTRY OF BIRTH GROUPING AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Mother's Country of Birth Grouping					All Births
	Northern Ireland	Rest of UK	Irish Republic	A8 Countries ¹	All Other Countries ²	
Belfast East	827	59	13	34	85	1,018
Belfast North	1,039	64	18	30	57	1,208
Belfast South	771	69	38	61	166	1,105
Belfast West	1,188	43	20	15	52	1,318
East Antrim	913	77	11	8	52	1,061
East Londonderry	937	78	29	51	46	1,141
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1,056	80	103	105	71	1,415
Foyle	1,331	83	91	12	60	1,577
Lagan Valley	1,319	108	22	25	77	1,551
Mid Ulster	1,261	60	33	65	37	1,456
Newry and Armagh	1,335	88	143	90	54	1,710
North Antrim	1,257	80	9	42	36	1,424
North Down	875	92	18	5	66	1,056
South Antrim	1,286	121	21	52	76	1,556
South Down	1,415	115	50	40	47	1,667
Strangford	1,041	79	13	13	62	1,208
Upper Bann	1,463	86	35	97	102	1,783
West Tyrone	1,011	74	56	30	26	1,197
Northern Ireland	20,325	1,456	723	775	1,172	24,451

- 1 A8 countries refer to the eight Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in May 2004, (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia).
- 2 Includes a small number of births where the mother's country of birth was not known.
- P Provisional data

DFP Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many page views his Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1110/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table shows the number of page views per month, for the last 12 months, for the website www.dfpni.gov.uk.

Month	Page Views
October 2007	95,442
November 2007	81,845
December 2007	62,970
January 2008	88,179
February 2008	84,479
March 2008	69,562
April 2008	107,238
May 2008	70,858
June 2008	84,596
July 2008	75,802
August 2008	80,962
September 2008	136,732
Total	1,038,665

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) what engagements he had with Professor Bain in relation to the review of the location of public sector jobs; and (ii) any offers he made to relocate jobs in his Department. (AQW 1135/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs was commissioned by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of the Executive. As the commissioning Minister I met with Professor Bain on two occasions to discuss general progress on the Review. While I have made no offers to relocate jobs in my department it is evident from the report that two organisations within the Department of Finance and Personnel – Land and Property Services and the Northern Ireland Civil Service Shared Services – are included in the pool of candidates for relocation.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

New Fire Station in Cushendall

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the provision of a new fire station in Cushendall. (AQW 647/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): I refer the

honourable member to my responses to Assembly Questions AQO 2171/08 and AQW 4464/08. The matter of determining when any refurbishment or rebuild of fire stations, including Cushendall is to commence, remains a matter for the Chief Fire Officer and the Board of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

Land in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to sell land owned by his Department in the North Down area. (AQW 662/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no plans to sell any land/property in the North Down area, as it does not own any land/property in this area.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to use the drug Embril to treat people suffering from Alzheimer's disease. (AQW 664/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to prescribe a particular medicine is a matter for clinicians, taking into account the patient's condition, a drug's licensed indications, the best available evidence about treatment options and local prescribing policies. Enbrel (etanercept) is not licensed for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease, nor has it been assessed or approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease.

In general, I would not anticipate any new drug therapy being available on the health service until its efficacy, safety and cost effectiveness have been rigorously assessed.

Alcohol-Related Brain Damage

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of alcohol related brain damage have been recorded in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 668/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cases of alcohol related brain damage, in each of the last 10 years, is not available.

Meningitis

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of meningitis were diagnosed in the last 12 months; and what action his Department is taking to increase awareness of the symptoms of the illness. (AQW 684/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Meningitis is caused by a range of bacterial and viral infections, the most frequent bacterial infection causing meningitis in Northern Ireland being *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal meningitis). The rates of meningococcal meningitis and *Haemophilus influenzae b* (Hib) meningitis have both decreased dramatically since the introduction of specific vaccines for these conditions.

Provisional figures provided by Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (NI) for the number of cases of meningitis (all types) show that 82 cases were reported during the period 10/07/07 to 21/06/08. Of these 82, 25 were cases of meningitis caused by *N. meningitidis* infection, and 57 were laboratory reports of meningitis caused by a bacterial or viral organism other than *N. meningitidis*. These data are derived from the regional programme for Enhanced Surveillance of Meningococcal Disease and routine laboratory reporting to CDSC(NI).

Regarding action taken by the Department to increase awareness of the symptoms, steps take the form of:

- information for the public and health professionals on symptoms and signs of meningitis on the DHSSPS website;
- distribution of information leaflets to all new parents, in particular immunisation leaflets and the 'Birth to 5' book;
- information given to parents for the pre-school immunisation programme;
- promotional campaigns for teenagers and university students to raise awareness of symptoms
- training, and distribution of information to, GPs, district nurses, health visitors and other health professionals;
- updates to all doctors in CMO Update;
- financial assistance to the Meningitis Research Foundation; and
- press releases.

All Trusts, Boards and primary care professionals are proactive in increasing awareness of the symptoms and signs of meningitis during periods when the number of cases of meningitis and septicaemia are likely to increase, especially during the winter.

Accident and Emergency Unit at Belfast City Hospital

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people had to wait in excess of 3 hours to receive treatment at the Accident and Emergency Unit of the Belfast City Hospital, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 693/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who had to wait in excess of 3 hours to receive treatment at the Accident and Emergency Unit of the Belfast City Hospital, in each of the last 3 years is given in the table below.

Year	Number of people
2005	15,705
2006	16,334
2007	17,416

Source: Belfast Health & Social Care Trust

A Priorities for Action target has been set that states that 'by March 2008, 95% of patients who attend A&E should be either treated and discharged home, or admitted within four hours of their arrival in the department'.

Accident and Emergency Unit at Belfast City Hospital

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many admissions there have been to the Accident and Emergency Unit of Belfast City Hospital, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 694/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Accident and Emergency Department at Belfast City Hospital plays a vital role providing emergency care for the public and the A&E Department at Belfast City Hospital and will continue to do so for many years to come.

Information on the number of attendances at the Accident and Emergency Unit at Belfast City Hospital, for each of the last three years, is outlined below.

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
First Attendances	39,441	40,897	40,648
Follow up Attendances	8,345	7,765	6,099
Total Attendances	47,786	48,662	46,747

Source: Departmental Return KH09 (Part 2)

Ballycastle Primary Care Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's response to the business case submitted for a new purpose built facility to meet the primary care demand and GP contractual requirements in Ballycastle.

(AQW 707/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is still considering the business case submitted by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust for a range of schemes within the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure programme, which includes proposals for Ballycastle primary care facilities. These and other capital schemes are currently being reviewed as part of a Capital Priorities Review which I am expecting to be completed in the near future.

Emergency Ambulance Response

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there was a delay in the response of an emergency ambulance called to Main Street, Waterfoot, on 21 September 2008.

(AQW 708/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised that an emergency 999 call was received to respond to an incident at the Mariner's Bar, Waterfoot at 17.40 hours on 21 September 2008. The nearest available ambulance was dispatched from Antrim and arrived on scene at 18.23 hours.

The response time for an emergency ambulance response is dependent on a number of factors such as unexpected peaks in demand, the time of day, traffic and distance to travel. Normally an incident in Waterfoot would be attended by an ambulance deployed from Ballymena or Ballycastle. At the time of the emergency 999 call however, these vehicles were attending other calls and an ambulance was therefore dispatched from the Antrim station. The time taken to arrive therefore reflects the distance the vehicle had to travel to get to the call and the fact that other potentially closer vehicles were already dealing with other 999 calls.

NIAS is currently working to achieve a target response time that, from April 2008, 70% of Category A (life-threatening) emergency calls should be responded to within eight minutes with performance in individual Board areas being improved to at least 62.5% by March 2009. I regret that in this instance the response time was longer than I would normally expect from the service.

Ambulances

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much has been invested in new ambulances in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 717/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Vehicle type	2003/04 £k	2004/05 £k	2005/06 £k	2006/07 £k	2007/08 £k
A&E ambulances	1,621	0	0	2,100	0
Patient care service vehicles	593	473	0	327	481

On 1 October 2008 I announced my intention to invest some £100 million over the next ten years to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. This includes an investment of £17 million capital funding over the CSR period 2008-2011 to modernise the ambulance service fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure.

Rapid-Response Vehicles

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if funding is being diverted from the purchase of new ambulances to the purchase of rapid response vehicles in the next 5 years; and if so, how much.

(AQW 718/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 1 October 2008 I announced my intention to invest almost £100 million over the next ten years to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. This includes an investment of £17.4 million capital funding over the CSR period 2008-2011 which will allow the purchase of some 60 new A&E ambulances, 26 rapid response vehicles and 60 Patient Care Services vehicles.

NIAS has submitted a business case to my Department identifying its requirements for capital investment over the next 10 years. This does not focus on the purchase of particular types of emergency response vehicles in isolation but sets out proposals for a rolling programme of investment for the whole ambulance service fleet, and will ensure that the fleet is of a suitable size and composition to respond effectively to patients with emergency care needs.

Ambulances

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times ambulances have broken down while on call, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 719/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would refer you to the answer I gave to AQW 488/09 on 24 September 2008.

Dental Services

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dental services are directly employed by a Health and Social Services Board, broken down by board area. (AQW 721/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of dentists¹ holding contracts with each Health and Social Services Board², as at September 2008, is shown in the table below.

Health & Social Services Board	
Eastern	364
Northern	202
Southern	168
Western	125
N Ireland ³	824

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

- Figures include Principal dentists only - excludes assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners.
- In order to obtain a split by Board, dentist numbers are taken from the list of dentists who have Health Service contracts with the Health Boards.
- Dentists may work in more than one Health Board, therefore the total for all Health Boards will not equal the Northern Ireland figure.

Services for Older People

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are provided by his Department for older people in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 730/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provides a full range of health and social care services for older people in the Lagan Valley area including Nursing Services, District Nursing, Treatment Room Nursing and Specialist Services for chronic diseases management, continence services and annual flu vaccines. Domiciliary care is provided by the Social Care Team who undertake the assessment and

support of older people in partnership with families to enable older people to remain at home for as long as possible. Interim care and rehabilitation services such as occupational therapy and physiotherapy are also available. Specialist Stroke Services are offered by a dedicated Trust stroke team. Other support schemes for the elderly include Fracture & Falls Schemes, Carers support groups and Dementia support groups. Voluntary organisations supported by the Trust to provide support services for older people include Luncheon clubs, Citizens Advice Bureau, the Access to Benefit Scheme (A2B), Lisburn Voluntary Laundry Service, Home safety checks through the 'Safe Home, Happy Home' Scheme, Lisburn Aftercare, Lisburn Secure Scheme (Help the Aged), Lisburn Handy Van Scheme, Lisburn Adults At Risk & Home Accident Prevention Group and Rural Lisburn Safe & Well Scheme.

Ambulances

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures are in place for the maintenance and regular assessment of ambulances to ensure they are fit for purpose. (AQW 744/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) A&E ambulances are comprehensively inspected and serviced every 12,000 miles. This is a proactive measure to reduce the risk of vehicle breakdown and exceeds manufacturers' recommendations. In addition, all NIAS vehicles, where required, undergo an annual MOT.

Ambulances

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to replace ambulances that are older than the recommended age. (AQW 746/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 1 October 2008 I announced my intention to invest some £100 million over the next ten years to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. This includes an investment of £17 million capital funding over the CSR period 2008-2011 to modernise the ambulance service fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure. This expenditure is subject to the normal public sector business case approval process.

Bamford Recommendations

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how much additional funding was given to each Health and Social Care Trust this year for the implementation of the Bamford recommendations; (ii) how that money has been invested; and (iii) which new community services have been developed. (AQW 761/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An additional £87m was allocated in the Comprehensive Spending Review over the three year period, 08/09, 09/10 and 10/11, for Mental Health and Learning Disability to implement the Bamford recommendations. For this year 08/09, the allocation was broken down (full year effect figures) as follows:

	Mental Health	Learning Disability
Belfast Trust	£2.8m	£1.4m
South Eastern	£2.05m	£1.3m
Northern Trust	£3m	£1.7m
Western Trus	£2.1m	£1.2m
Southern Trust	£2.3m	£1.3m

The additional monies have been invested in recruiting and training extra staff and new services will be established as new staff come into post.

Consultants

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many consultants are currently employed in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area; and how this compares with figures for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 764/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Consultants currently employed in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area and for each of the previous 3 years is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CONSULTANTS EMPLOYED IN THE NORTHERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA AS AT 30 JUNE 2005 - 2008.

Year	Headcount	WTE
2008	180	166.05
2007	176	169.47
2006	160	153.75
2005	145	135.90

Source: Human Resources Management System

Note: WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Disability Discrimination Act

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what obligations are placed on premises owned by his Department and health agencies by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005; and how his Department is performing in relation to these obligations. (AQW 766/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Premises owned by my Department and health agencies are required to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Detailed information regarding performance in relation to this legislation is not held centrally.

Ketogenic Diet

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the research evidence that demonstrates the value of the ketogenic diet used to treat some forms of epilepsy in children, what provision is currently available to children suffering from such conditions. (AQW 776/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As pioneered by Professor Helen Cross of Great Ormond Street Hospital, the ketogenic diet may be considered as a adjunctive treatment in children with drug resistant epilepsy. A decision to commence any particular child on the ketogenic diet will be taken in light of their individual condition and its management, and in conjunction with the child's parent or guardian.

Maintenance and monitoring of the ketogenic diet requires support from a dietician. The Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children has a dietician skilled and experienced in managing the ketogenic diet, and further dieticians are expected to complete relevant training in the near future.

Intractable Epilepsy in Children

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what diagnostic tools are used to assess the presence of intractable epilepsy in children. (AQW 777/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Intractable epilepsy is defined as epilepsy which does not respond to two appropriate anti-epilepsy drugs.

Intractable Epilepsy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of intractable epilepsy have been diagnosed in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 778/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available.

Intractable Epilepsy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are in place to treat infants suffering from intractable epilepsy. (AQW 779/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Treatment of an infant who suffers from intractable epilepsy will be tailored to their individual needs. Most children with intractable epilepsy are under the care of consultants in paediatric neurology, based in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. This care may be provided in conjunction with the child's general and/or community paediatrician. There is also a paediatric neurology specialist nurse, who liaises with the family of children with epilepsy and provides advice.

Children with intractable epilepsy may be referred to a specialist centre in the UK, usually Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, which provides a supra-regional epilepsy service. Referrals outside Northern Ireland are made on the basis of clinical need.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration was given to advice provided by the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee when changes were made to the conditions of the Minor Ailments Service. (AQW 785/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Officials have held a number of meetings with PCC over the last year and made a number of revisions to the scheme in light of concerns they raised. To address their concerns we built into the offer a commitment to review the service after a 6 month operational period, including evaluating its remuneration mechanism.

Despite extensive discussions, it has not been possible to agree the terms of the enhanced service and the PCC advised their members not to take part. As a result it is only available in a limited number of pharmacies.

I have also met with PCC recently to listen to the issues they have and have agreed to back to them following consideration of those issues.

Northern Health and Social Services Board

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will rural proof any decision his Department takes that affects staff employed by the Northern Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 787/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In relation to decisions taken as part of the Health and Social Care Reforms under the Review of Public Administration, where these decisions impact on issues such as location of jobs, rural proofing and other equality perspectives will be taken into account and associated human resources issues will be addressed in line with the Department's Human Resource Framework and the Public Service Commission Guiding Principles.

Other future decisions taken by the Department will take cognisance of rural proofing and other equality perspectives as required.

Northern Health and Social Services Board

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that people currently living and working in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area still have jobs that are accessible to them once the Review of Public Administration is completed. (AQW 788/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am very aware that the location of jobs is important for people living and working in all the Boards' areas. In July 2008 I announced that a human resources framework, and other policies, would be in place that would underpin the Review of Public Administration changes. I also anticipate that both the new Regional Health and Social Care Board and Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being will have a significant local presence irrespective of the location of any headquarters function. The final decisions on location will be subject to approved business cases and equality considerations will be taken into account.

All positions will be recruited and appointments will be made in line with the human resources framework and will be underpinned by Guiding Principles of the Public Service Commission.

Notional Rent Scheme

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on building developments through the Notional Rent scheme in the North Antrim constituency between January 2007 and July 2008.
(AQW 796/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Alcohol-Related Violent Attacks

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many alcohol related violent attacks have been recorded in accident and emergency units over the last 12 months.
(AQW 799/09)

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 current monitoring process records the number of incidents relating to verbal and physical abuse against health care staff by staff groups. It does not identify specific attacks where alcohol has been a contributory factor.

The attached table details the number of incidents in accident and emergency units for the last full 12 month period 1st April 2007 to 31 March 2008.

HSC Trusts	A&E UNIT	2007/08
Northern HSC Trust	Antrim Hospital	19
	Mid Ulster Hospital	10
	Whiteabbey Hospital	4
	Causeway Hospital	25
Southern HSC Trust	Craigavon Area Hospital	11
	Lurgan Hospital	14
	Daisy Hill Hospital	18
South Eastern HSC Trust	Downe Hospital	2
	Lagan Valley Hospital	4
	Ulster Hospital	11
Western HSC Trust	Erne Hospital	14
	Urgent Care Centre, Tyrone County Hospital	2
	Altnagelvin Hospital	26

HSC Trusts	A&E UNIT	2007/08
Belfast HSC Trust	Belfast City	40
	Mater	37
	Royal Group of Hospitals	44
Total		281

New South West Hospital in Enniskillen

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the tender process for the construction of the new South West Hospital in Enniskillen.
(AQW 802/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Acute Hospital is being procured in accordance with treasury guidance, under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), and utilising the Competitive Dialogue procurement procedure in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2006. There are four key stages to the procurement process and these are set out below:

Stage	Activity
Stage 1 Pre- Qualification	OJEU Notice Pre-Qualification Questionnaire/ Selection
Stage 2 Competitive Dialogue	2A: Strategic Approach (Shortlist) Invitation to Participate in Dialogue (IPID) issued 2B: Design Concept Proposals 2C: Firm Design Proposals 2D: Total Package Proposals Closure of Competitive Dialogue
Stage 3 Bid Evaluation	Invitation to Submit Final Bid (IFB) issued Final Tenders Preferred Bidder Selection
Stage 4 Finalisation	Appoint Preferred Bidder Financial Close

New South West Hospital in Enniskillen

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the names and addresses of the firms that submitted a tender; and (ii) the amounts tendered, for the construction of the new South West Hospital in Enniskillen.
(AQW 803/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Three consortia submitted a tender for the new Enniskillen Hospital, they were:

Name	Address
The Northern Ireland Health Group	17th Floor, Windsor House 9-15 Bedford Street, Belfast BT2 7EG
Consort Healthcare	Premier Business Centre 20 Adelaide Street Belfast BT2 8GB
Direct Health	19 Clarendon Road Belfast BT1 3GB

- (ii) The Preferred Bidder submitted the most economically advantageous bid for the new Enniskillen Hospital. The procurement process is not yet complete and I am therefore unable to disclose at this time further detail on specific costings as this information is commercially sensitive.

New South West Hospital in Enniskillen

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the criteria used for shortlisting; and (ii) the firms shortlisted, for the construction of the new South West Hospital in Enniskillen. (AQW 804/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) At the start of the Competitive Dialogue process, stage 2A, the four initial bidders were issued with detailed information on project requirements, which would form the basis of their formal responses.

Submissions were received in response to 10 questions that related to the key areas of the project, namely

- Design & Construction;
- Human Resources;
- Facilities Management;
- Finance;
- Project Management; and
- Socio-Economic factors.

The bidder's responses were evaluated against pre-defined model answers and an evaluation report was produced and quality assured. Following the evaluation of responses, bidders were short-listed from four to three. As the procurement process has not yet complete I am unable to disclose at this time further detail on specific model answers.

- (ii) The short-listed consortia were Consort Healthcare, DirectHealth and Northern Ireland Health Group.

New South West Hospital in Enniskillen

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the criteria used to select the successful tender from the shortlist; and (ii) the weighting system used in the scoring matrix, for the construction of the new South West Hospital in Enniskillen. (AQW 805/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Stage 3 of the procurement process built on information provided at the previous stages. The project requirements were defined specifically, with 170 deliverables required to be addressed in the final tenders. These were communicated to the bidders. Final bids were received in February 2008. The bids were evaluated on the following workstreams:

- Design & Technical (including equipment and ICT)
- Facilities Management
- Human Resources
- Finance (including insurance)
- Legal
- Project Management
- Social and Economic Regeneration

Evaluation teams applied a pre-determined evaluation methodology that had been developed in conjunction with key stakeholders and senior Trust staff and shared with all Bidders. The evaluation assessed the bids on both a quantitative basis - all bids had to pass the affordability hurdle or else they would be excluded; - and qualitative basis. The bids were then ranked based on the combined quantitative and qualitative scores.

Bids were evaluated against pre-defined model answers, for each workstream and covering the project deliverables, and the benchmarks established in the exemplar design. Once the evaluation was completed an evaluation report, was presented with the Appointment Business Case to Trust Board in May 2008 for scrutiny and subsequent approval. The Department approved the appointment of the Northern Ireland Health Group as the Successful Tenderer on 21st August 2008 and they were appointed in September 2008.

- (ii) The scoring matrix used in the evaluation process is set out below.

Assessment	Allocated Score
Very Poor - completely fails to demonstrate technical capacity and capability.	0
Poor - some, but very limited evidence of technical capability and capacity.	1-3
Satisfactory - provides evidence of sufficient capability and capacity to undertake the project.	4-6
Good – shows capacity and capability that meet the project requirements and in some areas, shows innovation in excess of the project requirements.	7-9
Very good - shows capacity and capability in all areas that are in excess of the project requirements.	10

The weighting scores for the quantitative assessment was 10% and the weightings for the qualitative assessment is set out in the table below.

Workstream Area	Weighting
Organisational Fit	5%
Project Management (including socio-economic)	5%
Design & Technical (including Equipment, ICT and socio-economic)	35%
Facilities Management (including socio-economic)	20%
Human Resources (including socio-economic)	10%
Legal	10%
Financial (incl payment mechanism and Insurance)	15%
Total	100%
Total Weighted out of 90%	90%

NB: 5% of the qualitative assessment was allocated for Social and Economic Regeneration Planning The 5% spanned across Design & Technical (2%), Facilities Management (1%), Human Resources0 (1%) and Project Management (1%).

New South West Hospital in Enniskillen

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the additional community benefit included in each shortlisted tender and (ii) the extent to which this influenced the outcome of the tendering process, for the construction of the new South West Hospital in Enniskillen.

(AQW 806/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) From the Strategic Approach stage in the procurement process, all bidders were asked to provide proposals to address the social and

economic aspects of the project. At final tender stage, bidders were required to submit a Social and Economic Regeneration Plan, demonstrating how their bid provided benefit for the local community, the five key areas covered are:

- Training, placement and employment.
- Addressing social exclusion and long-term unemployment.
- Maximizing Opportunities for the Local Supply Chain
- Addressing Equality and Diversity
- Community Engagement.

- (ii) A total of 5% of the qualitative assessment of final tenders was assigned to the evaluation of Social and Economic Regeneration Plans.

I am not in a position to release the information supplied by the Selected Tenderer, Northern Ireland Health Group, at this point in the procurement process.

Prescription Charges for Cancer Patients

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to abolish prescription charges for cancer patients in line with proposals in the rest of the UK. (AQW 808/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I announced on the 29 September 2008 that, subject to Executive agreement, I intend to reduce and then abolish prescription charging in Northern Ireland for all patients.

As from 1 January 2009 the price of a prescription item will reduce from £6.85 to £3.00, the price of a pre-payment certificate will also reduce from £35.85 to £9.00 for a four month certificate and from £98.70 to £25.00 for a twelve month certificate.

From 1 April 2010 prescriptions will be free of charge in Northern Ireland.

Elderly Care

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provisions his Department plans to put in place for elderly care following the closure of the Elderly Care Units in the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital. (AQW 817/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Reform and Modernisation Programme is designed to ensure that more people will be supported to live independently in their own homes. As part of the Trust's Programme, Care of the Elderly facilities at the City and Royal Victoria Hospitals will be

closed and the services transferred from these older buildings, which are no longer fit for purpose, to new more modern facilities within both the City Hospital's Tower Block and the main building of the Royal Victoria Hospital. Following the completion of the Reform and Modernisation Programme the range of services across hospital and community will be expanded and will provide a full range of services for the elderly in the most appropriate location.

Skills Shortages

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) skills shortages; and (ii) hard to fill vacancies, currently within his Department, broken down by job category; and what action he is taking to address this problem. (AQW 819/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) No skills shortages have been identified by the Department. The Department has an annual process in place to identify the priority generic and business specific skills needs of staff, which are met through ongoing training and development.
- (ii) The Department currently has 1 Staff Officer Accountant vacancy and 1 Deputy Principal Accountant vacancy which have proved difficult to fill. Difficulty in filling vacancies in the Accountancy discipline is a corporate issue affecting other NICS Departments. As a result, advertising and recruitment measures are now handled corporately for Departments by the Department of Finance & Personnel. Methods of addressing this problem across the NICS include the re-introduction of a Trainee Accountant programme and consideration of salary issues.

Dental Care

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to allow children to receive NHS dental care regardless of where their parents or guardians are registered. (AQW 820/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While the issue of access to health service dental care is problematic in certain areas of Northern Ireland, in the majority of cases, dental practices are still providing health service dental provision for children.

Unfortunately, under the current dental contract we are unable to compel dentists to accept any patient for

health service treatment, irrespective of the patient's personal circumstances.

My officials are in negotiations with the British Dental Association to develop a new dental contract. This new contract will ensure greater access to health service care for all, and in the interim we hope to be tendering shortly for additional dental services to fill geographical gaps in access to health service dentistry.

New Women's and Children's Hospital

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new women's and children's hospital on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. (AQW 822/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This and other capital schemes have been considered as part of the Review of Capital Priorities which has just been completed. I am now considering the findings of the Review and will comment in due course.

The business case for this project is currently being considered by the Department.

Respite Care

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans will be made to accommodate respite care for adults with learning difficulties outside of their Health and Social Care Trust area if provision is unavailable within their own locality. (AQW 823/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The responsibility for operational matters in the provision of services rests with the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts within Northern Ireland. Trusts have advised that where possible respite provision is provided near to the client's home area. On occasions where there are no vacancies within a Trust's catchment area or where specialist respite services are required, Trusts may consider contracting services from outside their catchment area.

Clinical Drug Trials

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the circumstances under which senior citizens are involved in clinical drug trials whilst in the care of hospital or care centre facilities; and how consent for these trials is obtained. (AQW 824/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The participants in any clinical trial of a

drug will vary depending on the protocol and the inclusion and exclusion criteria that are specified for the trial. Senior citizens may participate in any trial as appropriate for the drug being tested.

The Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (2006) sets out the requirements regarding obtaining consent for participation in a clinical trial. The Department requires that all health and social care research involving service users is reviewed independently to ensure that it meets ethical standards. All studies must have appropriate arrangements for obtaining consent. The ethics review process pays particular attention to the arrangements for obtaining consent. Written and verbal versions of the information will be presented to the subject detailing no less than: the exact nature of the study; the implications and constraints of the protocol; the known side effects and any risks involved in taking part. Specifically participants will be provided with a Patient Information Sheet, which they can either read for themselves or have read to them. The information will be presented in clear understandable language, and have been evaluated and approved by a Research Ethics Committee. It will be made clear at the outset that refusal to participate will under no circumstances cause any detriment to the patient's normal care, and any participant will be able to withdraw from a trial at any stage, again without any detriment to their normal care

Magherafelt District Council Area

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on supported living in the Magherafelt District Council area. (AQW 828/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not collected centrally.

Vulnerable Adults

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vulnerable adults are currently waiting on a supported living placement in the Magherafelt District Council area; and what is the average waiting time. (AQW 831/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not collected centrally.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the proposals for the future of the Minor Ailments service, given the comments made by the Pharmaceutical

Contractors Committee in its press release of 4 August 2008, stating that the proposals are so unreasonable and unfair that pharmacies are finding it impossible to continue the service. (AQW 845/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I regard the offer made to pharmacy contractors for the provision of an enhanced Minor Ailments Service as fair and reasonable. The new service implemented on the 1 August 2008 offers considerable benefits including:

- Improved access for patients to professional advice and treatment in respect of an expanded range of conditions, greatly reducing the need for patients to visit their GP for the treatment of a minor ailment;
- A much improved remuneration package for pharmacists, which more than doubles the previous investment in this service to £1.5m, and
- The commitment to review the service following a 6 month period of operation, including the remuneration package

To move this issue forward I met recently with representatives of the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee to hear at first hand the concerns they had. I have agreed to consider their comments and will be going back to them in due course.

Old Ambulance Stock

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to replace old ambulance stock; and to detail the timetable. (AQW 847/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 1 October 2008 I announced my intention to invest some £100 million over the next ten years to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. This includes an investment of £17 million capital funding over the CSR period 2008-2011 to modernise the ambulance service fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure. This expenditure is subject to the normal public sector business case approval process.

Northern Health and Social Services Board Workers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Northern Health and Social Services Board workers have resigned in each of the last 5 years, broken down by (i) gender; and (ii) full-time and part-time staff. (AQW 850/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the tables below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF RESIGNATIONS FROM THE NORTHERN HSSB BY GENDER

2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
3	0	25	2	13	2	15	1	14	5

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF RESIGNATIONS FROM THE NORTHERN HSSB BY FULL-TIME/PART-TIME WORKING

2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time
3	0	20	7	10	5	11	5	15	4

Source: Northern Health & Social Services Trust.

Domiciliary Packages

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many domiciliary packages have been provided in the Ards and Strangford area in the last year. (AQW 863/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Health Service Recruitment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is legislation in place or proposed that will restrict the recruitment of overseas workers into the Health Service. (AQW 866/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The recruitment of staff from outside the European Economic Area is bound by Home Office rules.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service dentists are available in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 876/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 1 October 2008, Central Services Agency figures show that there are 35 dentists¹ registered to provide Health Service dental treatment in the East Antrim constituency².

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Figures include Principal dentists only; figures exclude assistants and vocational dental practitioners.

Based on location of the dental surgery where the dentist is employed.

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the average waiting time for people to see a doctor or nurse, in each hospital's A&E unit, for each month in the past year. (AQW 882/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Patient Client Council

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) membership; and (ii) functions, of the proposed Patient Client Council. (AQW 899/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) I am presently giving consideration to the membership of the proposed Patient and Client Council and expect to confirm proposals in the near future for consideration in subordinate legislation.
- (ii) The functions of the proposed PCC would be:
 - representing the interests of the public;
 - promoting involvement of the public;
 - providing assistance (by way of representation or otherwise) to individuals making or intending to make a complaint relating to health and social care;
 - promoting the provision of advice and information to the public about the design, commissioning and delivery of health and social care; and
 - such other functions as may be prescribed by the Department.

Health and Social Care Reforms

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the framework document for the new functions under the Health and Social Care reforms will be completed. (AQW 900/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Framework Document, which will set out the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of each of the new organisations and how they will work, will be completed before the establishment of the new organisations on 1 April 2009.

Regional Support Services Organisation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what functions will be transferred from Health and Social Care Trusts to the new Regional Support Services Organisation. (AQW 901/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: When the Regional Support Services Organisation comes into operation on 1 April 2009, it will be formed by consolidating the Central Services Agency, the Directorate of Information Services, the Health and Personal Social Services Superannuation Branch and some services transferred from the four Health and Social Services Boards. It will not include any of the functions currently provided by Trusts at this time.

On a phased basis after April 2009, and subject to approval of a business case, services that will be transferred from the Trusts will include the recruitment of staff, payment of salaries and wages, payment to suppliers and other functions that would release resources for investment in front line services.

It is intended that the Regional Support Services Organisation will also provide Information Technology, Information Management and Estate Services to the HSC. This will require a further transfer of functions from Trusts and will only be undertaken following further consideration of the best way to provide these functions.

Commissioning Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Commissioning Groups will have a free role to make decisions. (AQW 902/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Local Commissioning Groups will have devolved responsibility for addressing the needs of their local community and as such will have planning, service procurement and performance management responsibilities. As committees of the Regional Health and Social Care Board they will also be expected to work within regional policy and strategy frameworks, available resources and performance targets.

Commissioning Groups

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many members will be on the Commissioning Groups. (AQW 903/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the answer I supplied to AQW 387/09.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the provision of a Minor Ailments Service by pharmacies will commence. (AQW 907/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to my reply to his correspondence sent to him dated 19th September 2008. I reiterate the points I made in that letter that the enhanced Minor Ailments Service commenced on 1st August 2008, and although the majority of pharmacy contractors opted out of providing the service, it still remains open for them to join. I welcome that a small number of contractors are providing this worthwhile service for their patients.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the proposal to remove the second fire engine from 12 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service stations, to confirm if Portstewart is now the only station that will lose its second fire engine. (AQW 915/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following a comprehensive review and assessment of its fire and rescue requirements, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has proposed that Portstewart Fire Station will be the only fire station to lose its second pumping appliance. The proposal was published for consultation on 1 October. No final decision will be taken until the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has had an opportunity to consider the responses to that consultation.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how much the removal of the second fire engine in Portstewart will save the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; and (ii) what percentage this represents of the overall savings the service is trying to achieve. (AQW 916/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If, following the current consultation, it is decided that the second appliance at Portstewart should be removed, it is anticipated that this would deliver Revenue savings as detailed below:

- 2009/10 — £80k out of £3,800k efficiency savings (2%)
- 2010/11 — £80k out of £5,800k efficiency savings (1.4%)

The proposed re-allocation of the second appliance from Portstewart is also expected to generate a one-off Capital saving of £180k.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there will be any job losses due to withdrawal of the second fire appliance in Portstewart. (AQW 959/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service proposal to withdraw the second pumping appliance from Portstewart Fire Station was published for public consultation on 1 October. No final decisions will be taken until the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has had an opportunity to consider the responses to that consultation.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the reasons (i) for the proposed withdrawal of the second fire appliance in Portstewart; and (ii) all other stations in the original proposal have been withdrawn from the new proposal. (AQW 961/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The detailed reasons for the proposed withdrawal of the second appliance from Portstewart Fire Station are set out in the related consultation document, issued by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service on 1 October 2008 and published on their website. That is the only proposed appliance withdrawal at this time.

New Acute Hospital in Enniskillen

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) provide an update on the new acute hospital in Enniskillen; and (ii) confirm if works are on target and within budget. (AQW 985/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to AQO 485/09 answered in the Assembly on 6 October 2008.

Rheumatology Consultant at Altnagelvin

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to confirm if the Rheumatology Consultant at Altnagelvin Hospital is due to retire in April 2009; and (ii) if so, what action his Department and the Western Health and Social Care Trust are taking to ensure a new consultant is in place, prior to his retirement. (AQW 986/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision for any member of the HSC workforce to retire is a private matter, therefore it would be inappropriate for me to comment. The Western Health and Social Care Trust assure me that robust succession planning arrangements are pursued, as need arises.

Medinet Consultants

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the costs associated with Medinet consultants being flown to Tyrone County Hospital on 27 and 28 September 2008 to attend neurology clinics. (AQW 988/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting lists have been transformed in Northern Ireland over the past 2 years through the implementation of a comprehensive reform programme together with investment in additional capacity, including the transfer of some patients to the independent sector.

In that context I am advised that a neurology clinic was held by Medinet at Tyrone County Hospital on 27 and 28 September at a total cost of £4,800.

Loyal Orders

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has held with the Loyal Orders about health and public safety issues. (AQO 486/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the summer months I met with representatives from the Belfast Orange Order to discuss specific issues relating to health and public safety at parades and bonfires.

I am keen to have further meetings with a broader representation from the Loyal Orders, and indeed any other organisation with a similar large representation

of men. These meetings will focus on how existing structures and communication channels can be used to engage with this target group, which is difficult to reach with traditional public health messages, and help further promote positive health and well-being.

Children and Vulnerable Adults

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to protect children and vulnerable adults under the interim arrangements in place, due to delays in the processing of applications by Access NI. (AQO 473/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The interim arrangements to which the Honourable member refers, are those which I put in place during August 2008 to help employers in health and social care who were experiencing grave difficulties caused by AccessNI delays. Members should be aware that these interim arrangements were put in place after very careful consideration and are subject to monitoring.

Last week, I wrote to NIO Minister, Paul Goggins, to impress upon him the serious impacts that AccessNI delays are having on employment in health and social care and emphasised the absolute necessity for AccessNI to return to full service as soon as possible.

Minor Ailments Service

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs of running the Minor Ailments Service in Community Pharmacies; and the corresponding amount saved by the service in reducing unnecessary visits to GPs and hospitals. (AQO 470/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007-08 the Minor Ailments Scheme cost £645,000 in service fees. For the new enhanced service available from 1 August 2008, the funding package offered is worth £1.5m in service fees, almost two and a half times what the scheme cost last year.

The Minor Ailments Service is a non-cash-releasing initiative and operates to improve efficiency within the Health Service. Although patients may go to their pharmacy rather than their GP for advice and treatment, this does not generate cash savings that can be redistributed.

Ambulance Cover

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update

on ambulance cover from 6:00pm to 8:00am in the Limavady area. (AQO 403/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Limavady area is covered predominantly from Limavady Ambulance Station, although it needs to be borne in mind that NIAS deploys its resources dynamically and will deploy the nearest available appropriate resource to attend a call.

There are two shifts at the Limavady Ambulance Station – from 8.00am to 8.00pm; and from 8.00pm to 8.00am and 1 A&E vehicle per shift. This level of cover has not changed in several years.

Health Service Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what measures he is taking to ensure that all Health Service vacancies are filled. (AQO 400/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recruitment and retention issues are a matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts. Trusts advertise vacancies regularly and there is a single on-line point of advertisement for all HSC jobs. The Department, in conjunction with the Trusts, promotes health service careers generally through recruitment fairs and via the Departmental and Trust websites.

Developing Better Services Model

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the number of beds to be provided at the new Enniskillen hospital; and to confirm that the services to be delivered will be as set down in the Developing Better Services model. (AQO 478/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Enniskillen hospital will provide 312 beds. I can also confirm that the new hospital will provide a range of acute services including inpatient surgery, critical care services, acute medicine and maternity services as outlined in the Developing Better Services model.

Lagan Valley's Obstetric-Led Maternity Ward

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consultation has taken place with the Ministry of Defence on the proposed closure of Lagan Valley's obstetric-led maternity ward. (AQO 416/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No consultation has taken place directly with the Ministry of Defence as no final decision on the future of the obstetric-led maternity ward at Lagan Valley Hospital has been taken.

The proposals to transfer consultant-led inpatient maternity services from the hospital are one of a range of proposals submitted by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to achieve 3% efficiency targets per annum across the Comprehensive Spending Review period in line with Executive agreement. I will not be making a decision on the Trust's proposals for the future of maternity services at Lagan Valley Hospital until the implications for staff, patients and the wider health system are clearly established.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress is being made in controlling clostridium difficile.
(AQO 477/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Until 31 March 2008 mandatory surveillance for *C. difficile* in Northern Ireland covered patients aged 65 and over, and since 1 April 2008 has covered all patients over 2 years of age. The two most recent quarterly monitoring reports for Northern Ireland published by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre [CDSC(NI)] show decreases in *C. difficile* inpatient episodes in two successive quarters.

C. difficile hospital inpatient episodes, NI			
	Q4, 2007	Q1, 2008	Q2, 2008
Cases	297	288	250

This is a decrease of 15.8% in the second quarter of 2008 compared with quarter 4 in 2007.

Progress has been achieved through a range of measures, some of which I announced on 25 January. These include: implementation of Changing the Culture and the Ward Sisters' Charter; performance management of the infection control targets that I set in September 2007; use of the leaflet for visitors that I published at that time; unannounced hygiene inspections by RQIA, of which 5 have now been completed and published; the regional hand hygiene campaign which I launched in June; implementation by Trusts of recommendations from the RQIA's interim report of the independent review of the *C. difficile* outbreak; Cleaner Hospital Team reviews, action plans and support; prudent antibiotic prescribing and the appointment of antimicrobial pharmacists in the Trusts.

Specifically in relation to the *C. difficile* outbreak in Northern Trust, the figures below, showing patient episodes in Northern Trust hospitals during the first nine months of 2008, demonstrate that the Trust has achieved a substantial reduction in cases during this period.

Throughout the course of the outbreak the Northern Trust consistently applied a three-pronged approach: of rigorous antibiotic management, infection control procedures and an enhancement of environmental cleaning.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept
46	29	40	39	24	22	19	11	14

Figures provided by NHSCT and refer to all patients, not just patients over 65.

The Northern Trust declared the outbreak of *Clostridium difficile* infection over as of 31 August 2008. The decision to declare the outbreak over was taken for two main reasons: the sustained reduction in the number of new cases of *C. difficile* in Trust hospitals and the fact that there was no evidence of recent transmission within the hospital.

Minor Ailments Service

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he has taken to ensure that the Minor Ailments Scheme is being rolled out.
(AQO 466/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that an enhanced Minor Ailment Scheme was rolled out on 1 August 2008, which increased the number of therapies available to patients within this service from

2 to 8. Despite extensive discussions, it has not been possible to agree the terms of the enhanced service with the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC) which represents community pharmacists in Northern Ireland. The PCC advised their members not to take part in the enhanced service and as a result the majority of pharmacists withdrew this service from patients.

I met with PCC recently and offered them my personal assurance of a review of the scheme including the remuneration model, after six months' operation. The service remains open for those pharmacists not currently providing it and I would encourage them to do this and ensure patients have access to this worthwhile scheme.

Board of Mental Health and Learning Disability

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the work of the Board of Mental Health and Learning Disability. (AQO 469/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Board for Mental Health and Learning Disability has recently submitted to me its first annual report charting their work progress over the last year, expressing their views and providing advice on progress with the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review. This report will be made available on the Board's website at: www.bmhldni.gov.uk/ in the near future.

Speech and Language Therapy

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans there are to increase the number of speech and language therapists to meet the demand by stroke survivors for speech and language therapy. (AQO 490/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recognising the need to improve services for stroke sufferers, in June this year I announced a range of proposals, and allocated an additional £14m over the next three years, to improve the outcome for stroke survivors.

These proposals include access for stroke patients to appropriate rehabilitation, including enhanced availability of speech and language therapy.

A regional Group has been established to bring forward a detailed implementation plan, in liaison with Boards and Trusts, for all of the proposals to the timescales outlined. In implementing the proposals it will be for Boards and Trusts to decide on the specific numbers of speech and language therapist required to meet the needs of their own populations.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the Minor Ailment Service has not been withdrawn. (AQO 481/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the Minor Ailment Scheme has not been withdrawn and that the service remains open for those pharmacists not currently providing it and I would encourage them to do this and ensure patients have access to this worthwhile scheme.

The enhanced scheme was rolled out on 1 August 2008 increasing the number of therapies available to patients within this service from 2 to 8. Unfortunately, despite extensive discussions, it has not been possible to agree the terms of the enhanced service with the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC) which represents community pharmacists in Northern Ireland.

The PCC advised their members not to take part in the enhanced service and as a result the majority of pharmacists withdrew this service from patients. I met with PCC recently and offered them my personal assurance of a review of the scheme, including the remuneration model, after it has been in operation for six months.

Diabetes Services Framework

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce a diabetes services framework in the 2009 round of service framework announcements. (AQO 474/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is currently developing the first tranche of service frameworks. These are: cardiovascular health and wellbeing; respiratory health and wellbeing; cancer prevention, treatment and care; mental health and wellbeing; and, learning disability. Earlier this year, I agreed that work should commence this year on the development of two further service frameworks for Children's Health and Wellbeing and Older People's Health and Wellbeing.

It is anticipated that further areas for service framework development will be taken forward from 2009/10. These will be selected from the remaining priorities identified and evaluated by the Department. These include diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions, physical disability and sensory impairment, and sexual health.

Magherafelt District Council Area

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to address the shortage of supported living places for vulnerable adults in the Magherafelt District Council area. (AQW 1334/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The responsibility for operational matters in the provision of services in the Magherafelt District Council area rests with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (the Northern Trust). The Northern Trust has advised that it is currently working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the

voluntary sector to address current and future supported living needs across all programmes of care.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Translink Metro Bus Service

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans Translink has to expand Metro bus services in the Mallusk area, including services to Hollybrook, Mayfield, Alderly and Aylesbury; and to confirm the start date of any new services. (AQW 185/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been informed by Translink that to provide Metro bus services to these areas would require the bus to travel through Mayfield. Translink has advised that, following public meetings in January 2008, Mayfield residents made it known that the presence of any bus service was unacceptable to them. As a consequence Translink has no plans to introduce new services to these areas.

Water Supply in the School Lane Area

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the adequacy of the water supply in the School Lane area, Coalisland, particularly in relation to the water pressure; and if he is satisfied that it is sufficient should the Fire and Rescue Service be called to attend an emergency in the area. (AQW 628/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that a comprehensive zonal study of the distribution system has been carried out for the School Lane area and that pressures have been found to be slightly less than the 15 metres head (22psi) standard of service as stated in Northern Ireland Water's Customer Charter. This would result in a small number of customers experiencing a slight drop in pressure during periods when there are excessive demands on the system. Remedial works have been identified and are being actioned to improve operating pressures and to ensure that NIW fully meets customer demands and regulatory standards.

Regarding Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service requirements and the capacity of the distribution system, NIW is satisfied that there are sufficient fire hydrants within 250 metres of School Lane on 6" diameter water mains to meet all requirements.

Bi-Lingual Road Signs

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any legislative change to enable the authorisation of a limited range of bi-lingual road signs would be subject to (i) a vote of the Executive; and (ii) a vote of the Assembly. (AQW 674/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, its power to prescribe or authorise traffic signs extends to the prescription or authorisation of bilingual signs. The general approach of the legislation is that traffic signs shall be prescribed in regulations.

Any such regulations would be brought to the attention of the Executive and would be subject to the negative resolution procedure in the Assembly.

Unreported Damage to Road Culverts

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of unreported damage to road culverts by Northern Ireland Water and its contractors; and what steps he is taking to ensure this action will cease, in light of its contribution to flooding incidents. (AQW 695/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are aware of a small number of locations where road culverts have been damaged by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and its contractors.

I would advise that Utility providers have a statutory right to open roads for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. While Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, it has powers to regulate them under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Under this legislation statutory undertakers must notify Roads Service of works on roads and footpaths.

I have been advised by NIW that, in the unlikely event that one of its contractors damages a road culvert, the damage is reported to Roads Service. NIW then repair the damage to the standard required by Roads Service.

I can also advise that the Utility Providers have agreed a protocol for the management of underground services.

20 mph Speed Limit Zone

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce 20 mph

speed limit zones in the East Antrim constituency.
(AQW 714/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently no plans to introduce any 20mph speed limit zones in the East Antrim constituency.

With regard to AQW 715/09, my Department's Roads Service is aware of a number of requests for 20 mph zones in the East Antrim constituency. However, such requests are not recorded separately, therefore specific details on the numbers received, or from whom, are not readily available.

As regards AQW 716/09, Roads Service encourages and supports 20mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users. However, there is no plan to generally reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. 20mph zones are an extension of traffic calming schemes. Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes to reduce speed in residential areas and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established. All requests are assessed as objectively as possible using criteria including; speed and volume of traffic, collision history and general road characteristics. Decisions can then be taken on the basis of need and resources.

Implementation of a traffic calming scheme is subject to the successful completion of residents' consultation and the legislative process. If objections are received to a Roads Service proposal to traffic calm a particular road, it may not be possible to implement the scheme.

You may be aware that Roads Service is currently piloting variable speed limit schemes at two schools. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds at schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

20 mph Speed Limit Zone

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has been lobbied to introduce 20 mph zones in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 715/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently no plans to introduce any 20mph speed limit zones in the East Antrim constituency.

With regard to AQW 715/09, my Department's Roads Service is aware of a number of requests for 20 mph zones in the East Antrim constituency. However, such requests are not recorded separately, therefore specific details on the numbers received, or from whom, are not readily available.

As regards AQW 716/09, Roads Service encourages and supports 20mph zones in situations where there is

a risk to vulnerable road users. However, there is no plan to generally reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. 20mph zones are an extension of traffic calming schemes. Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes to reduce speed in residential areas and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established. All requests are assessed as objectively as possible using criteria including; speed and volume of traffic, collision history and general road characteristics. Decisions can then be taken on the basis of need and resources.

Implementation of a traffic calming scheme is subject to the successful completion of residents' consultation and the legislative process. If objections are received to a Roads Service proposal to traffic calm a particular road, it may not be possible to implement the scheme.

You may be aware that Roads Service is currently piloting variable speed limit schemes at two schools. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds at schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

20 mph Speed Limit Zone

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria must be met for the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit zone. (AQW 716/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently no plans to introduce any 20mph speed limit zones in the East Antrim constituency.

With regard to AQW 715/09, my Department's Roads Service is aware of a number of requests for 20 mph zones in the East Antrim constituency. However, such requests are not recorded separately, therefore specific details on the numbers received, or from whom, are not readily available.

As regards AQW 716/09, Roads Service encourages and supports 20mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users. However, there is no plan to generally reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. 20mph zones are an extension of traffic calming schemes. Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes to reduce speed in residential areas and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established. All requests are assessed as objectively as possible using criteria including; speed and volume of traffic, collision history and general road characteristics. Decisions can then be taken on the basis of need and resources.

Implementation of a traffic calming scheme is subject to the successful completion of residents' consultation and the legislative process. If objections

are received to a Roads Service proposal to traffic calm a particular road, it may not be possible to implement the scheme.

You may be aware that Roads Service is currently piloting variable speed limit schemes at two schools. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds at schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

Bus Lanes

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to allowing (i) public and private taxis carrying paying passengers; and (ii) private cars with 2 or more passengers, to use bus lanes. (AQW 736/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Taxi-Bus type services (taxis with blue plates) and Belfast Public Hire Taxis (taxis with yellow plates) have been permitted to use certain bus lanes in Belfast since 2002. The other types of licensed taxi, Private Hire (taxis with green plates) and Public Hire Outside Belfast (taxis with white plates) are not permitted to use bus lanes.

Roads Service is currently undertaking a review of the operation of bus lanes. The primary focus of this review is to consider whether Private Hire Taxis should be permitted to use bus lanes. This review should be completed in the near future.

Roads Service has no plans to consider allowing private cars with two or more passengers to use bus lanes. I understand that similar schemes are being piloted in Great Britain, on both urban and rural roads, and Roads Service will continue to monitor any developments relating to this issue.

Money Returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money his Department returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 31 March 2008. (AQW 740/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that the Department for Regional Development did not return any money to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 31 March 2008.

Disabled Drivers

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development how many blue badges have been issued to disabled drivers, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 743/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain information on Blue Badges by Parliamentary Constituency. However, I can advise that, as at the 30 September 2008, the total number of valid Blue Badges issued in the North was 93,460.

Road Schemes

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development what road schemes are planned for the period 1 October 2008 to 31 December 2010 in the West Tyrone constituency. (AQW 783/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The information you request can be found in my Department's Roads Service Spring and Autumn Reports to Omagh and Strabane District Councils. The Spring reports can be accessed from the Roads Service internet site at the following web address:

www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

Roads Service is currently compiling their Autumn Reports to Omagh and Strabane District Councils. I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager, Mr Pat Doherty, to forward you a copy of these Reports in November.

20 mph Speed Limit Zone

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to introducing 20 mph speed limit zones in residential areas that have problems with speeding drivers, but do not qualify for traffic calming measures. (AQW 786/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service encourages and supports 20 mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users. However, I have currently no plans to generally reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. Experience shows that 20 mph zones in residential areas are ineffective without also implementing traffic calming measures.

The provision of traffic calming schemes is dependent upon resources. Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes to help reduce speed in residential areas and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be

established. All requests are assessed objectively using criteria which consider factors such as, speed, volume of traffic, collision history and general road characteristics.

Department's Multi-Lingual Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what research was conducted to determine a need for a non-English section for visitors to his Department's website. (AQW 879/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department is committed to making information about its services as accessible as possible. The development of a multi-lingual section on the Department's website was undertaken as part of a review of the Department's Guide to Making Information Accessible and a review of compliance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

In developing the site, my officials looked at best practice in website provision across Departments and consulted with Equality Forum representatives and organisations which have a particular interest in indigenous or ethnic minority language issues.

Ulsterbus

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria are applied by Ulsterbus when deciding whether to extend a bus service; and what steps Ulsterbus takes to obtain relevant information to apply such criteria in any given case. (AQW 883/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that Ulsterbus gathers information and considers the following:

- potential demand;
- route suitability including any physical constraints and potential hazards;
- assessment of need including any minimum service level criteria specified in Government plans;
- economic viability including the possibility of subsidy;
- availability of drivers and vehicles; and
- licensing issues.

The steps taken to obtain relevant information will vary in individual cases and may depend on the circumstances in which interest in the extension of a service has arisen.

Department's Multi-Lingual Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development for the cost to design and launch his Department's multi-lingual website. (AQW 884/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department's multi-lingual website was designed in house using existing staff resources. The total cost was £2804, comprising £2383 for translation of the information and £421 incurred on the launch of the site.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of the neighbourhood renewal posts and services that his Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 888/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department participates in Neighbourhood Renewal primarily through the delivery of services such as street lighting, traffic calming measures, and local bus services. When a Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership asks for a particular scheme to be carried out, my Department may agree to contribute to its costs. This funding falls within Roads Service's normal programmed expenditure.

My Department however, currently has no plans to fund neighbourhood renewal posts

Level Crossing at William St, Lurgan

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has made an assessment of the costs associated with providing an underpass or an overpass to overcome the problems caused to town centre development by the level crossing at William St, Lurgan. (AQW 895/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a study was carried out, in September 2007, to assess the William Street crossing in Lurgan.

The report considered a number of engineering options including an overpass, an underpass and a tunnel. The cost of the options ranged from approximately £20 million to £250 million.

None of the options performed well under economic appraisal and all had significant environmental consequences for the William Street/Lough Road area of Lurgan.

Security Against Flooding

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to improve the security of the urban centre of Portadown against flooding. (AQW 896/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is responsible for storm drains that are dedicated to collect water run off from the surfaces of the public roads and discharge it into suitable outlets.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has the responsibility for storm and foul sewage systems, that deal with discharges from roofs, driveways etc, including many combined systems that also take road drainage. Rivers Agency is responsible for watercourses and rivers.

The severe flooding on Saturday 16 August 2008 was caused by the extreme levels of persistent rainfall that affected many areas in the North. I am advised that the roads within the urban centre of Portadown were not particularly adversely affected. The only urban centre location in Portadown, where Roads Service encountered significant flooding, was within the confines of the Marley Street car park. This car park drains into the River Bann, and the unusual flooding of that day was directly linked to the flood levels of the river. This particular instance of flooding had no direct effect on private property, or on traffic flow within the Portadown area. Consequently, there are no plans to carry out any preventative works at this location.

I have been advised by NIW, that it is not aware of any flooding problems associated with the sewerage system in Portadown town centre. The heavy persistent rainfall of 16 August resulted in the design capacity of the drainage network being exceeded in many areas and, in some places, it was totally overwhelmed. It is widely accepted that no sewerage system could have coped with rainfall of this intensity.

NIW acknowledges that the sewerage infrastructure in many areas is in need of upgrading to meet the increasingly stringent environmental standards and to ensure that the capacity is adequate for future development. It is therefore undertaking a major programme of Drainage Area Studies across the North, to identify any improvements needed, and it is committed to the implementation of any recommendations. Also, any recommendations arising from the Study will be subject to detailed agreement with the Environment Agency. Improvements recommended by the Study will be included in NIW's Capital Investment Programme, subject to available funding.

Craigavon City Centre Development

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the impact of Craigavon City centre development on the town centres of Lurgan and Portadown. (AQW 897/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not made any assessment of the impact of Craigavon City centre development on the town centres of Lurgan and Portadown. The Regional Development Strategy provides an overarching strategic planning framework and it is for the Department of the Environment to interpret this framework locally through planning policies and development plans.

Speed Restriction

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce a 20 mph speed restriction on the Limentary Road, Kells, where the Kells and Connor Primary School is located. (AQW 909/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service currently has no plans to introduce any 20mph speed limit zones on the Limentary Road, Kells, in the vicinity of Kells and Connor Primary School.

You may be aware that Roads Service is currently piloting variable speed limit schemes at two schools. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these pilots, to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds at schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

I have asked Roads Service officials to assess Kells and Connor School under existing programmes that deal with speed management outside schools, to determine if there are other measures that could be introduced to address safety concerns.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development why Northern Ireland Water employees were not offered the option of putting their pension money into a plan of their own choice. (AQW 911/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the current Pensions Options Exercise for its employees, which relates to pension benefits accrued in the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) up to 31 March 2007, is managed by Civil Service Pensions based on advice from the Government Actuary's Department. NIW had no control over the options available to employees under this exercise.

However, employees who are members of the Northern Ireland Water Pension Scheme, which was established on 1 April 2007, can opt out of the Scheme at any time by applying for a transfer to an alternative money purchase arrangement.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost that will be incurred by Northern Ireland Water as a result of the recently announced redundancies. (AQW 912/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that in order to achieve the efficiency targets agreed with my Department and published in its Strategic Business Plan, it will reduce staff numbers during the 2008/09 financial year by 304. However, as a result of normal staff turnover it is likely that the actual number of staff affected will only be around 200 and every effort will be made to achieve the reductions by voluntary means.

A provision of £19 million is included in NIW financial operating plan for 2008/09 to cover the cost of the reductions, but actual costs are difficult to predict as they will depend on a number of factors relative to each employee including length of service and pensionable salary.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if the redundancies announced by Northern Ireland Water will include staff at all levels, including senior management. (AQW 913/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has not yet announced any redundancies at any level and it is important to stress that the staffing levels referred to in its recently published Annual Report are not new reductions but are related to targets originally detailed in the Strategic Business Plan published in 2007.

The current proposal for staff reductions will not include staff at all levels. In accordance with new business operating models, and in agreements reached with trade union representatives, voluntary release schemes will only be open to staff notified of being “at-risk” in impacted functions/directorates. These are primarily in middle management/supervisory and operative grades. A senior management level restructuring was implemented prior to the formation of NIW and the staff affected were facilitated through redeployment or release schemes in accordance with compensation mechanisms within the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the uncertainty over the security of employment for Northern Ireland Water employees, why staff are being asked to make decisions about pension schemes. (AQW 914/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the current Pensions Options Exercise for its employees, which relates to pension benefits accrued in the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) (PCSPS) up to 31 March 2007, is managed by Civil Service Pensions based on advice from the Government Actuary’s Department. NIW had no control over the options available to employees under this exercise.

Following the formation of NIW in April 2007, all employees automatically became members of the Northern Ireland Water Pension Scheme (NIWPS). This pension scheme was established as a ‘mirror image’ to the PCSPS. As part of the bulk transfer arrangements between PCSPS and NIW, staff have a “one-off” option to exercise in that they either leave their past pensionable service with PCSPS (NI) and start afresh with Northern Ireland Water’s Pension Scheme, or transfer their past pensionable service to the NIWPS. This decision has no impact on security of employment.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to decentralise any Northern Ireland Water jobs from Belfast. (AQW 942/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, as part of its drive to improve efficiency and reduce employee numbers, it has no immediate plans to decentralise any substantive number of jobs from Belfast. The Company has however advised that the Board will take account of the findings of the recently published Bain Report on the “Location of Public Sector Jobs”, in coming to a final decision on the location of its new headquarters.

Flooding of the Westlink Underpass

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how, when and where the sludge from the flooding of the Westlink underpass on Saturday 16 August 2008 was disposed. (AQW 943/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department’s Roads Service has advised that the silt and sediment, deposited in Broadway underpass during

the flooding on 16 August 2008, was initially removed by the contractor for the M1/Westlink Scheme, HMC, and stockpiled in a designated area on site. This material was allowed to dry out before transportation off site to a licensed landfill site at Black Mountain.

Prevention of Future Flooding

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to ensure that areas that suffered as a result of the recent flooding will have measures put in place to prevent future flooding. (AQW 976/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Responsibility for drainage infrastructure is shared between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, through Rivers Agency, Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water (NIW), the three main drainage organisations. I understand that you asked Minister Gildernew the same question. This answer, therefore, relates to actions by my Department.

The procedures for liaison and co-ordination of emergency response between the three drainage organisations are set out in Best Practice Guidelines. There is also a shared Flooding Hotspot list, which identifies those areas at greatest risk of flooding and the lead drainage organisation for each location. These organisations also take the lead in the development and implementation of measures to reduce the likelihood of future flooding, at these hotspots. There are also hotspot lists held by each of the drainage organisations, and they have their own programmes for dealing with these, on a priority basis.

In the case of Roads Service, the problems encountered at flooding locations are not always easy to resolve, as the solution may be prohibitively expensive, or not immediately obvious. Even with the most careful and thorough planning, gullies, road drains and watercourses can be simply overwhelmed by a deluge of rain falling within a short period of time.

NIW has advised of its major programme of Drainage Area Studies being undertaken to identify the infrastructure improvements required to increase capacity and improve environmental standards. Improvements recommended by the studies will be included in NIW's Capital Investment Programme, subject to available funding. However, in advance of any such sewer improvements, reviews have been carried out at the locations where out-of-sewer flooding occurred, to confirm that the sewerage networks in those areas are operating at full capacity. NIW has advised that any measures identified that will reduce the risk of further out-of-sewer flooding in these areas, through remedial maintenance work, will be implemented.

Properties at risk of flooding due to the hydraulic incapacity of the sewerage system are being included in NIW's Sewer Flooding Register and the information incorporated into the company's Capital Investment Programme for future improvement work, subject to competing priorities and available funding.

Bus Shelters

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to give the number of bus shelters in the Foyle constituency that have advertising facilities; and (ii) to outline any protocols relating to products which can be advertised in them. (AQW 1011/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, within the Foyle Constituency area, 42 bus shelters have advertising facilities.

Generally, any advertising approved by the Advertising Standards Authority is permitted on bus shelters with the exception of advertisements:

- promoting a union or political party;
- of a religious or racial nature;
- of a sexual nature or promoting contraception; and
- advertising tobacco products.

In addition, major drinks companies operate a voluntary ban on advertising in close proximity to schools, including advertising on bus shelters.

Car Clubs

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures the Roads Service is taking to promote car clubs. (AQW 1028/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Car clubs are an effective tool in the campaign to reduce congestion and improve air quality. My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is proposing to pilot the concept in Belfast, by setting aside up to three on-street city centre parking spaces for Car Clubs, and also seeking expressions of interest from Car Club operators. However, the provision of on-street Car Club parking spaces requires a Traffic Regulation Order to be made, and therefore it could take up to one year before the project is up and running.

Speed Limits Around Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on plans to introduce 20 mph speed limits around schools in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1033/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

My Department's Roads Service encourages and supports 20 mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users, including in the vicinity of schools. However, I have currently no plans to generally reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. Experience shows that 20 mph zones in residential areas are ineffective without also implementing traffic calming measures.

You may be aware that Roads Service is currently piloting variable speed limit schemes at two schools. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds at schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

Parking Enforcement

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of parking tickets issued by NCP each month, since taking over responsibility for parking enforcement; and (ii) the amount of revenue generated as a result, broken down by constituency. (AQW 1045/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

My Department became responsible for parking enforcement at the end of October 2006. Since then, the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued each month is as follows:

	2006	2007	2008
January	-	13,021	10,830
February	-	11,564	11,921
March	-	12,716	11,535
April	-	12,617	12,030
May	-	13,691	12,293
June	-	14,632	11,083
July	-	14,219	10,504
August	-	15,549	11,025
September	-	14,437	11,684
October	-	15,143	-
November	8,590	13,925	-
December	12,548	12,021	-

PCN revenue figures are not compiled by constituency or geographical area, so I am unable to give you the information as requested. The amount of PCN revenue received by Roads Service for each financial year is as follows:

	£Million
2006/07	1.63
2007/08	4.47
2008/09 (to end Sept 08)	1.65

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what estimate has been made of the cost of providing secondary treatment for effluent from the combined Whitehead, Ballycarry, and Ballystrudder areas. (AQW 1048/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that proposals for improving the treatment of wastewater from Whitehead, Ballycarry and Ballystrudder have been considered and that the preferred solution involves a single treatment facility and a sea outfall. The proposal will remove Ballycarry and Ballystrudder waste water discharges from Larne Lough and Whitehead's discharge from the mouth of Belfast Lough.

Northern Ireland Water has made provision in the proposal that will accommodate secondary treatment in the future if this becomes necessary due to population growth or a change in legislation. To provide secondary treatment at this stage is estimated to cost an additional £5,200k, which would increase the projected cost to £15,280k.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what estimate has been made of the cost of Northern Ireland Water's proposal to combine flows of waste water and sewage from Whitehead, Ballystrudder and Ballycarry, for discharge into the sea, via a new marine outfall at Cloghfin Bay, Islandmagee. (AQW 1049/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that proposals for the solution to the issues of inappropriate treatment of wastewater from Whitehead, Ballycarry and Ballystrudder have been considered and that the solution involves transfer of flows, screening and a sea outfall. This solution has been modelled and it has been demonstrated that the outfall will give dilution and dispersion in the Irish Sea to an extent which is acceptable to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. The proposals will remove the Ballycarry and Ballystrudder waste water discharges from Larne Lough and Whitehead's unscreened discharge from the mouth of Belfast Lough.

Provision will be made to accommodate secondary treatment in the future if this becomes necessary due to population growth or a change in legislation.

The cost of the proposals is currently estimated to be £10,080k.

Number of Page Views for DRD Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many page views his Department's website received on average each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1076/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Over the past 12 months my Department's website has received the following page views;

Page Views	
October 2007	87,753
November 2007	92,023
December 2007	42,796
January 2008	62,549
February 2008	64,070
March 2008	63,458
April 2008	66,545
May 2008	42,021
June 2008	82,259
July 2008	64,616
August 2008	75,744
September 2008	72,386

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken by Northern Ireland Water to prevent discharge of chemicals and pollutants from the water system onto the beach at Ballywater Road, in Millisle. (AQW 1086/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that since January this year wastewater from Millisle has been pumped via a new wastewater pumping station to the North Down/Ards Wastewater Treatment Works in Donaghadee. This replaced the former arrangement which involved a retention tank discharging directly to sea, with minimum treatment, through a short outfall pipe.

The pumping station incorporates an overflow which, with the consent of the Department of the

Environment, permits the discharge of dilute storm water during periods of prolonged heavy rainfall.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve water and sewerage facilities at Drumfad Road in Millisle. (AQW 1087/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the watermain on Drumfad Road were replaced earlier this year with work completed in March. There are no plans at present to replace the sewer on the Drumfad Road as it is performing satisfactorily.

Sewage: Ballynahinch

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development how many incidents of (i) blocked sewers; (ii) fractured sewers; and (iii) sewage overflows, have been reported in the Ballynahinch district over the past 5 years. (AQW 1093/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the information requested is not held in a format that is readily accessible and a manual exercise will be required to extract it. Northern Ireland Water's Director of Operations, Phil Barker will write to you direct with the information when the exercise has been completed.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many times Northern Ireland Water hired local contractors; and (ii) the work they carried out in the past 5 years in the Ballynahinch area. (AQW 1094/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the information requested is not held in a format that is readily accessible and a manual exercise will be required to extract it. Northern Ireland Water's Director of Operations, Phil Barker will write to you direct with the information when the exercise has been completed.

Drainage Area Study

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) why the Drainage Area Study for Ballynahinch has not been commissioned; and (ii) when this process can begin. (AQW 1096/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that consultants were commissioned in August 2008 to carry out a Drainage Area Study of the Ballynahinch sewerage network. The first stage of the Study, which involves the acquisition of asset information and the production of a computer model, is scheduled for completion by April 2009 and the second stage, involving the production of a report identifying any upgrading or improvements needed to the network, is scheduled for completion by August 2009.

Section 75 Equality Legislation

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if the Section 75 equality legislation was given the appropriate consideration; and (ii) was an Equality Impact Assessment carried out when awarding the traffic enforcement contract to NCP.

(AQW 1130/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Section 75 considerations are not applied to the award of a contract, however, my Department gave the appropriate consideration to Section 75 legislation during the development of the policy for Decriminalised Parking Enforcement.

As regards an Equality Impact Assessment, a screening exercise, published in August 2003, concluded that a full Assessment was not required, as the proposed legislation would result only in the transfer of an existing enforcement function from the police to my Department.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Scheme at Church Road, Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development if the proposed housing scheme at Church Road, Rasharkin, will be going ahead in this financial year; and to detail any problems the scheme is facing.

(AQW 646/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): This scheme is currently included in the Social Housing Development Programme to start during 2009/10. I am advised that the existing sewerage disposal system does not have the capacity to accommodate further development in Rasharkin at present. However, I understand that NI Water's proposed infrastructure improvement works are due to commence in early 2009.

A planning application has been submitted and Triangle Housing Association (and their Consultants) have met with Planning Service to resolve issues around site layout and car parking provision.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what preparations her Department has made for the transfer of Neighbourhood Renewal with the Chief Executive of each council; and what discussions her Department has had with each council on this issue.

(AQW 709/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Responsibility for the overall transfer of functions under the Review of Public Administration rests with the Department of Environment. However I have made clear my intention to explore ways relationships with councils can be developed further in the run up to full transfer.

To facilitate this, my Department has been in discussion with a number of councils - Belfast City Council, Derry City Council and a number of regional councils including Armagh and Newry and Mourne, to consider transferring some Neighbourhood Renewal functions in advance of 2011. This will provide valuable learning to support DSD and other Government departments through the transfer process.

Funding Allocation

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Social Development what proportion of funding has been allocated to (i) Belfast; (ii) Derry/Londonderry; and (iii) other towns and cities, in (a) 2005-06; (b) 2006-07; and (c) 2007-08.

(AQW 772/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department does not hold information in the precise categories requested for all its funding areas. However, information is available in relation to certain Urban Regeneration and Housing aspects of departmental expenditure. This is set out in the table below:

	Belfast Amount £m (%)	Derry Amount £m (%)	Regional Towns/ Cities Amount £m (%)	Total Amount £m
2005-2006	176.32 (43%)	29.70 (7%)	200.95 (50%)	406.97
2006-2007	130.13 (35%)	41.04 (11%)	201.42 (54%)	372.59
2007-2008	202.86 (40%)	54.52 (11%)	245.79 (49%)	503.17

Housing Benefit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for housing benefit there have been for (i) Ards Borough Council; and (ii) Strangford Borough Council, in each of the last three years. (AQW 841/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive records Housing Benefit information by District Office and not by District Council area. The table below gives the information for the District Offices that are closest to the Council areas requested.

District	2007-2008	2006-2007	2005-2006
Newtownards	4311	4265	4198
Downpatrick	4075	4058	3964

Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development the average length of time it takes the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division to process a child maintenance application; and how this compares with figures for the last 3 years. (AQW 842/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In August 2008 the average length of time to process a maintenance application was 120.3 days

March 2008	170.1 days
March 2007	300.3 days
March 2006	280.5 days

Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications to the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division were received (i) between 12 to 24 months ago; (ii) between 24 to 36 months ago; (iii) between 36 to 48 months ago; and (iv) more than 48 months ago, and have yet to be cleared. (AQW 862/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of applications received by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division and the number of these applications that have yet to be cleared are outlined in the table below:

Period	Applications received	Yet to be cleared
12 to 24 months (Sep 06 to Aug 07)	7324	424
24 to 36 months (Sep 05 to Aug 06)	8335	389
36 to 48 months (Sep 04 to Aug 05)	8311	359
Over 48 months (Pre Aug 04)	12573	824

Supported Living Units

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with (i) Housing Associations; and (ii) the Housing Executive, in relation to supported living units; and what encouragement she is providing to (a) developers; and (b) applicants. (AQW 867/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The identification of need and inclusion of supported housing schemes in the five year Social Housing Development Programme is an operational matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. There is an agreed nomination arrangement through which individual housing associations are nominated to take the capital project forward. The established Supporting People commissioning structures which includes the Housing Executive, Health and Social Services and the Probation Board, have the opportunity to identify and prioritise the need for additional or new supported housing services. Any of these agencies can bring proposals to the local area Supporting People Partnership for consideration.

Budget Allocations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to have the underspend of other Departments re-allocated to her Department to fund (i) social housing and (ii) co-ownership housing schemes. (AQW 889/09)

The Minister for Social Development: While decisions on budget allocations are a matter for the Executive, the in-year Monitoring Rounds provide Departments with the opportunity to register pressures and/or easements in their budgetary provision. In addition, Departments themselves can take pro-active management action to reallocate funding between their various programmes. Both avenues have been used to seek to increase funding in these areas, however, final decisions on the handling of pressures and easements rest with the Executive.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications to the Warm Home Scheme submitted in (i) 2007; and (ii) 2008, are still outstanding; and what action she is taking to address these delays. (AQW 891/09)

The Minister for Social Development: 1,279 referrals taken from 1 January 2007 until 31 December 2007 are waiting to be surveyed. 969 referrals taken from 1 January 2008 to 30 September 2008 are waiting to be surveyed.

I have been actively targeting the waiting list to ensure that those in greatest need receive assistance first. All those people on the waiting list over 70 years of age have had surveys completed. Applicants with no central heating, solid fuel or Economy 7 heating will be treated as a priority. I have increased my Department's spending on the Warm Homes Scheme to £20 million this year and I will continue to bid for additional resources as part of the in-year monitoring process.

I met recently with the Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Michelle Gildernew, and agreed a £400k contribution from DARD's Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion Fund to the Warm Homes Scheme budget to assist with improvements in energy efficiency in rural homes. The additional resources from DARD will assist around 630 homes which at present cannot be assisted by the Warm Homes Scheme because the cost exceeds the statutory grant limit.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure in Ballykeel, Ballymena; and in particular the use of £40,000 to clear overgrown communal space. (AQW 908/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I welcome the significant improvements that have been made in Ballykeel through Neighbourhood Renewal Funding.

I am also pleased that my Department was able to provide £40,000 of funding through Neighbourhood Renewal for an Environmental Improvement Scheme at Skye Park in Ballykeel. This project was brought forward by the Ballykeel Working Group in 2006 and is designed to allow the enhancement of an area that was being used for fly tipping and anti social behaviour, into an area that could be used as an attractive space for the community, encouraging healthy outdoor activities.

A number of ongoing issues with regard to maintenance of the site are currently being progressed by Ballymena Borough Council.

Housing Associations

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if there are any watchdogs or government standards that Housing Associations have to abide by. (AQW 937/09)

The Minister for Social Development: All Registered Housing Associations are required to comply with the standards laid down in the Department's Regulatory Framework for Registered Housing Associations and the Housing Association Guide. Compliance against both of these is checked by the Department's Regulation & Inspection Unit on an ongoing basis.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are waiting to be included in the Warm Homes Scheme, broken down by Housing Executive district area. (AQW 954/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Eaga, who manage the Warm Homes Scheme, collate the information from geographical areas which can be subdivided into postcode areas. The information in the table below shows the number of referrals awaiting survey by postcode area.

The number of referrals relates to applicants who have applied to Warm Homes Plus and are therefore aged 60+. Referrals for those applicants to Warm Homes are under 60 and there is no waiting list for this element of the Scheme.

Warm Homes Scheme – referrals to be surveyed						
Heating	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	Total
Approved Applications	564	439	482	310	529	2,324
	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	
	BT60	BT45	BT1	BT3	BT2	
	BT61	BT46	BT13	BT4	BT7	
	BT62	BT47	BT14	BT5	BT8	
	BT63	BT48	BT15	BT6	BT9	
	BT64	BT49	BT29	BT16	BT10	
	BT65	BT51	BT36	BT18	BT11	

Warm Homes Scheme – referrals to be surveyed						
Heating	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	Total
	BT66	BT52	BT37	BT19	BT12	
	BT67	BT53	BT38	BT20	BT17	
	BT68	BT54	BT39	BT21	BT24	
	BT69	BT55	BT40	BT22	BT25	
	BT70	BT56	BT41	BT23	BT26	
	BT71	BT57	BT42	BT30	BT27	
	BT74	BT81	BT42	BT33	BT28	
	BT75	BT82	BT43		BT31	
	BT76				BT32	
	BT77				BT34	
	BT78				BT35	
	BT79					
	BT80					
	BT92					
	BT93					
	BT94					

Housing Executive Tenants

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of Housing Executive tenants in rent arrears in the (a) Dairyfarm District; and (b) the Lisburn District; and (ii) the amount of arrears owed to the Housing Executive in the (a) Dairyfarm District; and (b) the Lisburn District. (AQW 997/09)

The Minister for Social Development: At 31 August 2008 the number of Housing Executive tenants in arrears and the total amount for Dairyfarm District and Lisburn District are as follows:-

Dairyfarm	481 tenants	£370,711.62
Lisburn	1282 tenants	£457,586.64

Developers' Contributions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development what progress is being made on the implementation of Article 40 on developers' contributions. (AQW 1059/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Legal responsibility for this matter rests with the Department of the Environment. I recently met with

the Environment Minister to press for the introduction of developers' contributions for social housing. Timing is dependent on progress being made on revisions to Planning Policy Statement 14 which has been with the Executive Committee for approval since June 2008. The Department of the Environment's work on a developers' contribution addendum to Planning Policy Statement 12 will begin after Planning Policy Statement 14 has issued for consultation.

Redevelopment of the Stanhope Site

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the residents living on the situation involving residents living on Stanhope Street in North Belfast, who are to move into new homes on 12 December 2008, and who are still waiting on the outcome of the vesting of their current homes. (AQW 1245/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The redevelopment of the Stanhope site will be delivered over two phases resulting in 23 new family homes for this community in North Belfast. Phase 1 consists of 10 homes and is due to be completed in December this year. Phase 2 will consist of 13 further new homes and involves the vesting of 7 private homes. The owners of these private homes have expressed an interest in remaining in the community and my Department and the NIHE are currently seeking to identify a solution to accommodate them.

I have asked for a full paper outlining the options, including the financial implications, to be presented to me within the next number of weeks.

Conflict Transformation Initiative

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding the Conflict Transformation Initiative has received from her Department since the Ministerial statement of 16 October 2007. (AQW 1267/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Following a High Court Decision, the Conflict Transformation Initiative has received £382,457.25 from the Department since the Ministerial statement of 16 October 2007.

Supporting People Budget

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the caps made to the 'Supporting People' budget, what measures she is taking to aid vulnerable people in need of supported housing. (AQO 526/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Supporting People budget has been baselined for the three year period commencing 1 April 2008 at £61 million. This was determined during the Comprehensive Spending Review when spending needs had to be prioritised to meet demand. I decided however not to apply the recommended 3% efficiency saving to this fund.

Since Supporting People was introduced on 1 April 2003, the target to assist 12,000 people to live as independently as possible has been exceeded. It is estimated that there are approximately 23,000 people currently being assisted by this fund.

Baselining the budget does not necessarily freeze individual budgets and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive may make in year bids for additional resources in the usual way.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development what budget her Department has set aside for the transfer of responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils. (AQO 428/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I believe in a strong local government and have delivered a sizeable package of functions for transfer including the operational matters of Neighbourhood Renewal. In principle, the related budget will transfer with this function. However, the overall model for achieving this is still under consideration by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Let me just say that although budgets beyond the current CSR period are unknown it is unthinkable that a block of work should transfer from Central to local government without associated financial and other resources.

I am also happy to look at how Neighbourhood Renewal or some aspects of it can move over to local government ahead of the RPA schedule.

Financial Advice Services

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development if there has been an increase, since January 2008, in the number of people availing of financial advice services funded by her Department. (AQO 419/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Particular responsibility for Debt Advice rests with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Industry through a contract with the Citizens Advice Bureaux. Figures obtained from that Department show a less than 10% increase

for the first six months of this year for clients seeking advice on financial matters. Benefit uptake is one of the key priorities for the Social Security Agency. Since 2005 a targeted approach has been adopted to increasing benefit uptake which involves working under contract with the independent advice sector to offer vulnerable clients a full comprehensive assessment of all benefit entitlement. To date this has generated an additional £15 million in benefit.

My Department provides funding for Citizens Advice Bureaux, Advice NI, and The Law Centre and funding of £1 million is delivered through the Council network for generalist advice.

Shared Future Agenda

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any initiatives she is taking in her Department to promote a Shared Future.

(AQO 521/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The shared future agenda is at the heart of all my work in the Department for Social Development. It's an agenda that presents challenges, particularly in terms of our segregated social housing stock, but long term it can only complement our core objective of tackling disadvantage and building communities.

When I launched my New Housing Agenda earlier this year, I made it clear that I wanted to provide housing solutions that would start to bring our people together rather than continue to keep them apart. A recent survey found that eight out of ten people wanted to live in mixed communities yet only half felt Government was doing enough to promote this.

Every new build scheme that comes forward onto our Social Housing Development Programme will now be screened to explore its potential for inclusion as a shared future development.

I was also pleased to launch our Shared Neighbourhoods Programme, with our partners the International Fund for Ireland, on 19 August. The programme will be delivered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Supporting and encouraging neighbourhoods where everyone in the community is valued and respected and where diversity is celebrated is fundamental to building lasting peace and a stable society in Northern Ireland and this Programme is a key plank in my New Housing Agenda.

We now have relative peace but we cannot just settle for that. Nor is coexistence and carve up an option either.

We have to build a genuine shared future and start the work now.

Warm Homes Scheme

Ms Purvis asked the Minister for Social Development, following the Northern Ireland Audit Office report and recommendations on the Warm Homes Scheme, when she will publish proposals for consultation on the scheme. (AQO 409/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My officials are currently finalising changes to the Warm Homes Scheme taking account of recent Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendations and a consultation paper will be published in October.

The Warm Homes Scheme has been a huge success and has benefitted approximately 65,000 households in Northern Ireland to date. However it has perhaps now captured most of the “quick wins” and needs to be refocused so that the maximum energy efficiency gains can be achieved going forward – and also that the people most in need of help, get help.

Streetscape Renewal Scheme

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development if the regeneration work in Fountain Lane, Belfast, will be completed by November 2008. (AQO 420/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The streetscape renewal scheme at Fountain Lane, Belfast will be completed by November 2008.

Department Owned Sites

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to identify the number of sites owned by her Department in Carrickfergus. (AQO 509/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department owns two potential development sites in Carrickfergus at North Street and the Maritime Area. The Department is commissioning a Masterplan for Carrickfergus which will include identifying development proposals for these two sites. The Masterplan process is due to commence in November 2008. DSD also owns a number of small strips of land left over from the major marina development and a previous development by DOE. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive also has 11 undeveloped sites within the Carrickfergus area at.

- Dunluskin Site 1
- Dunluskin Site 2
- Oakwood Road
- Glenfield Estate Site 1
- Irish Quarter West
- McKeens Avenue

- Windmill Avenue
- Eden Orbits
- Prince Andrew Way
- Lower Woodburn
- 30 Davy's Street

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development how the uptake of the warm home scheme in rural areas compares with uptake figure in urban areas. (AQO 405/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Eaga plc, which manages the Warm Homes Scheme on behalf of my Department, markets the scheme across Northern Ireland. It does not monitor grant take up between urban and rural areas. The recent Northern Ireland Audit Office, Value for Money Study, did undertake some limited analysis of grants awarded during January and February 2008. This analysis showed that 15% of grants were awarded to isolated rural households.

Proposed changes to the Warm Homes Scheme, including targeting of resource at hard to heat rural properties, will be subject to public consultation in the Autumn.

Fundraising to Restore the Nomadic

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on fundraising to restore the Nomadic by 2011. (AQO 422/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The SS Nomadic Charitable Trust has set a target of fundraising up to £1 million by the end of October 2008 and a further £4 million by March 2010. I understand that the Trust is on course to secure up to £1 million by the end of October 2008.

Equity Sharing in the Housing Market

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to extend equity sharing in the housing market. (AQO 515/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As part of my New Housing Agenda, I am amending the House Sales Scheme to allow social housing tenants to buy part of their home, on an equity sharing basis, if they cannot afford to buy it all. Consultation on this proposal is ongoing.

It is also my intention to amend the Co-Ownership scheme to allow people to enter it more easily. People

will be able to buy 25% of the value of a property as opposed to the current minimum of 50%. I will also make it easier for people to purchase additional shares in their home by reducing the minimum increment from its current 12.5% to just 5%. These proposed changes will be dependent on satisfactory consultation and should be in place by April 2009.

This year, the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association was given £15 million at the start of the year, four times more than at the same time in the previous year. I am also seeking further funds as part of the ongoing September Monitoring Round.

In September this year I launched the “Own A Home” initiative in Portadown, which brought together in partnership Turkington’s, Clanmil and South Ulster Housing Associations and Barclays Bank. This initiative gives first time buyers a real opportunity to get on the housing ladder by taking a part equity share in a house without the burden of a large deposit. I am aware of other developers and Housing Associations who have expressed an interest in this initiative and I very much welcome this.

Site at Churchill Park, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why the Housing Executive is proposing to sell an area of green open community open space in the Churchill area of Bangor. (AQO 401/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As part of a review of its undeveloped lands, the Housing Executive took the view that this site at Churchill Park, Bangor would be unsuitable for social housing and declared it surplus to requirements. The Housing Executive subsequently tested the market to establish if there was any development interest in the site. As no potential purchasers emerged, the Housing executive has now taken the site off the market.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development the number of applications for the warm homes scheme in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency. (AQO 404/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since the Warm Homes Scheme began in 2001 there have been 3,087 referrals from the East Derry/Londonderry constituency.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Upgrading the IT System

Mr O’Loan asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to upgrade the IT system for Assembly Members in Parliament Buildings, to address the slow speed of the current system. (AQW 696/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): The Information Systems Office on behalf of the NI Assembly Commission provides a number of IT systems for use by Assembly Members in Parliament Buildings. The performance of each service is carefully monitored. Upgrades to the systems are undertaken regularly to either enhance capabilities or address performance issues.

Over the past 18 months the Commission has authorised the renewal of all desktop PCs and printers used by Members and Secretariat staff, along with an upgrade of the capacity of the underlying network equipment to bring these services up to modern standards.

Reviews of other Information Systems will be undertaken in a planned manner and any significant upgrades will be costed and brought to the Commission for approval. Currently such reviews are planned for the aging TV Distribution system, the NI Assembly website and the speed of Internet access from Parliament Buildings.

Official Report (Hansard) Recording System

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to change the Official Report (Hansard) recording system to enable those attending committee meetings to receive text messages and emails on mobile phones while the proceedings are being recorded. (AQW 698/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): Mobile phone interference with the sound recording in Committee rooms is an issue of which we are aware. In simple terms, the interference is caused by mobile phones being in relatively close proximity to the sound system in each Committee room. The recording equipment used by the Office of the Official Report (Hansard) merely receives a feed from the general sound system, which of course also provides feeds for other users. As such, it is the general sound system that needs to be looked at as opposed to the Hansard recording equipment.

I am happy to inform you, however, that the issue is currently under investigation, and that the Engagement Directorate will bring a paper on the matter to the Chairpersons’ Liaison Group once that investigation is complete. It is also worth pointing out that the

Northern Ireland Assembly is not unique with regard to interference of sound systems by mobile devices, and preliminary work suggests that while it might be possible to introduce some measures to reduce the potential for interference, it may be at significant cost for only limited benefits in return.

I have asked the Director of Engagement to ensure that you are kept informed of progress on this matter.

Food Waste

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission what proportion of food supplied for (i) Committee meetings; and (ii) functions at Parliament Buildings, is wasted. (AQW 790/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter):

- (i) Committees generally make two types of food requests for meetings:
 1. Basic morning and afternoon refreshments (Tea, coffee & Scones or Biscuits)
 2. Working lunch (finger buffet comprising of various hot and cold items)

Each clerk makes an order that is appropriate to the numbers of their committee. Clerks are mindful of wastage and costs, and from experience only order the precise number they require. Clerks will alter on a weekly basis the required numbers for that particular week.

From our experience the amount of waste for basic refreshments is minimal with a few scones or biscuits left over per meeting.

For working lunches the waste is again negligible as precise numbers for each food item is only ordered to cover the amount of people attending the working lunch.

To offer an exact percentage of each type of waste is difficult but as a guide, the following should be used:

1. Basic morning and afternoon refreshments (5%)
 2. Working lunch (5% - 8%) (Mainly sandwiches)
- (ii) For the purpose of this question, functions cover the following:
1. Formal lunches or evening meal
 2. Buffets (mainly sandwiches and salads)
 3. Basic hospitality (Tea, coffee and biscuits)

Function and events' organisers are meticulous in attempting to make bookings for exact numbers of

guests attending any event. From experience however, some organisers do have difficulty confirming numbers when making a booking. This is primarily due to guests not providing an RSVP. On these occasions, organisers will then make a firm order for a set number of guests.

To offer an exact percentage of each type of waste is again difficult. The following may be regarded as the upper level of waste that might be accepted.

- Formal lunches or dinners (5%)
- Buffets (5%-8%)
- Basic hospitality (2%)

Electricity Consumption

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to install motion sensitive light switches in rooms on the basement level of Parliament Buildings, in order to reduce electricity consumption. (AQW 851/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): I can confirm that energy saving work has already been carried out in the basement of Parliament Buildings. Motion sensor lighting was installed in the Gent's Toilet during the recent summer recess as a trial.

It is estimated that the cost of carrying out this work will be recovered in savings over a three year period – (the payback calculation is based on a current monthly load of 203 kWh, which equates to £217 per annum, installation costs of £450 and an estimated reduction in energy usage of 66%).

Further to this, an application is to be made to the Central Energy Efficiency Fund for grant assistance for energy saving installations to install sensor lighting in additional toilets throughout the building.

A feasibility study is also ongoing regarding the installation of motion detectors for the lighting in the basement corridors and rooms although initial indications are that the installation costs for this work could prove to be prohibitive.

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